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CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY OF TRANSGENDERISM

Thomas Trace Beatie is the first “man” legally to give birth in the United States. Born in 1974 as the girl Tracy Lehuanani LaGondino, Beatie self-identified as transgender and, in 2002, started the process of transitioning from female to male. While Beatie began hormone treatments and had her breasts removed, she decided to keep her reproductive organs. This was followed by a legal change in status from female to “male” in the state of Hawaii. In 2003, Beatie married female body-builder Nancy Gillespie, who already had two biological children of her own but could have no more because of a hysterectomy. So the couple purchased sperm from an anonymous donor to have Beatie artificially inseminated, and Beatie subsequently gave birth to three children in succession. Thus, though Beatie is legally identified as a “male,” she has given birth to three children. Beatie has since gone the next step and had surgery to modify her genitalia. Commenting on her decision to transition, Beatie said, “I never struggled

with my identity, or fought it or tried to change the way I felt. It was just the simple fact of my existence: Outside I was a female, but inside I was a male.”¹

Previous generations may have been able to dismiss Beatie’s actions as an odd occurrence, noteworthy only for its uniqueness. But stories about transgenderism multiply weekly, and what was once unheard of now seems omnipresent. Understanding the background to the modern transgender movement can bring clarity and perspective when developing a moral stance on the subject. Transgenderism has not emerged from nowhere, and in this chapter I will trace some of the significant events that have led to modern debates about gender. I will begin with some historical background of transgender-like behavior from the Roman Empire. Then I will discuss Magnus Hirschfeld, Harry Benjamin, the sexual revolution in the United States, and the influence of literary deconstruction in academic discussions about gender.

THE CULT OF CYBELE AND TRANSGENDER-LIKE BEHAVIOR

For us modern Christians it may feel at times as if no one else in church history has faced anything like transgenderism. But actually, the early church was familiar with something similar in the religion of Cybele, an ancient goddess-worship cult that had priests called “Galli” who presented themselves in ways similar to transgender people today. In ancient Rome, March 24 was known as the Day of Blood and was dedicated to Cybele worship. During a public procession, the high priest of Cybele would flog himself with a whip hung with knucklebones while marching through the streets. At the same time, men who wanted to become servants of Cybele worked themselves into a frenzy and slashed their testicles with a piece of broken glass or flint,

castrating themselves in a painful fit of emotional hysteria while dancing. After castrating themselves, these Galli were attired in female garments, grew their hair long, and used perfumed ointments. They had their hair bleached and usually wore it dressed up and waved like women, a look completed by wearing heavy makeup, their faces resembling whitewashed walls.² As Robert Turcan of the Sorbonne says, "The galli consecrated themselves to Cybele by sacrificing their manhood to her."³

While the cult of Cybele has some striking similarities to modern MtF transgenderism, the parallels have limitations. It is not clear how many of the Galli emasculated themselves and cross-dressed merely out of misguided dedication to Cybele as opposed to men who may have experienced what today is clinically described as gender dysphoria. Thus, I refer to their behavior as "transgender-like" in order to acknowledge the differences. But while the motivations may diverge, the final behaviors are very similar. If we could travel back in time to early Christians in Rome in AD 64 and describe modern transgenderism to them, they probably would have said, "We don't have the word 'transgenderism,' but we think we have seen something very similar to what you are describing." Transgender-like behavior was not unheard of in the past, but how did modern transgenderism emerge in our culture?

MAGNUS HIRSCHFELD

If one person can be most credited for beginning the modern transgender movement, perhaps German physician Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935) is the best candidate. An advocate for sexual liberation from traditional values, in 1897 he founded the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, which was committed to arguing in favor of changing German law to decriminalize homosexual behavior as well as defending the rights of bisexuals

and transgender people. To achieve these goals, Hirschfeld opened the Institute of Sexual Research in Berlin in 1919. On May 6, 1933, a little more than three months after Hitler became Reich Chancellor, the Institute for Sexual Science was ransacked, and much of its library went up in flames during Joseph Goebbels's infamous book-burning on May 10, 1933.

Much of Hirschfeld's activism was motivated by his own homosexuality. In 1919, at the age of fifty-two, he started living with nineteen-year-old Karl Geise and later added a second boyfriend, twenty-four-year-old Li Shiu Tong, whom he met while touring China in 1930. After the Nazis took over Germany, Hirschfeld took both men with him to France and claimed them both as lovers.⁴

Hirschfeld wrote during a transitional period in the conceptualization of sexuality and sexual ethics. It was during this time that many of today's sexual identity categories were initially constructed. Hirschfeld's rejection of traditional views of gender was foundational in the development of what is now called transgenderism. He said, "The human is not man or woman, but rather man *and* woman."⁵ Most significantly, Hirschfeld's paradigm presented gender as existing on a continuum between male and female, with most people having characteristics of both. His work served the purpose of questioning traditional distinctions between the sexes and thus opened the door for future generations to embrace an ambivalent transgenderism. In his drive to expand gender categories, he once calculated there were 43,046,721 possible combinations of sexual characteristics, then indicated that the number was probably too small.⁶

In 1910, Hirschfeld published a monumental work titled *Die Transvestiten* (*The Transvestites*), in which he took the innovative step of distinguishing transvestites from homosexuals.

Hirschfeld himself coined the term “transvestite,” which is Latin for “cross-dressing,” and suggested that not all men who cross-dressed were actually homosexual, but their focus of pleasure was on themselves and their clothes. He also felt that women cross-dressers were more interested in the work roles and lifestyle of men than male clothing.⁷

Hirschfeld also coined the word “transsexual” in 1923. Distinguishing between transvestites and transsexuals, he described transsexualism as the adoption of the gender role opposite to a person’s birth sex, arguing that such people hold an unswerving conviction that they are assigned to an incorrect sex. In contrast, he claimed that transvestites merely wanted to dress in the clothes of the other gender, but still identified with their natal sex.

Two of the first attempts at gender reassignment surgery were cases related to Hirschfeld’s institute: Rudolf Richter and Einar Wegener. Richter (1891–1933) was a servant at the institute who preferred the female name Dora. Surgeons associated with the institute castrated Richter in 1922 and amputated his penis in 1931, and even attempted the daring move of giving Richter an artificial vagina.⁸ Wegener (1882–1931) was a Dutch artist who married another artist, Gerda Gottlieb. On occasion his wife asked him to wear women’s clothes so she could use him as a model. This experience purportedly awakened a desire in Wegener to become a woman, and he began to identify by the female name Lili Elbe. Eventually finding his way to Berlin, Wegener underwent five surgeries to transition to a woman, the last one an attempted uterus transplant. Sadly, Wegener died from complications related to this last surgery in 1931.

Hirschfeld initiated changes in thinking about gender and prepared the way for modern transgenderism in three ways. First, prior to Hirschfeld, transsexuals (equivalent to our

modern term “transgender”) were merely considered another form of homosexual, but Hirschfeld argued that transsexuals should be viewed as a separate and independent category. Second, he initiated the pattern of creating categories of sexual expression by inventing the words “transvestite” and “transsexual.” Third, physicians at his clinic attempted the first genital surgeries to reassign a person’s sex. While Hirschfeld set the stage for acceptance of transgenderism globally, another German physician was highly instrumental in changes in the United States.⁹

HARRY BENJAMIN

In American history, the most influential figure regarding transgenderism was German-American endocrinologist Harry Benjamin (1885–1986), widely acknowledged for his pioneering work in standards of care for transsexuals and considered the “founding father of contemporary western transsexualism.”¹⁰ He was an acquaintance of Magnus Hirschfeld, and their friendship helped direct Benjamin toward an interest in sexual matters. Transplanting to New York at the outbreak of World War I, Benjamin began treating transsexuals with hormones in 1948, when notorious sex researcher Alfred Kinsey referred a male who wanted to be a woman to Benjamin. While Benjamin did not provide gender reassignment surgery himself, he directed his patients to doctors who could.

In 1966, Benjamin published his groundbreaking book *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, in which he described his work with transsexuals and advocated a paradigm shift in their treatment.¹¹ He denoted three categories of cross-gender types: Heterosexual men who cross-dressed for reasons of sexual fetish, a second group of cross-dressers with deeper emotional disturbances, and a third type that represented a disturbance

What is a knowledgeable, faithfully biblical response to transgenderism?

In *Affirming God's Image*, J. Alan Branch takes a fair, respectful, and factual tone in addressing this complex issue through a biblical lens. You'll learn:

- Scientific research around the transgender experience
- An overview of the history of transgenderism
- Important terminology surrounding gender issues
- Why people pursue gender reassignment surgery
- How to navigate conversations around this topic

The book ends with two practical chapters for families and churches, giving you guiding principles for how to address this issue in a loving, Christ-honoring way.

"Affirming God's Image is the book I will recommend first to anyone with concerns about transgenderism. Professor Branch . . . urges us to show the love of Christ to people afflicted by gender dysphoria (especially including our own children and youth). But he sees great dangers in gender reassignment surgery and urges a vigorous "no" when that is suggested. He calls us to affirm the sex God has given to us at birth as a precious gift. And he presents these messages to us clearly and with grace."

—John M. Frame, retired J. D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary (Orlando)

"Careful, compassionate, and faithful, this new volume from Alan Branch is required reading for pastors, counselors, families, and individuals who are struggling with gender dysphoria. Dr. Branch has waded through a sea of literature to distill an approach that calls on Christians to love those who are suffering and to serve them by sharing biblical truth about sexuality."

—C. Ben Mitchell, Graves Professor of Moral Philosophy, Union University

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