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A Transgender Pastor in the Pulpit?

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What do you do when your pastor shows up in a new gender? That question is now faced by a United Methodist church in Maryland, and the issue of transgender persons is soon to confront all churches and denominations.

As *The Baltimore Sun* reports, the Rev. Ann Gordon is now presented as Rev. Drew Phoenix. The paper sets the issue clearly:

A year ago, the Rev. Ann Gordon received her routine reappointment as minister of a Charles Village Methodist congregation. Yesterday - after undergoing a sex-change operation and taking on a new symbolic name - the Rev. Drew Phoenix received another one-year contract to head St. John's United Methodist Church.

The paper also reported that the “reappointment” of the minister came after a 2 1/2-hour meeting with Methodist clergy “as well as an emotional open session.” In the end, the bishop of the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church decided that the church’s moral code, known as the *Book of Discipline*, did not preclude the appointment of transgender persons as pastors.

Before turning to the ecclesiastical and theological issues at stake, we should note the way the minister explained her motivation — to do this for others. “This is about more than me This is about people who come after me, about young people in particular who are struggling with their gender identity. I’m doing this for them.” What she is doing is leading her congregation into an illusion and her denomination into an explosive controversy.

The illusory nature of this transformation becomes clear in another section of the paper’s report:

“The gender I was assigned at birth has never matched my own true authentic God-given gender identity, how I know myself,” Phoenix said. “Fortunately today God’s gift of medical science is enabling me to bring my physical body in alignment with my true gender.”

This pastor claims that she knows her “own true authentic God-given gender identity” to be different than her own body. The ancient Gnostics would understand this repudiation of the body, but not historic Christianity. Christians have believed that the body is a gift from God, for believers the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Despising the body to the point of repudiating birth gender is a posture in direct conflict with the Bible and the historic Christian tradition.

There can be no question that some persons suffer excruciating gender confusions. But the answer to this must be the embrace of birth gender as a central dimension of God’s will for the individual. Christians must understand that gender — the sex of an individual — is a part of God’s glory in creation. God’s own verdict on the creation of humanity as male and female, both made in His image, was that it was “very good.” The transgender temptation is a repudiation of God’s own verdict on His creation and His plan for humanity.

The emergence of this phenomenon is a direct consequence of the massive social, moral, legal, and ideological shifts that mark our times. The concept of autonomous individualism has led persons to believe that each of us holds the protean ability to create and re-create ourselves into whatever or whomever we wish — and that no one outside the autonomous self has any right to set limits on this self-definition and transformation. The therapeutic revolution has

deluded modern Americans into thinking that patterns of basic rebellion against God are means of self-liberation and therapy. The law has been transformed into an instrument of social revolution, even as many legal authorities claim that traditional definitions of marriage, sexuality, and gender are artifacts of an oppressive and patriarchal age.

Added to all this, the sexual revolution has led to a society fixated on sex and reluctant to draw any clear boundaries. A worldview of nearly absolute non-judgmentalism leads the larger society to consider sexuality and sexual issues to be beyond the bounds of common concern.

The saddest part of the Sun's report comes when the pastor claims that "today God's gift of medical science is enabling me to bring my physical body in alignment with my true gender." This is an illusion of incredible tragedy. Modern medicine is truly capable of many wonders, but it cannot turn a woman into a man, nor a man into a woman. Doctors may perform drastic surgery and prescribe hormone therapies, but they cannot make a woman into a man. Rev. Drew Phoenix will be no more capable of biological fatherhood than Rev. Ann Gordon. Those who overlook this fact are hiding from reality.

Subsequent to its first report, the Sun reported that local Methodist clergy have asked for a judicial opinion from the church's highest legal authority, questioning Bishop John R. Schol's decision to reappoint the pastor. UMAction, an organization of conservative United Methodists, called upon their church to offer moral teaching on this pressing issue:

"I think instinctively most church people would say there are some theological problems with gender change, but they don't know how to articulate the arguments, and expect the church to offer a teaching on the subject," said UMAction director Mark Tooley.

"The issue of gender identity is not directly about sexual practice and really requires some different theological arguments," he said.

As one concerned pastor lamented, "Medical technology has gotten ahead of us." That is true for virtually all churches and denominations. Now is the time for Christian congregations, schools, and denominations to offer clear moral teaching and sound theological reflection on the gift of gender and the challenge of transgender persons.

The challenge could show up at your church tomorrow.

SEE ALSO: Article from The Church Report, release from The Institute for Religion and Democracy, "Gender Benders" by Mark Tooley.

Mark Tooley was my guest Tuesday as we discussed this controversy on The Albert Mohler Program [listen [here](#)].

