

INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE CHURCH

by Dr. Rosaria Butterfield

A few years ago, during an open question and answer session on a college campus, a student accused me of hate speech. She referred to something I described in my lecture, when in 1998 I was in my kitchen confessing to my transgender friend Jill that I was starting to believe that the gospel was true, that Jesus is alive, and that we were all in trouble.

This student approached the microphone and blurted: “That’s hate speech! When you described your transgender friend putting her hand over yours as you shared your new faith in your kitchen, you mocked her! You actually said that your transgender friend had large hands!”

I paused, perplexed, and asked, “So . . . it is hate speech to say that Jill’s hands are large?”

The student practically exploded off the floor: “Of course it is!”

“Jill stands six foot two without heels,” I explained. “I’m five two. My hands barely cover an octave on the piano. Compared to mine, Jill’s hands are large. Large is a descriptive adjective.”

The student tossed her own hands in the air in exasperation and declared: “Transgender women are hurt by such insensitive observations. It’s hateful.”

Me: “Why is it hateful to say Jill’s hands are large?”

Her: “This is what leads LGBTQ+ people to suicide!”

Me: “But the size of Jill’s hands is a measurable, objective truth.”

Her: “Who cares about truth? Your truth isn’t my truth. Your truth hates my reality!”

How did we get to a place where it makes sense for a person to reject truth not because it’s false but because it hurts? How did we get to a place where we label people—image bearers of a holy God—as knowable primarily by their political and social group, as if that is their truest and most indelible virtue? Under what worldview could my words cause suicide but the genital mutilation that allows a biological man to masquerade as a woman cause celebration and affirmation?

This exchange grieved me. It still does. This college

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student is the fruit of my life as an unbelieving professor. I had been a university professor living in serially monogamous lesbian relationships during the 1990s. This student’s response calls to mind Jesus’ famous exchange with Pilate after His arrest. Jesus said: “I have come into the world that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice,” to which Pilate dismissively responded, “What is truth?” (John 18:37–38, NKJV). Pilate audaciously stared Truth in the face and walked away, but he didn’t deny its reality. How have we arrived at a place where students on elite college campuses perceive objective

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truth as a threat to personal safety and authentic selfhood?

The answer is intersectionality, an analytical tool introduced in humanities and social science departments in U.S. universities in the 1990s. Intersectionality creates a metanarrative (grand story) out of oppression. It maintains that the world is made up of power struggles, and that white male heterosexual patriarchy must be destroyed in order to liberate those who are oppressed by it. It understands the biblical complementarity of husbands and wives as perverted and “weaponized.” It believes that if we can expose the myriad ways in which people suffer down to the smallest detail and then rearrange the power-oppressions, we have the ability to reemploy a person’s history (of oppression) and destiny (of liberation). Suffering in this worldview includes both material and perceived suffering: the “dignitary harm” clause of the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, the 2015 Supreme Court decision that legalized same-sex marriage in all fifty states, expanded the concept of harm to include harm to one’s dignity and identity. Thus, any perceived rejection of personal identity based in LGBTQ+ affirmation constitutes harm. Harm, then, is both material and psychological, both real and perceived.

Under intersectionality, liberation depends on the power of voice—or re-voice—of material and perceived harm. It works like this: when we allow those with a hefty load of intersections (perhaps a transgender woman of color who is deaf and poor and incarcerated) to have a larger voice in a culture and simultaneously require those who have white male heterosexual “privilege” to remain silent, we supposedly tear down the walls of material violence. Indeed, intersectionality maintains that who you truly are is measured by how many victim statuses you can claim—with your human dignity only accruing through intolerance of all forms of disagreement about your perceptions of self and world.

Let’s be clear: unjust violence against all image bearers of a holy God is condemned in the Bible as sin. And God knew that certain groups of people would need greater protection than others—widows, orphans, the poor, the

prisoner—and He commands our immediate care of them (Heb. 13:1–3). God warns us against committing the sin of partiality (James 2:6). The most horrific forms of betrayal and sin are those committed within families and churches, when the very people who are called by God to protect the small and weak become their captors and predators. God hates this.

The question at hand, however, is this: Can intersectionality serve the gospel? Can we add intersectional teaching to the gospel to arrive at a better way of loving our neighbor? A number of churches and parachurch groups say yes. Intersectionality has found a home in many of our Reformed churches, notably in sensitivity training to make the church a friendlier place for “sexual minorities.”

Denny Burk has helpfully identified the two most prominent ways that intersectionality works at cross-purposes with the gospel: first, by fostering an unbiblical view of human identity, and second, by producing social fragmentation.

Intersectionality fails to distinguish between morally neutral descriptions of people’s lived experience (ethnicity and class) with morally charged descriptions (sexual orientation and gender identity). Because intersectionality does not have a biblical category of sin, it does not have a biblical category of repentance, redemption, or grace. Because it does not start with a robust understanding that human identity is an image-bearing reflection of God—that all people are made in His image (Gen. 1:27)—it has no concept of what it means to grow in the knowledge, righteousness, and holiness of Christ.

Intersectionality produces never-ending social division and fragmentation. This is ironic, because when intersectionality first appeared in U.S. universities in the 1990s, it was hoped that it would challenge the idea that dominant and oppressive social groups are easily identifiable. Instead, it multiplied social groups and attributed to them an invented reality, leaving us with a culture of identity politics on steroids.

For example, intersectionality demands that you “honor

someone's pronouns" even while knowing that those pronouns can change tomorrow. We are told that good neighbors lie to each other like this, pretending that women can be men and men can be women. We are told that a homosexual orientation is indelible and permanent, but biological sexual difference is a matter of personal opinion.

These contradictions to the creation ordinance violate both love of neighbor and common sense. Intersectionality claims to create community, but the community it creates is fractured, victim-minded, angry, and inconsolable. This is the exact opposite of the community created by the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; Gal. 5:22–23). When intersectionality joins efforts with the gospel, it leaves us with an immature faith, a false hope, and a deceptive vocabulary.

Intersectionality confuses justice, a command of God to defend the poor and the needy (Mic. 6:8), with a conception of justice not defined by Scripture. Biblically speaking, sin causes suffering, and even oppressed people need soul care in addition to body care because oppressed people are sinners in need of a Savior too. Sin produces suffering, both our own sin and the sin of others that hurts us. The order between sin and suffering matters. Miss this point or change the order and you have bypassed the entire gospel.

As Elizabeth C. Corey has pointed out, the departure point for intersectionality is a debatable but never-debated set of ever-expanding personal qualities that constitute identity and personhood: age, race, class, sex, sexuality, gender identity, weight, attractiveness, feelings, phobias—the list goes on. Heading out in the wrong direction guarantees arriving at the wrong place, and that is the unintended fruit of intersectionality in the church. The church's embrace of intersectionality as an analytical tool was intended to give voice to the voiceless. But the victimized identities that emerge from intersectionality are perpetually immature and in constant need of therapy and affirmation. Because of the nature of the beast, a number

of false positives are emerging. Breakouts of "rapid-onset gender dysphoria" among college women prove this point. Gone are the days of empowerment; intersectionality requires life support.

God-fearing churches take violence and oppression seriously. A God-fearing church takes church membership, personal accountability, and church discipline seriously, too, because these things are connected. An oppressed person's best defense against true violence is membership in a Bible-believing church, one that practices both hospitality and church discipline, one that protects the sheep from the wolves by driving the wolves out the door. Intersectionality banks on the power of human words, but justice for the oppressed comes by the power of the gospel.

Churches and parachurch organizations should be aware: intersectionality will not serve the gospel. It will not help you become kinder, more aware of the world around you, or better able to deal with diversity. Rather, it will introduce a new set of false virtues and false vices into your ministry. Take heed to your ministry. Paul's first epistle to Timothy tells us how: he calls our pastors and elders to be examples of righteousness (1 Tim. 4:12), to "give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine" (v. 13, NKJV), to not neglect the gifts of teaching (v. 14), to "meditate on these things [and] give yourself entirely to them," and to "take heed to yourself and to the doctrine" (v. 15).