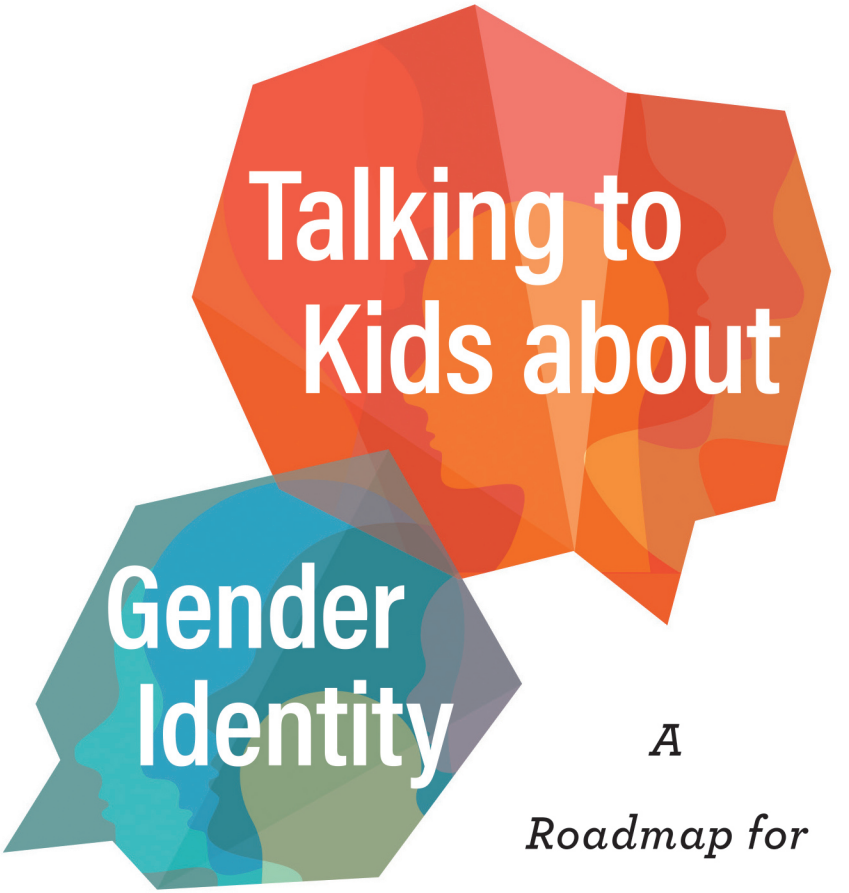
MARK YARHOUSE



Talking to Kids about Gender Identity

A Roadmap for Christian Compassion, Civility, and Conviction

"This book is essential for Christian parents, youth workers, and educators as we seek to draw our children into the difficult conversations surrounding gender identity. Mark Yarhouse provides an incredible way of helping adults understand the topic and gives suggestions for engaging young people in a conversation that cannot be avoided. He also provides a conceptualization of learning together and having conversations that are led by Christian conviction and compassionate civility."

Erik Ellefsen, director of networks and improvement
for the School of Education's Center for School
Leadership, Baylor University

"This extraordinary book is the most helpful we've read on the topic. Dr. Yarhouse offers learnings from scientific research in civil and compassionate language for Christian parents to have healthy and helpful conversations with their children about gender identity. *Talking to Kids about Gender Identity* is a must-read for Christian parents, ministry leaders, and health care professionals. It will save lives!"

Greg and Lynn McDonald, co-founders
of Embracing the Journey, Inc.

"The calm, compassionate, and careful tone of Yarhouse will lessen parents' heightened anxiety and fear around gender identity, As will his practical advice based in both faith and clinical experience. Parents will be relieved to find themselves saying, 'We can do this,' as they anticipate these conversations with their children."

Janet B. Dean, MDiv, PhD, professor of pastoral counselor
education, Asbury Theological Seminary


Talking to
Kids about
Gender
Identity

Books by Mark Yarhouse

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Homosexuality and the Christian

Emerging Gender Identities (with Julia Sadusky)

Talking to Kids about Gender Identity

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All names and some recognizable details have been changed to protect the privacy of those whose stories are shared in this book.

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Why This Book Is Important

A few years ago, I was meeting with a mother of a middle school student. She was remarking that she doesn't recall when she first heard about people being transgender; maybe it was around the time of Caitlyn Jenner's transitioning, but no, she did have a vague recollection of knowing about it prior to then but not giving it a lot of thought. When her middle schooler came home one day and mentioned a friend who was trans, she realized she hadn't had any kind of conversation with her son that would help him navigate these concepts in a culture and peer group in which such gender experiences and gender identities are increasingly normal, almost commonplace.[1]

This is a book for Christian parents who are struggling with what to think about gender identity, transgender experiences, and emerging gender identities—and with how to talk to their children about these issues. It is a book for Christian parents figuring out how to respond to the self-descriptions of their children or their children's peers, from "I have gender dysphoria" to "I am gender diverse."

Parents are asking good questions and need reliable resources. You need answers for yourself and, by extension, for

your children. You may not feel you have the language to talk about these issues and are not sure what approach to take when discussing them with your children.

Part of the challenge is that you may feel you have few role models for how to think about and engage the topic of gender identity. Because the topic is so polarizing, most parents have access to people on one of two extremes: the "culture warrior"—i.e., the person whose greatest concern is to win a war against ideas they view as threatening to Christianity, and the "cultural capitulator"—i.e., the person whose Christian worldview seems to have no bearing on the topics of sexuality and gender. This person just takes everything in stride, never appearing to critically evaluate shifts in language and categories for gender identity and expression that are used in the broader culture today.

The book you are holding is intended to provide you, parents, with another angle of entry into the conversations you might have with your children about gender identity. Think of yourself as a "cultural ambassador," a person who draws upon their Christian worldview to understand various aspects of God's kingdom. Toward this end, you engage culture with an eye for kingdom considerations.[2] This angle of entry into the conversation should be characterized by "convicted civility seasoned with compassion."[3] Anne Lamott wrote, "You don't always have to chop with the sword of truth. You can point with it too."[4] In other words, the sword of truth doesn't have to be wielded as a weapon, so that you are focused on taking an attacking posture. We can also point with a sword, much as a compass needle points toward true north. Such a maneuver takes you out of both the "capitulator" posture and the "warrior" posture, providing you with a unique opportunity to engage and transform.

As an ambassador, you are open to listening and learning from other people's experiences, as there are people who share

your Christian worldview who are navigating gender identity questions, as well as people who do not share your Christian worldview doing the same. As an ambassador, you are also building and maintaining relationships. This is the constant work of a good ambassador. Relationships are maintained over time through a sustained presence. As a Christian, by bringing your sustained presence into the life of another, you make Christ present. You embody the love God has for the person.

My goal is to help you understand how these three Cs (*convicted civility* seasoned with *compassion*) can guide the conversations you have with your kids about gender and gender identity, and their relationships to peers who identify as transgender or who have transitioned.

The book is organized into four parts. The first part of the book provides some basic background information so that you are better positioned to answer your kids' questions and to respond to the teachable moments that are part and parcel of raising kids. We tackle the question of why transgender experiences have suddenly become so prominent (chapter 1), and what causes someone to experience gender dysphoria (chapter 2), which is a condition associated with most transgender experiences. The limited research in this area makes it an especially difficult topic, but I'll go over some of what we know and don't know and how to talk with your kids about it. We then wrestle with what the Bible says about being transgender (chapter 3). This is a crucial topic for Christian parents, and one we want to think through carefully.

The second part of the book moves more deeply into parents' engagement with their children. We'll look at what to tell your child about gender in general (chapter 4). This chapter is part sex education and part affirmation of your child's typical gender experiences (to the degree that your child's experience of gender has been typical so far). We then consider what you could say to your child when they ask you about a classmate

who has decided to use a different name and pronouns, to take hormone blockers, or even to pursue a surgical transition (chapter 5). We also address the question of how best to guide your child in their interactions with a transgender friend (chapter 6) who has socially and/or medically transitioned. While chapter 5 is about helping your child understand and respond to a friend's *decision* to transition, chapter 6 is about helping your child respond once the transition has occurred.

In the third part of the book, we want to help parents who are wondering about their own child's experience of gender identity. We'll discuss whether there are any early signs that a child may be struggling with gender dysphoria (chapter 7). How do we distinguish what is in the typical range of gender expression and what takes a child into a different set of considerations, such as the possibility of gender dysphoria? We then consider how you can help your own child if they are struggling with dysphoria (chapter 8).

The final part of the book is for the person who experiences gender dysphoria themselves. *What if this is your story?* We engage this question in chapter 9.

Each chapter will have two special features: Bringing the Conversation Home and Cultural Ambassador: Our Three Cs. Bringing the Conversation Home will illustrate how parents can engage this topic in their own home. In most instances, I'll include dialogue that parents could have with a child or teen. This section is meant to model for you as a Christian parent what is possible and to help you have the words, tone, and posture that will lead to more constructive communication and education.

The other special feature, Cultural Ambassador: Our Three Cs, goes back to what I mentioned above about *convictions*, *civility*, and *compassion*. I want you to think of ways to push beyond the extremes of culture warrior or cultural capitulator. I want to help you engage ideas from the broader culture and "thicken the plot" by bringing Christian considerations into

the conversation. Instead of being a culture warrior or cultural capitulator, you can be a cultural ambassador who represents another way of engaging this topic. Because I recommend that parents engage others with *convicted civility seasoned with compassion*, I want these sections to model for you how to apply these three Cs to the topics covered in each chapter.

As a Christian parent, you may be struggling with what to think about transgender experiences, gender dysphoria, and emerging gender identities. If you're like most parents, you're probably also struggling with how to talk to your children about these issues. If so, this book is written specifically for you.

PART 1

The Basics of Gender Identity

1

Why are transgender experiences suddenly so prominent?

Lauren and Daniel[1] came to our clinic for a parent consultation. They wanted to talk about some of the behaviors they were seeing in their son, James, age fourteen. James has been more withdrawn in recent months, but ever since he was four or five, his behavior had Lauren and Daniel asking each other what might be going on. When he was five, James asked his mom if he would grow breasts like she has breasts. Later that same year, James asked Lauren why God gave him a penis. He did not find comfort in his mother's reply: "God made you a boy, and that's why you have a penis. God made you this way, and you are a terrific boy." Other behaviors would follow, as would other statements and questions that Lauren and Daniel found mystifying. When they sat down for the consultation, they noted at one point in the interview that there were at least three other kids at school who identified as transgender, and these were just the kids James knew of. There were likely others. Daniel said, "I've never known a transgender person. This just was not a thing we saw growing up. I don't even know where

to begin, to be honest. Why is the transgender issue so huge all of a sudden?"

Parents like Lauren and Daniel are asking, "Why are transgender experiences suddenly so prominent?" What is happening in our culture? Many parents feel like this conversation has come out of the blue in the past few years. You may be feeling the same way and asking the same question: Are more people transgender now—are experiences of gender dysphoria more common than they used to be—or are we just more aware of them?

There are a few ways for us to answer this question.

Are More People Transgender?

Probably the most commonly held view I come across in my field of psychology is that there is no difference in the proportion of people who are transgender today compared with the past—that transgender people have always been here, but what has changed is the social acceptance. Transgender people can now identify themselves openly and publicly, in ways that are new and exciting for them.

But another point of view is that there is a huge increase in the proportion of people who are transgender, and this remarkable increase is the result of social influences such as peer group influence and shared communal identity as a people group. There can be a kind of "social contagion" in which people catch and pass along ways of thinking about themselves, such that they begin to present with similar symptoms to those around them. This is the most commonly held view among critics of some forms of transgender experiences.

Keep in mind that there is a difference between *research* on how common transgender is and *interpretation of research* that seeks to explain why being transgender is more common, if we believe it is. What do the numbers show?

Psychologists in the United States today use a standard manual, called the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5)*, to diagnose mental disorders. That manual includes a current diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria. Gender Dysphoria refers to the distress associated with gender discordance or lack of fit between a person's gender identity (as a boy or girl, man or woman) and their biological sex (usually thought of in terms of chromosomes, gonads, and genitalia). When a person experiences gender discordance and they find that experience to be distressing, they could meet the criteria for the diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria.

The *DSM-5* says that the percentage of people who have gender dysphoria is remarkably low; it is not a common experience at all.[2] The fine print, however, points out that these estimates are of adults seeking medical interventions from specialty gender clinics in Europe. They aren't good estimates of gender dysphoria among adults in the general population, let alone among children and adolescents. Also, we've seen that most transgender adults don't report using medical interventions[3] such as hormone therapy or various surgical procedures, so those early estimates are very misleading.

If you survey the general populace about their gender identity, you'll find higher estimates of the frequency of people who identify as transgender. Unlike surveying people who go to specialty clinics, surveying people who are just part of the community allows you to include those without sufficient money, time, or interest to pursue specialty services. These surveys can also include people who don't meet the criteria for a formal diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria, and even those who don't experience gender dysphoria at all. If you just survey people and ask them if they are a man or a woman or transgender or a different gender identity, you'll find much higher percentages of transgender experiences reported.[4] It would still be under 1 percent of the population, but that's a lot more than what we

thought when we surveyed people going to specialty clinics for medical assistance.

Where the percentages really rise is among younger generations. A recent Gallup Poll indicated that the highest percentages of people saying they are transgender were reported among those in Generation Z, specifically those born between 1997 and 2002. About 2 percent of that group identified as transgender. You get lower percentages among Millennials, who were born between 1981 and 1996, and still lower percentages among Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) and Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964).[5]

Table 1. Identify as Transgender?

Generation	Years	Percentage
Generation Z	1997–2002	2.1%
Millennials	1981–1996	1.0%
Generation X	1965–1980	0.5%
Baby Boomers	1946–1964	0.1%

I mentioned above that some people view these increases as a result of social contagion. I don't tend to use this phrase—or at least, I don't use it in isolation, as if it alone explains the increases. Sometimes social contagion is offered as an explanation in a way that pits it against the social acceptance theory. It is a very common tendency for people to think in terms of single causes. The single-cause approach allows us to reduce complexity to a simple explanation that is easier to incorporate into our way of making sense of what is going on around us. This is unhelpful. In my mind, there are undoubtedly multiple influences impacting the rise in transgender identification. Social acceptance is certainly going to increase the number of people who are aware of their gender discordance or are willing to acknowledge that discordance and now have a name for it. To the extent that social contagion occurs, it likely occurs for a

What is Social Contagion?

Social contagion refers to "the spread of behaviors, attitudes, and affect through crowds and other types of social [relationships] from one member to another."[6] When we apply this concept to mental health symptoms, social contagion is related to how symptoms may transmit across groups of people who may be more susceptible to influence by their peer group, and how these symptoms may be maintained through various interpersonal processes. Social and peer group influence has contributed to reinforcement of weight loss and/or excessive exercise in such a way that has contributed to risk for eating disorders among adolescent females, for example.[7] When applied to the experience of gender dysphoria, the social contagion theory reduces the complexity of gender dysphoria to nothing but peer group influences in ways that will likely be experienced as more antagonistic by people navigating gender identity questions.

subset of people within a broader, overarching shift in culture. I believe this shift is better accounted for by what Ian Hacking refers to as a "looping effect." Before I explain the looping effect, let me first discuss the splintering of gender categories.

Emerging Gender Identities

Some of these increases across generations could be a reflection of what I call "emerging gender identities."[8] Beyond transgender experiences in which a person experiences themselves as the opposite gender (a woman trapped inside the body of a man), we are seeing a rise in variations of nonnormative gender identity, with ever-expanding gender identity labels such as genderqueer, nonbinary, agender, bigender, androgyne,

aporagender, graygender, demigender, demitrans, feminine-of-center, masculine-of-center, maverique, gender expansive, and gender creative, to name but a few. How did this splintering of gender categories come about?

Drawing on the work of Ian Hacking, I've suggested that there may be new ways people think about themselves in response to new categories, language, and terminology around gender. Let me give you one example. Mental health experts used to think of different experiences of gender as reflecting an identity problem. Since 2013, with the most recent revision of the *DSM*, mental health experts now no longer see different experiences of gender as an *identity* problem; rather, they see *distress* among those with different gender experiences as the problem. We moved from the *identity* being the problem, to the *distress* about the identity being the problem. That shift changed how a person (and the group of people who share similar experiences) thinks about themselves and even their history as a group. In response to these kinds of changes, people and people groups in some ways come into existence in response to how they are organized into categories and the meaning now given to those categorizations.

Mental health diagnoses are one way of categorizing people. Historically, there was a clear attempt in the transgender community to move away from medical and psychiatric language (e.g., *transsexual*) and toward language that people navigating atypical experiences of gender felt they could claim for themselves. That new language was *transgender*, which took individual and group experiences beyond mental health categories toward a more public identity. There are many steps involved in how these changes come about. Developments in mental health categorization and responses to medical and psychiatric terminology, in tandem with the growth of "experts" who determine what counts as true knowledge about gender, contribute to conjectural knowledge and taken-for-granted realities that end up

on social media, in entertainment, and are otherwise reflected in society in compelling ways. This has been referred to as a "looping effect" that has been applied to a number of phenomena.[9]

If social contagion plays any role in people's diverse gender identities, it would be best to consider this phenomenon just one piece of an overarching looping pattern in society, where changes in language and categorization contribute to the further splintering of gender categories, the rise in the number of self-attributions associated with gender, and the renegotiation of individual and group characteristics.

The fact that a child has met transgender people online and then begins identifying as transgender doesn't invalidate the child's experience. But of course, prior to hearing from other transgender people, the child may not have had "transgender" as a category through which to interpret their experiences. The looping effect helps explain how people's awareness of a category shapes their interaction with that category, without social contagion necessarily being the culprit. When a child exploring gender identity uses the internet to connect with others who have similar experiences, that does not mean those online relationships *caused* the dysphoria. It may be that the child seeks out others to make sense of their own experience. We saw this with an emerging adult we met for a consultation who shared what online relationships meant to her:

> The internet became a fantastic thing. I learned a lot and connected to other people in [a] similar situation to me. I learned what was wrong with me and a way to fix it. However, I struggled with whether I wanted to transition because of both moral concerns and [my understanding] that people who do [transition] often have harder lives.

As I mentioned above, there is a difference between the *research* and the *interpretation* of research, a difference between

the *data* and what we *make* of the data. The looping effect is one way to try to make sense of the data of increasing trans identification. Others would see people with diverse gender identities as having always existed, apart from the existence of categories to describe them, and they interpret any increase in trans identification as an increase in societal awareness. Still others, as I mentioned, see these increases as something like a virus spread by way of social contagion, something that is "caught" through peer group interactions and influenced by trends toward transgender identities and community.

Another factor that may be at play in rising transgender identification is a broader cultural cynicism toward authority and norms. This cultural cynicism is in part the result of significant institutional failures, as we see with movements like #MeToo and #ChurchToo, as well as scandals and collapses at the highest levels of finance, banking, housing, education, and organized religion. It would make sense that some of this cynicism would be directed toward norms taught within organized religion, including norms surrounding sex and gender. This phenomenon is hard to point to directly, but it's likely part of the water we swim in. In other words, we are so immersed in this cynicism toward norms that we can forget it is a part of our lives at every turn.

People disagree about what is going on right now in the area of gender identity, gender dysphoria, and transgender experiences. Parents need to know that experts also currently disagree; we don't have the kind of consensus parents typically like to see when it comes to the care of their children. Professional organizations and experts in gender will claim consensus and claim to have true knowledge about gender, but keep in mind that even this apparent consensus is a predictable part of the looping effect I mentioned earlier. None of these claims are being handed down from on high with the kind of certainty you might want.

Bringing the Conversation Home

The question of how common transgender experiences and emerging gender identities are may come up in conversations between you and your child. An older child might ask if transgender identity was a conversation among your peers when you were a teen.

Child: Did your friends talk about being transgender when you were my age?

Parent: No, not really. It wasn't an experience that many people said they had, and it wasn't all that well known or understood. That doesn't mean we understand all of what's going on today, but it was talked about much less often when I was your age.

Child: So, it just didn't exist?

Parent: I wouldn't say that. There were well-known reports of people transitioning.

Child: What do you mean?

Parent: I'm thinking of when Chaz Bono, a celebrity, transitioned many years ago now. He is the child of very famous entertainers, Sonny and Cher. I can remember when Chaz transitioned because there just weren't as many instances of it. It also wasn't discussed in the same way as it is today.

Child: People are talking more about it today?

Parent: I think so, and it is on TV and the internet. It's become part of entertainment and a more mainstream conversation. You may or may not remember when Caitlyn Jenner transitioned in 2015. She had been Bruce Jenner prior to

> her transition, and Bruce Jenner had been a famous athlete who competed in the Olympics, so her transition was definitely a big deal.

As a parent you could also be proactive and say to a child or a teen, "It sounds like among the friends you have at school, you know some people who are transgender. That wasn't an experience that was as common when I was your age, but there are more people today who talk about their experience of their gender that way." Avoid any sense of putting your child or any of their friends on trial. Stay curious, but don't let your curiosity lead to sharp questions that come across as accusations.

We are only getting at the question of prevalence here. This is not the end of the conversation, but it marks the beginning of a conversation that will be ongoing, one that we will return to in each chapter of this book.

As we close this chapter, I want to help you as a parent take a healthy posture toward this topic and the people represented by it. Unfortunately, parents have few examples to turn to for how to engage culturally explosive topics. We are mostly offered rather extreme options. I mentioned in the preface that one extreme is that of the "culture warrior," or the person whose greatest concern is to win a war against ideas they view as threatening to Christianity. In my experience, parents who take this route often do so out of fear—they fear the ways in which society is changing and see the changes as a threat to their children and their way of viewing the world. I am not saying that there is nothing to be concerned about, but I do think as parents we want to avoid fear-based ways of parenting, particularly if we take the posture of culture warrior in response to those fears. Such a posture has to identify an enemy (after all, you are at war), and that enemy often inadvertently becomes the people navigating gender identity questions, which I don't think reflects the heart of God toward them.

I also mentioned that the other extreme example for engagement is the "cultural capitulator." This is the person whose Christian worldview seems to have no bearing on the topics of sexuality and gender. They absorb every new idea and incorporate it into their way of seeing the world and never seem to critically evaluate it. As the broader culture begins to celebrate diverse gender identities, capitulators uncritically follow suit. But this will not position you as a parent to help your children explore the ideas behind the desire to celebrate. Nor will it encourage them to wrestle with how best to love people within the redemptive story of our shared faith.

Cultural Ambassador: Our Three Cs

As you and your child discuss cultural changes and real-life experiences of gender identity, I encourage you to think of yourself as a cultural ambassador. As a Christian, you are an ambassador of God's kingdom to the culture of which you are a part. You are engaging that culture in creative and practical ways. You are not at war with the culture, nor are you capitulating to the culture, as though everything the broader culture says about sex and gender is obviously correct. The posture of ambassadorship is what I call "convicted civility seasoned with compassion." These three Cs can guide the conversations you have with your kids about gender, gender identity, and their relationship to peers who identify as transgender or have transitioned.

Conviction. Convicted civility seasoned with compassion begins with convictions you hold as a Christian about sexuality and gender. What do you believe about sexuality and gender, and why? How is your "working knowledge" of sexuality and gender informed by your Christianity, your reading of the Bible, and other sources of information? It's essential to hold our convictions with humility, but it's also crucial to have a perspective

based on Christian thought in this area so that you can parent your children well, helping them think critically about these topics. Perhaps reading this book will be a part of clarifying your convictions in your own mind.

Civility. When you think about convicted civility seasoned with compassion, think about how you are known to others in your spheres of influence—your home, obviously, but also your extended family, your neighborhood, your church, your place of employment, and so on. When polarizing topics come up, are you known as someone who can engage others without demonizing them? Can you treat people with the respect warranted them as people who bear the image of God? Can you sit with the tension that arises when positions on a topic are in conflict? It is increasingly apparent that the way we treat others in a diverse and pluralistic society is part of our Christian witness. Engaging others with civility sets a great example for your children.

Compassion. Finally, convicted civility seasoned with compassion means that you are known as being compassionate toward people navigating gender identity issues, including the language and categories used to describe experiences of gender today. In my experience, holding convictions and relating with civility can lead to compassion if we take some time to think about it. If we were talking about your child, would that influence how you would process what you are reading? Probably so. You could also picture this being the experience of your best friend's child—maybe that mental imagery will help you feel compassion toward people navigating these questions in their lives.

You can hold the conviction that there is a true north in these conversations—that there is a God whose plan for sexuality and gender is better than that offered by the broader culture—and at the same time appreciate that people who experience a discordant gender identity have to navigate a very challenging

experience that they did not choose. In other words, it is possible to hold convictions about God's creational intent and also appreciate that some experiences of gender do not reflect that intent, nor are those experiences a choice. When you cease demonizing the "other side" and begin to relate to people with civility because of God's love for them, you allow room for compassion to grow in your heart. Compassion helps you show Christ to others, speaking into their confusion by pointing them to a good and loving Father whose love for them and plan for them is greater than anything else they have known.

We will return to these three Cs of relating and parenting on the topic of gender identity. But for now, begin to think about how these three Cs can be reflected in your life, and how you wish to be intentional about modeling each one for your children.