

6. Male and Female he created them - Sex and Gender

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Series: Being Human

Texts: Genesis 1.26-28, 2.18-25, (3.16), (Ephesians 5.21-33), Revelation 21.1-8, Matthew 19.1-12

This is the sixth sermon in our series on Being Human. We're asking the question, "Who are we?" so that we can also answer the question "How should we live?" So far we've looked at things which are the same for all of us. We're made in the image of God, loved by him. We're also fallen. Jesus shows us how to be truly human. He dies for each of us to rescue us and to restore our humanity. In the Church, the body of Christ we find a name and a family. We're a mysterious unity of body and soul. Christ calls us to freedom, which we are to use in loving our neighbour. Today we're considering the fundamental difference in humanity, namely that we are male or female. We're looking at the topic of sex and gender. Issues around sex and gender are constantly debated on social media, traditional media and in politics. We're wrestling with all sorts of questions about this. What is it to be a man or a woman? How should men and women relate to each other? There's issues of sexual ethics. There's the question of what is the relationship of sex to gender, and what happens if your sense of your gender conflicts with your bodily sex? All of these questions are deeply personal and affect each of us and those we love in different ways. My aim this morning is to sketch a biblical picture of sexual ethics and then to look at the relationship of sex and gender, along the way seeing how the Bible offers something of a different story to our culture on these matters. Maybe that's wildly ambitious for this fabulously large topic, so please forgive me if I don't cover everything. Teens, I know talking about bodies and sex is all a bit gross and uncomfortable, at least it was when I was teenager, but it's something we all have to deal with, and it's a pretty big part of our lives, so that's why we're talking about it.

As some of you know I've recently started going on ABC breakfast radio for their Tricky Conversations segment discussing an ethical question with a philosopher from UTas. It's lots of fun. As I think about how to answer these questions, I keep coming back to the basics of a Christian approach to ethics - love your neighbour as yourself. There's two parts to this. Loving your neighbour and loving yourself. My hope with this sermon is that each of us will gain wisdom from God on how we are to live. For the Christian, in Romans 12, God calls us to worship him with our bodies. That's the main focus for this sermon. And if you're not a Christian, I hope this sermon helps you understand where Christians are coming from on these matters. But I also don't want to neglect loving our neighbours. Just because people might disagree with Biblical ethics, that does not give us licence to treat them badly. Jesus

calls us to love even our enemies! We're able to show all those fruits of the Spirit towards those with whom we disagree - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self control. And second, our job as Christians isn't to tell others how to live, it's to love them and invite them to meet Jesus, because it's only in him that we find life and forgiveness and healing and wholeness.

Ok, having hopefully cleared my through sufficiently, let's get under way and look at sex.

1. Male and Female he created them - Sex and ethics.

Sex is on page one of the Bible. Have a read with me.

27 So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'

In this series we've already looked at the fact we are made by God in his image, and therefore crowned with glory and honour to use the language of Psalm 8. But here we focus on that final line of verse 27 - male and female he created them. Being made male and female is intrinsic to our humanity. It's something that God declares is good. Notice there is no competition or hierarchy here. Both sexes fully bear the image of God. And we see that we as humanity are given a task - to rule over creation, after the pattern of God's own governance, namely in love and care. Intrinsic to this task is to be fruitful. Just in case you didn't get it, that means having sex, because that's where children come from. This is how the human family grows, and how we are able to carry out such an enormous task of taking care of God's world.

Genesis 1 and 2 offer two complementary accounts of creation. Chapter 1 if you like is the macro, 30,000 foot view. In chapter 2 the camera zooms in to the intimate and personal view. Where in chapter 1 God speaks creation into existence, in chapter 2 he stoops down, and gets his hands dirty. He forms the man, *adam*, from the dust of the earth, and breathes life into him. The word *adam* is the Hebrew for earth or ground as well as *man*. It's the same with our English word human. It comes from the word humus, soil. The picture here is that humanity is both earth and breath, matter and spirit, body and soul. Our bodies are integral to who we are, yet we're not merely bodies, we have a spiritual, Godward dimension. We're a unity of body and soul.

As the story progresses we find the first thing that is not good in creation. “It is not good for the man to be alone.” The human needs a counterpart, a companion. God had formed all the creatures of the earth, just as he had formed the man. He brings them before the man “to see what he would name them”. “And whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.” Now, just as an aside, there is in this story an important point about language. Our words can *name* reality, but they cannot *create* reality. The only one who speaks something into existence is God. Our words *recognise* the reality. The man’s act of naming does not impose meaning, but recognises meaning that exists objectively, outside of us.

This view of the relationship of language to reality is highly contested today. You may be surprised to know that this situation was predicted in the 19th century by none other than Humpty Dumpty. Or at least Lewis Carroll writing in *Through the Looking Glass*:

“When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master — that’s all.’

This is the situation we find ourselves in - put neatly by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Language is power. The question is not what is true, what corresponds to objective, external reality. The question is, “which is to be the master - that is all.” And if that is the case then life from the individual through to society as a whole is a contest of wills, to see who will be master, and who can impose their vision of reality on the rest.

That account of the world is a far cry from the harmony and delight we see in the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2. For the man, no suitable helper can be found. “**21** So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep.” In a fascinating reading of the text, John Paul II suggests that this sleep is a sleep of non being where God takes the first non-sexed human out of existence and brings two new human beings into existence, man and woman.¹ When God brings the woman to the man he bursts into poetry.

‘This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called “woman”,
for she was taken out of man.’

The Catholic feminist Abigail Favale writes,

¹ Abigail Favale, *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory*, Ignatius, 2022: 38

“[The man] immediately recognises, in the silent declaration of her body that she is both like him - more like him than any other earthly creature - and not like him. Their difference is complementary, but asymmetrical; this is not a mirror image or polar opposite. ... [The man] chooses a word that corresponds to that two-fold reality: *ishah* ('woman'), a word that includes *ish* ('man') while adding something new. ... This is a moment of *mutual* recognition; the man is both naming woman and renaming himself; it is through encountering her nature that he is able truly to understand his own.”²

In this moment we also see a vital principle that *the body reveals the person*. Although the woman hasn't introduced herself, “her *body* speaks the truth of her identity, and this truth is immediately recognised by the man, who is struck with joy and wonder at the revelation of a person with whom he can - *at last!* - have true communion.”³ It's a picture of difference yes, but also harmony and communion.

The narrative ends, verse 24: “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” And so we see that Genesis 1 and 2 outline not only the basics of the Bible's picture of what it is to be human, but also the Bible's picture of sexuality and marriage.

Marriage is the union of one man and one woman, voluntarily entered into for life, to the exclusion of all others. The marriage service in the Anglican prayer book neatly summarises the purpose of marriage outlined in Genesis. It was ordained for the procreation of children, as the proper place for sexual intimacy, and for mutual companionship, comfort and help. Sex is for inside marriage, and prohibited outside of it, irrespective of who that is with. This is the Bible's basic sexual ethic. All the other laws and instructions around marriage and sex in both the Old and New Testament flesh that out. But they are summed up in the 7th commandment: Do not commit adultery. This is why when Jesus' quotes Genesis 2 in Matthew 19, he is alluding to the entire sexual ethic of the Old Testament.

That harmonious picture is of course not how we see so many relationships. Genesis 3 is not only the story of the fall of humanity, but also of the fracturing of the relationship between the sexes, seen most acutely in our intimate relationships. There's doubt, lying, manipulation, mistrust, shame, hiding, blaming the other. It's summed up in the curse of Genesis 3:16: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” Favale writes, “The man's response to the woman's desire is to dominate her, which ‘makes an object out of

² Ibid, 39, 42-43

³ Ibid 40

a human being.' The dynamic of communion is displaced by a dynamic of possession; mutual love between persons becomes a utilitarian exchange between person and object."⁴

In 1 Thessalonians 4 we read,

3 It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; **4** that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable, **5** not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; **6** and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.

Here the prohibition of sex outside of marriage and the command to control one's own body sexually, is put forward on the grounds of justice - because this is an area in which people can "wrong and take advantage" of others. And it's interesting for me that the effect of the various prohibitions around sex in Leviticus 18 is to make marriage a safe place for women and especially children.

While the Biblical picture of marriage as being for the interlocking goods of children, sex and companionship used to be the ideal for our culture, it has not been for some time. The current sexual ethic is basically you are free to do whatever you want, so long as there is consent and it doesn't harm other people. Marriage is no longer seen as the place for children, or sex, or even companionship, unless you want it to be. The Biblical prohibitions are seen as repressive and harmful.

There is a fundamental technological innovation that has facilitated this change and that is the contraceptive Pill. Prior to the invention of the Pill, it was very clear that if you had sex, you could expect to sooner or later get pregnant. The Pill broke the intrinsic connection between sex and kids. The promise of the Pill, especially in the story told by second wave feminism, was emancipation and freedom from the shackles of motherhood and domestic labour, and other societal norms that have oppressed women since forever. The Pill offered the possibility for women to have responsibility free sex, just like men. In fact the birth control movement in the US was founded by a woman, Margaret Sanger, who viewed women's fertility not as natural and good, but as pathological, "a dangerous disease that needs to be treated and controlled."⁵ Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*, while highlighting ways that women are oppressed, also argued for a vision of freedom where, "women can only find true freedom by making themselves as much like men as possible."⁶

⁴ Ibid, 48

⁵ Ibid, 92

⁶ Ibid, 91

There are however some feminists today who recognise that the sexual revolution unleashed by the Pill has not delivered the goods for women that it promised. In an article summarising her book *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, British feminist Louise Perry writes,

I'm not a religious conservative. I'm a feminist, and I've spent my entire professional life working on the issue of male violence against women—first in a rape crisis center, and later as a journalist and a media relations director for a legal campaign against sexual violence.

It's precisely because I'm a feminist that I've changed my mind on sexual liberalism. It's an ideology premised on the false belief that the physical and psychological differences between men and women are trivial, and that any restrictions placed on sexual behaviour must therefore have been motivated by malice, stupidity or ignorance.

The problem is the differences *aren't* trivial. Sexual asymmetry is profoundly important: One half of the population is smaller and weaker than the other half, making it much more vulnerable to violence. This half of the population also carries all of the risks associated with pregnancy. It is also much less interested in enjoying all of the delights now on offer in the post-sexual revolution era.

She continues,

We need to re-erect the social guard rails that have been torn down. To do that, we have to start by stating the obvious: Sex must be taken seriously. Men and women are different. Some desires are bad. Consent is not enough. Violence is not love. Loveless sex is not empowering. People are not products. Marriage is good. And above all, listen to your mother.⁷

Gender - sex as lived out.

So far in this sermon we've talked about sex - that we are made male or female, and sexual ethics. But what about Gender? Are 'sex' and 'gender' synonyms? Do they signify a split between the body and the soul? What we mean by gender has changed with developments in feminism over the past century. In the second wave feminism of the 60s, the term gender was used to distinguish between the basic facts of biological difference, indicated by the term sex, and the collection of cultural meanings associated with that sex, termed gender. Distinguishing between sex and gender enabled feminists to maintain the distinction between, and equal value of, men and women while at the same time showing how gender

⁷ Louise Perry, 'I'm 30. The Sexual Revolution has Shackled my Generation.' *Common Sense*, 20.8.22, https://www.commonsense.news/p/im-30-the-sexual-revolution-shackled?utm_source=email&triedSigningIn=true

norms had been used to oppress women. So for example being a 1950s housewife is not essential to being a woman. Girls don't have to like pink, boys don't have to like blue. These are just gender stereotypes.

In the 1990s the godmother of contemporary gender theory Judith Butler argued that gender is essentially performative. Nothing is natural. Gender is entirely a social construct. There is nothing beneath the cultural performance. Gender is a complex fiction we inherit and repeatedly repeat.⁸ Butler is incredibly influential to our current discussions around gender. On her account, gender is entirely unmoored from the body, and, in popular discourse, now defined by the cultural stereotypes feminism sought to undo. To quote Favale again, "In other words, when a girl recognizes that she does not fit the stereotypes of girlhood, she is invited to question her sex rather than the stereotype."⁹

Distinguishing between sex and gender facilitated a more nuanced and helpful conversation about what it looks like to be a man or woman, and enabled a critique of unhelpful stereotypes. We are at a point where many in our public conversation are trying to collapse sex into gender, which is to say that everything is socially and therefore linguistically constructed. As one writer puts it, "in this conception, gender identity is a free-floating signifier that relativises matter out of existence, or at least out of relevance."¹⁰ But this is to underplay the reality of our bodily existence.

Ok, let's step back from this cooks tour of gender. What wisdom do the Scriptures have for us here? As I read the Bible, it does distinguish between sex and gender. That is, it has room for different culturally conditioned expressions and experiences of sex lived out. David is a warrior and a musician and poet. Deborah leads an army. And let's be honest, Paul is a massive nerd. The Bible also critiques sinful gender norms, like the book of Esther. I once did a men's seminar and in preparation I read every verse in the Bible directed at men. The vast majority were about their roles as husbands and fathers. The few that weren't were about character.¹¹ The text which most clearly addresses gender is 1 Corinthians 11 and it's about public worship in church. It's subtle and complex, but, as I read it, it does call us to live out the biological reality of male and female, for all the cultural contingency in how the sexes are differentiated.¹² The key is that how we live out our masculinity or femininity is governed

⁸ Favale, 71-75, 150

⁹ 158

¹⁰ Petra Bueskens, 'The Absurdity of Tickle v Giggle', *Fairer Disputations*, 30.8.2024: <https://fairerdisputations.org/tickle-v-giggle/>

¹¹ See Titus 3:1-8

¹² See Judith Gundry-Volf, "Gender and Creation in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16: A Study in Paul's Theological Method" in *Evangelium, Schriftauslegung, Kirche: Festschrift für Peter Stuhlmacher zum*

by the fundamental Biblical ethic of loving your neighbour as yourself. We are not bound by cultural stereotypes. But we are to use our freedom to in humility serve others in love in how we live out our sex. And we are also called to love ourselves, namely the sexed bodies that we are given by God, because we are not someone else apart from our body.

The Bride of Christ

There are two final points that must be said. I've spent a lot of time talking about sex and marriage. But I don't want to give the impression that to be truly male or female you have to get married. Far from it! Marriage is not the completion of our humanity, at least not this side of glory. John the Baptist, the apostle Paul, Jesus himself, none of them were married. Celibate singleness is not only possible, but a good and full way of life. In fact, Paul says it's better than marriage.¹³ Jesus says that "at the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage, they will be like the angels of heaven". Those who out of obedience to Christ stay celibate and single are a signpost to the future that God has for us. They powerfully bear witness that they are citizens of heaven, looking for glory. Their celibacy tells us that hope and life are not bound up in sex or marriage but in the resurrection of Christ from the dead and the promise of union with Christ and the wedding feast of the Lamb. Some things are worth waiting for. Sex isn't necessary to life. Jesus is.

And that leads to the final thing that needs to be said. Marriage also, at least according to the Bible, points to the future God has for us. Marriage is used as a metaphor throughout the Bible for God's relationship with his people. This culminates in Jesus, who loved the Church his bride and gave himself up for her.¹⁴ The one flesh union of marriage points to the union that Christ has purchased for his bride by his blood and which we will enjoy in glory. Just as the Bible begins with a wedding, so it finishes with a wedding, with the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. Marriage becomes a window in which we see an imperfect glimpse of the perfect joy and consummation of the union between God and his people. But married or single, Christ invites us now to become part of his bride the Church. It's here in his body that we can learn how to live out our embodied lives in worship to him, even as we look forward to enjoying him forever.

65. *Geburtstag*, Jostein Ädna, Scott J. Hafemann and Otfried Hofius (eds.) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 151–171; Anthony Thiselton, *1 Corinthians NICNT*, Eerdmans, 2000

¹³ 1 Corinthians 7.32-28

¹⁴ Ephesians 5.25 (cf. 5.22-33)