

Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

Volume 22 | Number 22

Article 8

2023

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Recommended Citation

Richardson, Kaleigh (2023) "Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*. Vol. 22: No. 22, Article 8. Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol22/iss22/8

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Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say

Preston Sprinkle (2021)

David C. Cook

Reviewed by Kaleigh Richardson, M.Ed.

Dr. Preston Sprinkle, president of the Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender, has authored a timely and in-depth book on transgender identities and Christianity. With humility and compassion, Sprinkle explores emerging gender identities, the Church's response, and what the Bible says. This book is interwoven with stories from those who question their sexual identity, and it gives readers a glimpse into transgender brothers' and sisters' deep and often agonizing struggles with sexuality. For those working in student development, it is essential to understand the discussion around transgender identity, be knowledgeable about the topic, and be prepared to care for students who identify as transgender. A theme common throughout *Embodied* is the idea of people and concepts: people to be loved and shown hospitality and concepts to be wrestled with and deeply considered. The ability to balance abstract ideas with the hard work of loving God's image bearers can be difficult, but Sprinkle demonstrates a way forward where ideas and love flourish side by side.

Whenever human sexuality is involved, the conversation is guaranteed to be complex. Sprinkle prepares readers to be fully engaged by ensuring terms are defined and the scope of *Embodied* is understood from the very beginning. From the outside looking in, Generation Z seems to know these terms innately, but for professionals unfamiliar with transgender identity, it is crucial to start at the beginning. The definition used to set the stage for the remainder of the book is: "Transgender is 'an um-

rella term for the many ways in which people might experience and/or present and express (or live out) their gender identities differently from people whose sense of gender identity is congruent with their biological sex,” (Yarhouse, 2015 as cited in Sprinkle 2021, pp. 29-30). Umbrella is an apt term for this book, as the diverse experiences and varied examples differ significantly. This is an important concept to grasp and one Sprinkle emphasizes throughout the text—one transgender person’s experience is just that: one person’s experience.

Understanding the difference between biological sex and gender stereotypes is an important nuance to Sprinkle’s position. Stereotypes persist for a reason, generally because enough people conform to those expectations to allow the stereotype to continue. However, stereotypes do not dictate behaviors. Too often, the Church, and culture more broadly, has made those who do not fit into narrow definitions of acceptable gendered behaviors feel like outsiders. Sprinkle questions and explores what role these narrow understandings of gender play in the transgender experience. While the data do not show a direct link between stereotypes and gender dysphoria, Sprinkle argues there is a correlation. What can be shown is that stereotypes can and do exacerbate the pain felt by transgender people. The Church has reinforced those stereotypes and imposed cultural ideas of gender on individuals instead of offering the freedom found in Christ. God calls his people to grow to be more like him; he does not call his followers to be more masculine or feminine based on their sex.

As God’s image bearers are physically present in the world, Sprinkle wrestles with the role bodies play in a felt sense of sexual identity. Historical Christian belief says that God created males and females and declared them good, but the Fall brings the unfortunate reality that all is not as it should be. Does that mean that transgender people are experiencing some effect of the Fall when they do not feel at home in their created bodies? When body and mind do not align, which is given preference? Building an argument from Genesis through the New Testament, an exploration of medical journals, and interviews with transgender individuals and their families, Sprinkle concludes that “sexed bodies play an essential, though not exhaustive, role in determining who we are” (p. 76). Sprinkle concludes that bodies should be given preference when one feels incongruence between biological sex and gender identity. However, he recognizes that it can be a painful experience for those experiencing

gender dysphoria and that the Church has to do more to care for the transgender community.

While Sprinkle's beliefs align with the orthodox views of the Church, he presents them with a posture of humility and love. The Church has regularly gotten the theology of something right without following Jesus' example of freely giving love and belonging. The last half of *Embodied* explores what it means to welcome transgender individuals and emphasizes that what Christians believe is just as important as how they believe it. He dives into current issues such as rapid onset gender dysphoria and hormonal therapy for teens questioning their gender identity, how to care for Christians who are considering transitioning or have already transitioned, navigating pronoun usage, and gender-inclusive bathrooms and sleeping spaces. These are complicated topics to explore, and some may be surprised at how untraditional some of his ideas are compared to historical Christian behavior towards sexual minorities.

What stands out throughout the book is Sprinkle's humility and desire to truly listen to the experiences of members of the transgender community. His care for others clearly shows in his writing about this very complex and emotional topic. Readers will find someone who not only writes about the ideas of sexual ethics and gender identity but also lives in community with and deeply loves transgender people.

So, what does this book mean for those working in student development? If the goal is to care for students, then understanding their experiences is necessary. Whether that is caring for students who are exploring their gender identity or supporting students as they are walking alongside friends and family members who are questioning their gender identity, student development professionals have a responsibility to be knowledgeable about the student experience—or at least a responsibility to not be ignorant. The reality is that all campuses have students that are wrestling with their gender identity, and faculty and staff alike should be prepared to walk with them as they explore the complexities of gender identity and their faith.

To think more broadly than caring for individual students, how does this apply to caring for entire communities? How are students encouraged to engage with this topic and care for others? How is deep care and belonging for those with different life experiences being modeled? If minority students do not fit into stereotypical male- or female-targeted programming, where do they find belonging? Is there a place for community building between the sexes and programming not targeted to

specific genders? What systems are in place to ensure that all students, regardless of sexual or gender identity, are welcomed and respected community members? The questions are endless. The answers are also countless but require reimagining how things have always been done.

Regardless if readers are unfamiliar with the various identities that fall under the umbrella of transgender or if they have a deep personal knowledge of the transgender experience, it is likely something new can be learned by reading *Embodied*. Along with Biblical references, Sprinkle has done the hard work compiling the most recent data and research into something easily accessible that will appeal to a broad audience. Human sexuality is a controversial topic, perhaps especially so in Christian communities. However, *Embodied* shows a way forward where Christians can follow Jesus' example of holding deep convictions while loving and welcoming people.

Sprinkle does not shy away from this complicated discussion, nor do the numerous transgender individuals whose stories are shared in the text. Student development professionals must ask themselves how students' stories are being received. Are professionals seeking to understand the student experience or attempting to dictate to students the choices they should be making? Christianity is rooted in the freedom to choose. Dictating acceptable behaviors and feelings is the opposite of the guidance of discipleship. The average person feels loved when they feel heard, so much so that it is difficult for them to distinguish between the two (Augsburger, 1982). Do students feel heard? Or do they feel ostracized due to their theology not aligning with the institution or individual professionals? While readers may disagree with the positions taken in *Embodied*, Sprinkle's love for transgender people is apparent throughout his work. He shows a way forward where abstract concepts and love for people can not only coexist but flourish.

Kaleigh Richardson holds a M.Ed. in Higher Education from Abilene Christian University and a B.A. in Political Science from Taylor University. She is currently serving as the Assistant Director of Student Conduct at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana.

References

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