

Research Article

The Meaning of “Side B” to Conventionally Religious Transgender Christians

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Abstract

There is very little research on the experiences of transgender and gender-diverse Christians. We report data from a convenience sample of 13 Side B transgender Christians. Side B refers to a typology first developed by Bridges Across the Divide to foster dialogue among sexual minority Christians. While Side A referred to those Christians who believe same-sex behavior may be morally permissible in certain contexts (e.g., marriage), Side B viewed such behavior as morally impermissible. This distinction has been extended to and adopted by some Christians who identify as transgender, and this study was intended to help us understand the meaning of “Side B” to those who identify with it, including views of social and medical transition, the use of preferred name and pronouns, and other commonly reported behaviors. Purposeful sampling was used to reach participants identified through a religious ministry serving transgender Christians. Thirteen transgender Christians participated in the study. Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) was utilized for data analysis, and major themes reported included Multiple Valid Pathways, Divine Guidance, and Identity Acknowledgement. Additional themes were also identified.

THE MEANING OF “SIDE B” TO CONVENTIONALLY RELIGIOUS TRANSGENDER CHRISTIANS

In discussions among gay Christians, a taxonomy of positions was developed originally through a ministry called Bridges Across the Divide [1], and used by other Christian ministries, such as Queer Christian Fellowship and Revoice. In this taxonomy, positions are designated by letters. Side A gay Christians believe that same-sex behavior can be morally permissible in certain relationships, such as the commitment between two spouses of the same sex in marriage. Side B Gay Christian views same-sex behavior as morally impermissible. They may pursue celibacy or be in a mixed-orientation marriage in which one spouse is gay, and the other is straight. Side B gay Christians tend to identify to different degrees with elements of the mainstream LGBTQ+ community as a culture (e.g., use of the identity-first designation ‘gay Christian’). The concept of “Side B,” originally applied to same-sex relationships, can be extended to transgender Christians navigating their faith and gender identity.

Side A and Side B are the two more recognizable sides in the gay Christian dialogue. However, other positions have also been noted. The Side C person is unsure or confused as to whether same-sex behavior is morally permissible. They might be actively seeking answers to that question, or they may have set that question aside for the time being and anticipate that they will get back to it when they have the energy to do so.

The Side X perspective is that not only is same-sex behavior morally impermissible, but so too is same-sex attraction and orientation, so they believe they should change their sexual orientation as a reflection of their own sanctification. Does not identify as “gay”; tends to use descriptive language (e.g., “same-sex attraction”). Does not identify with any elements of the mainstream LGBTQ+ community as a culture.

Finally, the Side Y person is not as confident that sexual orientation can change but shares similar concerns about the morality of same-sex orientation and attraction as Side X. Does not identify as “gay”; tends to use descriptive language (e.g., “same-sex attraction”). Does not identify with any elements of the mainstream LGBTQ+ community as a culture [2].

The language of “Sides” and the use of letters to designate positions is primarily an in-house conversation among sexual and gender minority Christians. It is difficult to say precisely how these positions map onto larger denominational positions on gender-diverse experiences, gender identity, and gender expression. However Gerdtts [3], offers an overview of the “religious landscape for LGBTQ+ persons,” and the views of gay affirmation, marriage, and ordination might serve as an indication of a more positive view of transgender experiences and social and medical transition. Welcoming and affirming congregations that might reflect more of a Side A position include the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Quakers, the Unitarian, and the United Church

of Christ. Denominations or branches of Christianity prohibiting gay marriage or ordination include American Baptist Churches, Assemblies of God, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the National Baptist Convention, the Roman Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the United Methodist Church. Such stances may reflect Side B, Side X, and Side Y perspectives to differing degrees as each views same-sex sexual behavior as morally impermissible but takes a different view of the use of sexual identity labels.

Lipka and Tevington [4], reported on attitudes about transgender issues among U.S. Christians and reported that most Protestants (75%) and Catholics (62%) viewed gender as determined by sex at birth. It is difficult to say where the different "Sides" would be reflected among transgender Protestants and Catholics, but likely all of the Sides are represented to different degrees across various denominations and branches of Christianity.

TG individuals often face conflicts between their religious and gender identities, employing various strategies to manage these tensions [5]. Research indicates that religious individuals, particularly Christians and, to a lesser extent, Muslims, tend to exhibit higher levels of transprejudice compared to their nonreligious counterparts [6]. However, attitudes within religious communities are not monolithic. Kanamori et al. [7-9], found that while evangelicals generally hold more negative attitudes and binary views of gender, they also acknowledge the intrinsic human value of transgender individuals. This suggests potential for reducing discrimination within these communities.

SGMs employ various approaches to resolve tensions between their identities and religious beliefs. Some disaffiliate from traditional religious communities, embracing secular identities or alternative spiritual paths like paganism or Wicca, while others seek to integrate their identities by finding affirming religious spaces or reinterpreting religious teachings [10]. The resolution of identity conflict significantly improves health outcomes for SGMs, regardless of the direction of resolution, with benefits comparable to the impact of reducing internalized homophobia [11].

For transgender and gender-nonconforming (TGNC) individuals, religious and spiritual struggles often involve interpersonal conflicts, perceived divine disapproval, and ultimate meaning struggles [11]. Some TGNC individuals perceive their gender identity as God's will, which can provide comfort or exacerbate internal conflicts, particularly if they internalize transphobic beliefs. Himschoot et al. [12], highlights the importance of pastoral care that fosters reverence for creation, community, vocation, and integration to combat negative internalizations and promote well-being among TGNC Christians.

A systematic review of 18 studies examining the impact of religion/spirituality on transgender adolescents' mental health revealed mixed findings: six studies indicated negative impacts, seven presented mixed outcomes, two showed positive effects,

and three found no significant relationship [13]. This underscores the complex interplay between religious beliefs, community attitudes, and psychological well-being. The complexity is further evidenced by a significant 392% increase in students identifying as non-binary over four years in Massachusetts public schools; this is illustrative of the national trends reflecting growing recognition of diverse gender identities in educational settings [14].

The experiences of celibate gay Christians navigating their faith and sexuality can provide insights into the challenges faced by Side B transgender Christians [15]. Both groups engage in reflective journeys to reconcile their identities with their faith, considering aspects of expression and behavior that align with their conservative sexual ethics and relationship with God. Yarhouse et al. [15], outline themes including the role of meaning/attribution, conservative sexual ethics, relationship with God, and advice for the church, which can be insightful for understanding Side B transgender Christians' experiences.

Kanamori et al. [9], validated the Transgender Attitudes and Beliefs Scale (TABS) with self-identified Christians, confirming its three-factor structure (interpersonal comfort, sex/gender beliefs, human value) and highlighting generally accepting attitudes, particularly regarding human value and interpersonal comfort, despite more binary views of sex and gender. Additionally, Kanamori et al. [10], found that certain religious beliefs, such as fundamentalism and belief in chance, are linked to lower valuation of transgender individuals, while seeing God as in control correlates with higher valuation.

In conclusion, the intersection of gender identity and conservative Christian beliefs presents unique challenges for SGMs. While religious communities often exhibit higher levels of transprejudice, there is potential for growth and understanding. The resolution of identity conflicts, whether through integration, disaffiliation, or reinterpretation of religious teachings, can significantly improve mental health outcomes for SGMs. These same designations have been explored to a limited extent among Christians who experience a discordant gender identity, experience gender dysphoria, or otherwise identify as transgender or non-binary. The purpose of the present study was to gain an understanding of what a "Side B" position means to conventionally religious Christians who experience gender discordance, experience gender dysphoria, or otherwise identify as transgender or non-binary.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodology [15]. CQR was chosen for its strength in identifying and understanding complex phenomena within specific contexts, particularly suited for exploring the nuanced experiences and perspectives of transgender Christians within the "Side B" framework. Qualitative research often utilizes smaller, targeted samples to enable an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences. Rather than

aiming for statistical generalizability, the focus is on obtaining rich, detailed insights into complex and nuanced perspectives. Given the study's emphasis on a specific and underrepresented population—Side B transgender Christians—the sample size of thirteen participants is consistent with the principles of qualitative inquiry, where depth and contextual understanding are prioritized over breadth.

The study sample comprised a convenience sampling of thirteen transgender Christians, ensuring a diverse representation in terms of gender identity, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation. Participants were selected only if they met all of the following qualifications: Identification as a Gender Minority Person and Christian and were 18 or older at the time of the study. Participants were recruited through Posture Shift Ministries, Inc., a leading training and consulting resource for church and ministry leaders on LGBTQ+ inclusion and care, ensuring a purposive sampling that reflected the study's focus.

Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 46 years, with a mean age of 30.23 years and a median age of 27 years. The biological sex distribution included five males and eight females. The sample reflected a broad spectrum of gender identities: one individual identified as male/other (7.69%), two as transgender women or trans women (15.38%), three as trans men (23.08%), one as transmasculine (7.69%), two as nonbinary (15.38%), one as female (7.69%), one as transgender (7.69%), and two as genderqueer or gender non-conforming (15.38%). The sexual identities within the sample were similarly diverse, with participants identifying as autogynephilic, bisexual, queer, heterosexual straight, lesbian, gay-oriented asexual aromantic, and gay.

Religious affiliations in the sample were predominantly Protestant (61.54%), with non-denominational affiliations (30.77%) and one Catholic participant (7.69%). The racial composition of the sample was predominantly Caucasian (84.62%), with one participant identifying as mixed ethnicity (Caucasian and Native American), one as Hispanic/Latina, and one as Caucasian Hispanic Jewish. Furthermore, 11 participants (>84%) had identified as Christian for over a decade, and nine of them were raised in the Christian faith, signifying a long-term engagement with Christian practices and beliefs.

Regarding religious attendance, 85% (11 out of 13 participants) attended services weekly, with two participants attending more than once a week, reflecting a high level of religious involvement. One participant attended religious services a few times a year. Upon sharing their gender identity within their church communities, four participants (31%) reported general acceptance, seven (54%) experienced mixed reactions, one (7.69%) reported general non-acceptance, and one chose not to disclose their gender identity.

Data were gathered through in-depth in-person and phone interviews to accommodate participants' preferences and geographical locations. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing for open-ended responses while guiding the

conversation to relevant topics pertaining to gender identity, religious beliefs, and the "Side B" perspective.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and were subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis process that begins with pairs of researchers coming to consensus and bringing them to the whole group if they cannot reach consensus on any issues. Two researchers identified "themes within" the individual abstracts. Four-person consensus was used for those times of disagreement or confusion. Four-person consensus was then used as the standard for "themes across." This was the step for consensually creating the "thematic hierarchy" across the whole sample. Using frequencies and significant quotes, the team -- all together -- works toward the narrative for the sample. The process is then audited by an external auditor to help with validity and to reduce groupthink.

The focal question for this phase of the study was: "In the Christian sexual identity conversation, where 'Side B' is defined by a stance against same-sex genital sexual behavior, how do individuals define a 'Side B' perspective on gender identity and expression?" This question guided the exploration into participants' personal definitions of gender identity (as man, woman, transgender, nonbinary, etc.) and gender expression (including aspects like cross-gender attire and other forms of expression). The aim was to elucidate the complexities of navigating gender identity and expression within the confines of a "Side B" Christian perspective, contributing to a deeper understanding of these individuals' lived experiences and challenges.

FINDINGS

The most frequently observed themes in this study highlight the diverse and complex ways Side B transgender Christians navigate their gender identity within their faith. They are *Multiple Valid Pathways*, *Divine Guidance*, and *Identity Acknowledgement*. These themes underscore the necessity for flexibility, compassion, and spiritual guidance in understanding and supporting their unique experiences.

Most participants (N=11) interviewed indicated that there were *Multiple Valid Pathways* for navigating gender identity and faith. For example, one participant shared,

I think that [Side B] is living in alignment with your biological sex in as much as you are able to without, I think, severe, debilitating gender dysphoria. So that could include using the pronouns that match your biological sex and dressing in a way that typically matches what most people who identify with biological sex in the way that they dress. Things of that nature, I guess. And then my other mind about it is, well, it really depends because I identify as having mild to moderate gender dysphoria, but for someone whose gender dysphoria is so severe that sometimes they feel like they can't leave the house, or that they can't get out of bed, or even look in the mirror, I also don't want to say, 'You can't transition,' because that just feels unnecessarily harsh and restrictive.

Another participant shared: “From a Side B perspective, there can be a continuum of reactions to how you respond to gender dysphoria... There might be allowances for transitioning if it was a life or death situation.”

Another common theme (61.5%) was that of *Divine Guidance* by which participants referred to seeking God’s direction in identity and lifestyle choices. One participant shared:

I think being able to have those have open conversations within community and also with God and figuring out what does faithfulness look like in my particular context and setting and how can I continue to Follow him faithfully even if that means potentially letting go of some personal preferences when it comes to dress or transitioning and still like seeing that as a valid way to be following Christ and seeing and experiencing him and support from the community around you as well.

Another participant shared:

My personal perspective is not throwing away the biological reality God has given me and asking Him to lead me in living this life in a way that glorifies Him, without masking all the time or pretending to be an ultra-feminine individual. For me personally, not doing any type of medical transition, seeking to be at peace with the body I was given.

Another common theme was that of *Identity Acknowledgement*, which was noted by 61.5% (N = 8) of participants. By this they were referring to the adoption of transgender and non-binary identifiers within their faith context. For example, one participant shared, “For Side B, I believe it’s fine and permissible to use transgender or gender minority language as a way to identify yourself as having a different experience than everyone else in the room.” Another participant said: “I feel convicted to not identify as, like, Trans masculine or trans guy or trans man or anything like that because I’m not a man...I kind of just stick to just trans really to describe like my experience between or my experience with my gender identity.”

Other themes included the reality of gender dysphoria, ambiguity about what “Side B” means for gender identity and expression, and acknowledgment of the importance of one’s biological sex. The theme of *Dysphoria’s Reality* (61.5%; N = 8) referred to acknowledgment of the genuine struggle when there is discordance between one’s gender identity and biological markers. One participants shared:

I would say a side B perspective of gender identity would be... first and foremost, *gender dysphoria, the experience of that is not wrong*. I think that that is kind of a lived in experience that you can come to God with, and then I think the next step of that is you were born, you were created within a certain, sex. So you may be born male or female, but your gender identity might not be congruent with, with that. So your, your lived out expression could be you presenting more feminine or more masculine in certain areas. I guess that would be okay. That’s What I would say.

Another theme was that of Side B Ambiguity (46%; N = 6), which spoke to how participants reported a wider array of what ‘Side B’ could mean or include in terms of gender expression. For example, this participant shared:

A Side B trans person is someone who falls under the trans umbrella but agrees with that statement about sexual activity. Regarding the importance of birth sex and not medically transitioning, I’ve already transitioned, so I wondered if I fall outside the mold...for trans people, it’s about saying no to sexual activity but still embracing transness, focusing on gender difference, and expressing that internalized gender identity and expression. Some trans people or people with gender dysphoria choose not to medically transition due to their convictions, which is okay, but that’s not the sole perspective; there’s no single perspective.

The final theme that was identified was that of *Biological Alignment* (54%; N = 7) or the inclination toward living in congruence with one’s biological sex. One participant shared, “Side B means acknowledging to some extent, the truth and beauty of your biological sex”

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study offer valuable insights into the complex relationship between gender identity and faith among transgender Christians who identify with the “Side B” perspective. Several primary and peripheral themes emerged from the interviews, each shedding light on how these individuals navigate their gender identity within the confines of their religious beliefs, both aligning with and extending existing literature on the subject.

A prominent theme from our participants was the recognition of various valid ways to navigate gender identity and faith. This aligns with Lefevor et al. [5], who describe multiple strategies SGMs use to manage conflicts between their identities and conservative religious environments, including compartmentalizing identities, rejecting one aspect of their identity, or integrating both. The flexibility and compassion highlighted in our study suggest a need for personalized support within faith communities, echoing findings by Himschoot, [12], on the importance of pastoral care that fosters reverence for creation, community, and integration to combat negative internalizations and promote mental health and well-being within this community.

The theme of seeking God’s direction in making choices regarding gender identity and expression underscores the deep integration of faith in the decision-making processes of Side B transgender Christians. This reliance on spiritual discernment aligns with Exline et al. [9], who found that some TGNC individuals perceive their gender identity as God’s will, which can either provide comfort or exacerbate internal conflicts. The theological guidance shaping their understanding and acceptance of their gender identity emphasizes the critical role of spiritual discernment in these individuals’ lives.

Participants' use of transgender and non-binary identifiers within their faith context may reflect a shift towards self-acceptance and visibility. This theme resonates with Rosik et al. [10], who found that resolving identity conflict between religious and sexual identities significantly improves health outcomes for SGMs. The acknowledgment of diverse gender identities within religious contexts challenges traditional binary views and calls for broader acceptance within faith communities, consistent with findings by Kanamori et al. [7], and Kanamori et al. [8], on the range of attitudes towards transgender people among evangelical Christians.

The additional themes identified in this study further illuminate the nuanced experiences of Side B transgender Christians. These themes emphasize the importance of inclusive and supportive environments within Christian communities and call for more empathetic and individualized approaches to pastoral care and theological discussions. Such findings are consistent with the broader literature, which highlights the need for nuanced understanding and support from both mental health professionals and religious communities [12].

For example, the acknowledgment of gender dysphoria as a real and significant experience for Side B transgender Christians underscores the need for pastoral care and mental health support that is sensitive to their unique struggles. This finding is supported by Exline et al. [12], who noted that ultimate meaning struggles and internalized transphobia are closely linked to gender minority stress among TGNC individuals.

The admitted ambiguity about what "Side B" means for gender identity and expression reflects ongoing theological and personal explorations. This uncertainty indicates a need for further dialogue and clearer theological frameworks to support these individuals. Such ambiguity is echoed in the literature by Yarhouse et al. [14], who highlighted the complex and individualized pathways SGMs navigate in reconciling their faith and gender identity.

This ambiguity is particularly significant as it reflects the evolving nature of discourse on gender identity within conservative religious contexts. Unlike the more established "Side B" position regarding same-sex relationships, the application of this concept to gender identity is still in flux. This fluidity presents both challenges and opportunities for individuals and faith communities alike. It suggests a potential openness to new understandings and interpretations of scripture and tradition regarding gender identity, which could lead to more inclusive and affirming religious spaces for transgender individuals.

While some participants emphasized the significance of aligning with one's biological sex, others expressed flexibility in this regard. This divergence points to a broader spectrum of beliefs and practices within the Side B community, necessitating a more inclusive approach in religious teachings and pastoral care. This spectrum of beliefs aligns with findings by Kanamori et al. [7], who noted that religious beliefs and gender views significantly influence attitudes toward transgender individuals.

The findings of this study have potential broader societal implications, particularly in light of the changing landscape of gender identity recognition. Joyce [13], reported a significant 392% increase in students identifying as non-binary over four years in Massachusetts public schools. This societal shift towards greater recognition and acceptance of diverse gender identities may be influencing the experiences and perspectives of Side B transgender Christians. It suggests a growing need for religious communities to engage with these changing social dynamics and develop more nuanced and inclusive approaches to gender identity.

The themes identified in this study highlight the importance of creating inclusive and supportive environments within Christian communities for transgender individuals. The nuanced perspectives of Side B transgender Christians challenge traditional binary views of gender and call for more empathetic and individualized approaches to pastoral care and theological discussions. Additionally, the reliance on divine guidance emphasizes the need for faith leaders to facilitate spaces where transgender Christians can explore and reconcile their identities with their faith in a supportive community.

These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on the intersection of gender identity and faith, offering insights that can inform pastoral care, mental health support, and theological discussions surrounding transgender Christians in conservative religious contexts. As society continues to grapple with evolving understandings of gender identity, the experiences of Side B transgender Christians offer valuable perspectives on navigating these complex intersections of identity, faith, and community.

This study is limited by its small sample size and the use of convenience sampling, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences among Side B transgender Christians. The reliance on self-reported data through interviews also introduces the possibility of bias. Future research should aim to include larger, more diverse samples and utilize mixed methods to triangulate findings and enhance the reliability of the results.

Future research should aim to include larger, more diverse samples to capture a broader spectrum of experiences and perspectives among Side B transgender Christians. Employing mixed methods, such as combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena by triangulating data from multiple sources. Longitudinal studies could also be beneficial in examining how individuals' perspectives and experiences evolve over time, particularly in relation to their faith and gender identity.

Additionally, exploring the experiences of transgender Christians in different cultural and denominational contexts can shed light on how various theological and social environments influence their experiences and beliefs. Comparative studies between Side B and other perspectives (e.g., Side A, Side X) within the transgender Christian community could also offer valuable insights into the diversity of thought and practice regarding gender identity and faith.

Further investigation into the role of community support, both within religious settings and in broader social contexts, can help identify key factors that contribute to the well-being and spiritual growth of transgender Christians. Understanding the specific needs and challenges faced by these individuals can inform the development of more effective pastoral care practices and supportive resources.

Finally, more interdisciplinary research that integrates theological, psychological, and sociological perspectives is needed to provide a holistic understanding of the intersection between gender identity and faith. Such research can contribute to more inclusive and empathetic approaches within religious communities and enhance the overall support for transgender individuals navigating their faith journeys.

CONCLUSION

This research provides valuable insights into the experiences of Side B transgender Christians, highlighting the intricate interplay between gender identity and faith. Key findings suggest that there is no single pathway for integrating gender identity with religious beliefs and that divine guidance, personal discernment, and community support play crucial roles in this process. These insights have important implications for Christian communities, theologians, and LGBTQ+ advocacy within religious contexts. They underscore the necessity for inclusive, compassionate, and nuanced discussions around gender identity within faith traditions, promoting a more accepting and supportive environment for transgender individuals. This study calls for ongoing dialogue, research, and theological reflection to better understand and support the unique experiences of transgender Christians.

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