

CONVERSATIONS

Social Awareness, Living Truth

Series 2, Paper 3

HUMAN SEXUALITY: UNDERSTANDING GENDER

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Identifying one's gender used to be the easiest question to answer, there were only two options – male or female. One's biology provided the answer. But a seismic shift has occurred. Culture no longer views gender as being dictated by your physical anatomy. It is now based on what you feel, think and want to be. As a well-known trans activist put it, "It used to be that gender was about what was between your legs. Now it's about what's between your ears." (Chaz Bono).

Much has changed in our world. Modern culture defines gender as the non-physiological form of sexual identity; it is cultural rather than innate; it is chosen rather than imposed; it is fluid rather than binary. Biological sex has been replaced by "gender assigned at birth". *Queer* used to be a derogatory term, now it is general term for people who identify as part of the LGBTQ2+ community (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, 2-Spirited, and all other identities).

Gender issues, initially a civil rights movement, are now challenging long held cultural norms and beliefs. Trans-activists and their supporters are pushing for new laws and policies for schools, hospitals, workplaces, prisons and the military.

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Our medical system is at the forefront of these changes with a variety of interventions to address gender dysphoria (the experience of distress associated with the incongruence when someone's psychological and emotional gender identity does not match their biological sex). Hormone blockers are administered to children to delay puberty and hormone therapy is given to support a cross-gender identity change. Sex Reassignment Surgery (also called Gender Affirmation surgery) provides more drastic and permanent changes. The complexities created by these medical interventions raise the tension between human rights, ethics and personal freedoms.

The shift away from viewing gender dysphoria as a psychological disorder has removed stigma but it has also created a greater challenge for those seeking psychological support without pursuing transitioning. Psychoanalytic or psychiatric treatments that try to change an individual's gender identity through pressuring, harassment, alienation or bullying are harmful tactics that need to be eliminated. However, the proposed bans on conversion therapy would ban and even criminalize all practices that are not affirming, including psychological support through talk therapy, support groups, prayer and pastoral support. This issue of gender is morphing at unprecedented speed as we have moved from resistance, to cultural tolerance, to acceptance, and finally, to celebration.

Additionally, the church is having to defend its theological position on gender and that its cultural practice provides a helpful voice to those dealing with gender issues. The belief that Scripture is true and speaks

to gender identity is being dismissed by secular authorities as out of date.

This growing movement is also personal. More and more of us are being personally impacted as someone we know, children, grandchildren, siblings, spouses, and dear friends, are dealing with these feelings. Culturally, these people are told that they cannot flourish with the feeling of being trapped in the wrong body or questioning our cultural stereotypes of masculinity or femininity unless they embrace a transgender identity.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH?

At the heart of gender ideology is the belief that our bodies are incidental to our gender expression. This view is contrary to the esteem that Scripture places on the human body. The creation account gives evidence that biological sex is God given and actually reflects God.

Genesis 1:27 (NIV), "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

This verse shows that humanity is designed in God's image and a significant and important part of design is the differentiation between male and female (binary). This demonstrates the high value God has placed on our sexed body. An attempt to diminish the importance of our sexed bodies is an attempt to strip humans of one of the specific ways we reflect God's image.

Although God has made the sexes separate and different, the apostle Paul reinforces that their separation does not diminish either one's importance.

Galatians 3:28 (NIV), "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

This verse speaks to the equality all people have in the eyes of God through Christ Jesus. Sex continues to be a distinguishing characteristic but not one that limits a person's value or ability.

Genesis 2 continues to describe the creation of male and female, two uniquely sexed humans, which goes beyond biology and anatomy. There are God-given differences in the nature of men and women. Difference does not erode equality.

Genesis 2:18 (NIV), "The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

Our English interpretation of "helper" is often one of subordination, like an assistant. However, the Hebrew word used for the "helper" God gave Adam is "ezer" and it is used elsewhere to describe God. "Ezer" denotes a strong powerful ally who comes to the aid of someone in desperate need. Men and women were created with complex differences in order to complement each other in the work they do together. These beings are allies to each other and providing strength where the other

is weak. This design of biologically sexed differences and gender uniqueness was declared “very good” by God.

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Biological sex is integral to human identity. To be human is to have

a body that is sexed as either male or female and that sex is determined by God at conception. The body, its sexual differences and the cultural and behavioural strengths that come from that difference are described as good. God loves our designed and created uniqueness.

1 Corinthians 6:13-20 (NIV), “Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit”.

Sometimes our society, and even the church, fall into the thinking that our spirits are good and our bodies are bad. This negative view of the body is often attributed to Christianity when in fact it is actually an ancient mystical belief and couldn’t be further from the biblical perspective. The idea that our created bodies can be modified to suit our emotional states rejects God’s design for the human body that He esteems as good. As Christ-followers, His Spirit lives within our body, strengthening, healing and empowering us.

We are instructed in the great commandment that every aspect of our humanity is to be used for the glory of God.

Matthew 22:37 (NIV), “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

Life can be hard enough just dealing with the burden of existence, let alone trying to figure out what it means to be live as a man or woman and meet the cultural expectations associated with those realities. Biology, culture, families and the church have put expectations around masculinity and femininity by defining what it should look like – sometimes in a healthy way and sometimes in an unhealthy way.

Instead of honestly wrestling with those culturally and biologically defined boxes, people will blame God for creating us with the wrong body. God’s not to blame. It’s the confining stereotypes and the rejection of natural realities that has contributed to the fight to express one’s gender as something that is fluid on a spectrum. Rather than attempting to uphold overbearing cultural stereotypes, our focus should be on the spiritual fruit which have no gender.

Galatians 5:22-23 (NIV), “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

These spiritual characteristics are to be cultivated in the lives of all God’s people. They are human qualities. We all have the capacity to develop them, none more natural to one gender or the other.

HOW ARE WE TO RESPOND?

As Christ followers, our response to the cultural shift around gender issues needs to fit within our biblical understanding of God and ourselves. This will be challenging, as much of our Scriptural teaching is in conflict with the current beliefs of our present day. We also need to interact with our culture, including the LBGTQ2+ community, in a Christ-like manner that is full of love, grace and truth. In doing so, we offer hope.

Here are some suggestions for combining truth and love in response to the question of gender:

- 1 Listen well**
Seek to understand people’s realities, struggles, fears and hopes. There is always much more below the surface in people’s hearts and lives than we see in conversation and action.
- 2 Speak with Respect**
Use language that communicates dignity and esteem for every human being. Our cause is best served through a diplomatic tone. A tone that properly represents our positions as ambassadors of God’s kingdom.
- 3 Acknowledge the Pain**
Many people struggle to feel “comfortable in their own skin”. An increasing number are turning to a variety of ways to gain affirmation and acceptance. This is impacting families, marriages and communities. Kindness, empathy and love builds relational bridges.
- 4 Point people to the Goodness of God**
Scripture affirms that God’s design is good. The Good news of the gospel is that everyone is in need of Jesus and no one is excluded from God’s invitation to grace. God’s goodness is evidenced in His unconditional love. Let’s hold on to the hope that God’s Word provides.
- 5 Remember that God is still on the throne**
Don’t panic or give into overwhelming fear. Pray for godly wisdom for our political, cultural and spiritual leaders. Pray that God’s truth and love would permeate our institutions, our churches, our families and our own hearts.

Faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13:13 (NLT)

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- Centre for Faith, Sexuality & Gender: www.centreforfaith.com
- Nancy R. Pearcey, *Love thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018.
- Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015.
- Walt Heyer, *A Transgender’s Faith*. WaltsBook@yahoo.com, 2015.
- Sam Alberry, *Does Christianity Have Good News for the Transgendered?* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7Q5K003lvk>

