A Danish girl's costly self-denial

By John Backman
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I didn't go see *The Danish Girl* for insight into the gospel. Yet the parable played out in the film, which is nominated in four categories at the Oscars this Sunday, provides exactly that. It sheds light on the interplay between two Christian callings: self-affirmation and self-denial.

Ostensibly, *The Danish Girl* centers on the gender transition of rising artist Einar Wegener into Lili Elbe in 1926. From Einar's first epiphany—the slide of silk over his skin—to his attendance at a peep show to learn and practice women's gestures, actor Eddie Redmayne lingers over the details of discovering that one's gender is not what one has always assumed.

This discovery is not linear. Einar wrestles with his desires, is terrified by the idea of dressing as a woman in public, and wonders about the future of his blissful marriage to painter Gerda Gottlieb (Alicia Vikander). The journey has that sense of inner striving found in Paul's "pressing on toward the goal of…the heavenly calling," but with a different calling: to become, as Lili says toward the film's end, "finally myself."

Such a goal fits seamlessly with our current golden age of self-affirmation. For Christians with genders outside the traditional binary (like me, for whom the most accurate term is *genderfluid*), this kind of affirmation is also deeply Christian: a healing tonic for years of shaming, imposed invisibility, and the requirement that we turn our backs on an integral part of ourselves. In a way, it's part of the call to

welcome the stranger—not only in our midst but in ourselves.

And while you'd be hard pressed to find proof texts on self-affirmation, the theme does appear in much Christian thought—starting with our Genesis-affirmed dignity as God's image bearers and running through contemporary sermons about how *you can't "love your neighbor as yourself" without loving yourself.*

But like Christian theology itself, *The Danish Girl* goes farther than this. And not everywhere it goes is comfortable.

Start with the fact that the Danish girl in question, and the film's center of gravity, is not Lili but Gerda. After pressing Einar into service as a model for a painting—and then finding him wearing her camisole—Gerda decides to play a game, decking out Einar in fashionable dress, heels, and makeup and taking him to a party as Einar's cousin Lili. It's all good fun until she realizes with horror that, as Einar tells her, "something clicked": that, rather than being Einar in drag, "there was a moment when I was just Lili."

Here begins Gerda's own internal struggle: a drive to love Lili into full realization, even as the man she adores begins to disappear. The scale of her loss comes through near the end of the film, when Gerda says to Lili, "I need my husband. Can you get him?"

Gerda does not get her wish. And yet she continues to live with Lili, advocate for Lili, affirm Lili's true nature as a woman, and stay with her through reassignment surgery. It is easy to see in Gerda John the Baptist's pithy summation of authentic self-denial: "He must increase, but I must decrease."

These words always sound noble when read from the pulpit. But the cost to us, if we choose to live them, is extraordinary. This, for me, is one of *The Danish Girl*'s enduring gifts: a detailed portrait of the cost and the struggle of both self-affirmation and self-denial. Einar's transition to Lili brings on not only inner conflict but an uninvited transition of sorts for Gerda and their friends. Gerda's affirmation of Lili costs her the life she knew and loved. While both are indeed lofty actions, they feel quite the opposite: like hard, unremitting work, taken up day after day.

This is important particularly for self-denial. We have many models for what self-affirmation looks like. We have few models to teach us what it means to "look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." In that light, Gerda incarnates the insight that authentic self-denial has little to do with symbolic gestures like giving up

chocolate for Lent. It is about following love into whatever abyss it leads us, with only an unsecured promise that love will also see us through.