

Gender Identity – Sermon

Introduction

When we are talking about issues of gender identity I would caution all of us, myself included, to be very careful. The reason to be careful isn't because of feeling ashamed about a biblical worldview or anything like that, but because when we are discussing this topic it's not just theory and it's not a case of people just pretending or just trying to be different.

The clue is in the second part of the name gender *identity*... Identity is a complicated thing – and we need to be careful not to oversimplify things.

And so tonight as we speak about this I want to warn you about two potential dangers when it comes to discussing gender identity.

- The first is the danger of being dismissive. We as human beings are incredibly self-centred by default and as a result of this we can be very bad at imagining ourselves in someone else's situation. When it comes to gender identity the danger is that we project our own experience onto others – and just because our experience of what it means to be a woman or to be a man is easy to understand and simple to live out – we dismiss the complex and confusing experiences of gender that others are living.
- The second danger is related. That is the danger of being lazy. Let's not shy away from the fact that gender identity is a complicated issue. We are in danger of being tempted to oversimplify our terms because that's easier than having to grapple with ideas that require some effort from us to be able to engage with them. If we want to respond biblically to the debates around this topic we can't afford to be lazy.

So what is the issue all about. Well there are three terms which we need to understand before we go any further.

1. The first is sex, also called biological sex. Sex is a biological classification of a person on the basis of physical anatomy and chromosomes.
2. Our next term is gender. This is a broader category and it refers to the range of things that we consider normal for a person of a particular sex.
 - a. Perhaps it would help us to differentiate between the two things by considering the difference between on the one side male and female... and on the other you have masculine and feminine characteristics.

3. The third important term is identity. This has to do with who a person is. So - who I understand myself to be, and also who others understand me to be.

When we talk about gender identity we are at the cross-section between these three ideas.

This whole debate exploded in 2015 with Bruce Jenner, an Olympic gold medallist then in his sixties, revealing to the public that he was transitioning to become a woman and also adopting the name Caitlyn Jenner. Jenner detailed struggles with gender identity years before publicly revealing his decision to adopt a transgender identity.

More recently, in 2019, the popular musician Sam Smith revealed that he does not identify as either male or female and came out as non-binary also called genderqueer. He later revealed that his preferred pronouns to be referred to as are not HE and HIS but THEY and THEM.

In fact, Merriam-Webster named the singular usage of THEY to refer to a person in a gender neutral way as their word of the year in 2019.

Public response to these and other developments in the ongoing gender identity revolution has been mixed. There has been a great deal of celebration surrounding the decisions people have taken to embrace their own understanding of gender identity, but at the same time many others have rejected these developments and see them as absurd and contrary to nature.

Many Christians have been blind-sided by the sudden shifts in understanding of gender identity and are confused about how to respond biblically. And it's at this point that I have to confess to you that when we are done here this evening there will still be confusion. But that said, the Bible teaches us a great deal that can equip us to approach questions of gender identity with 1) **conviction** but also with 2) **compassion**. Let's look at those two things in turn. We can't touch on everything tonight and if you would like to find helpful resources please come and chat to me.

Conviction

Let's start with conviction. Where we will spend the most time.

In Genesis 1:27 we read "***So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.***"

When God he created humans he made them in his image and he made them male and female. God decided to make us as either male or female.

We must remember that this was before sin and evil entered the world. This was God's design for humanity before it was corrupted.

In the world as we experience it now there are biological factors that complicate the division between male and female. There are numerous conditions where a person's anatomy and even their chromosomes are neither 100% male nor 100% female.

We need to have room in our thinking for people in this situation – we can't just force every person into our neat binary categories of either male or female.

But allowing room in our thinking for individuals who have a condition like this – known as an intersex condition – does not erase the categories of male and female.

The issue of gender identity is a broad topic, but the aspect that is being debated today comes when a person with an otherwise normal female or male body does not feel that their body matches who they are. It's when you experience your own body as foreign to you. There seems to be a mismatch between your experience of gender and your anatomy. The name for this is Gender Dysphoria.

So how should we think about the issue of gender identity in light of the distress that a person may feel with their own body?

- The Bible is of course the place to start. We've already seen that God made human beings in his image and that at the beginning he made us male and female.
- God is in full control when he makes human beings. Your maleness or femaleness is not an accident. In fact, nothing about who you are and how you are put together is an accident.
- The fact that God is our creator is fundamental to our identity. Who we are as individuals is not something that we are absolutely free to decide for ourselves. This, I think, is the point at which we who trust in the authority of God's Word have to sink our feet into the ground and refuse to budge. This is where the debate about gender identity is waged – it is not a debate first and foremost about gender, but about what it means to be human.
 - As humans God made us as the high point of his creation. He gave us immense freedom to care for and rule over the world that he made (Gen 1:26-30). But there are limits to that freedom. And those limits stem from the fact that God is God and we are creatures of his making.
 - We are made by God – we don't **make** ourselves.

- Why do I think that this idea of our being creatures with limits placed on us is central to the issue of gender identity? Well just listen to how Sam Smith – the singer I mentioned earlier – described what it means to identify as non-binary:
 - **“Non-binary/genderqueer is that you do not identify in a gender. You are a mixture of all different things. You are your own special creation.”**
- Notice that there is an underlying belief there, that we as human beings have the right to create ourselves. That the way in which we are created by God does not determine who we are at the end of the day.

- What that statement amounts to is placing human beings in the position of God and granting ourselves authority to go against God’s goodness in creating us – because of the belief that we could do a better job.
- The apostle Paul, in Romans 9, draws on an idea from the Old Testament when he challenges the way that people reject God’s way of doing things. He says:
 - ***“...who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?” (Rom 9:20-21, see also Isaiah 29:16 and Isaiah 45:9).***
- The Bible teaches that God is the potter and we are the clay. We can’t place ourselves in the place of the potter and make ourselves into whatever we want to be.

Now, I don’t want to caricature the beliefs of those who say people should embrace the gender they understand themselves to be when it conflicts their biological sex. I believe that most on that side of the debate are genuinely concerned for the wellbeing of human beings who feel totally alienated from their own bodies.

- In fact, a lot of the science on the causes of a mismatch between a person’s understanding of their own gender and their biological sex seems to point to strong similarities in the makeup of the brain of say a biological male who feels they are a woman and the brains of other women. Most then argue that a person can have a male body with a female brain – and vice versa.
- How do we respond to this?
 1. Well, at this point some might try to undermine the scientific findings, but I don’t believe that’s necessary.

- Remember people on both sides of this debate are seeking to do what's best for people who are in distress because their experiences don't match up with their bodies.
- The question then becomes is this a problem of the body or a problem of the mind
 1. There are many who argue that this is not a problem at all and that the problem is with society and the expectations it places on females and males. To which I would say, they have a bit of a point – there is plenty of nonsense that we might associate with being a certain gender that has no basis in the Bible nor in our biology.
 2. But this group goes too far when it denies that there is any problem with a person's understanding of their gender when they feel alienated from their own bodies. As a result of their beliefs those in this group often suggest embracing one's gender identity rather than one's anatomy. This group recommends in some cases that those suffering with gender dysphoria undergo hormone treatments that stunt the normal development of puberty and suggest that it may also be in a person's interest to undergo surgery to change the appearance of his/her body so that the person's body matches his/her experiences of gender.
- There are a number of problems with this view that Christians need to be aware of.
 1. First, it assumes that we as people have the right to do whatever we want with our own bodies.
 - We've already seen that this isn't what the Bible teaches. As creatures we don't have the right to do what we want, because we are not God.
 2. Second, it sees our biological sex as being entirely arbitrary. It says our sex and gender exist on a spectrum and that the associations we have with each are completely relative since they are social constructs.
 3. And third, it makes an idol of the idea that we must be true to ourselves.
- Because of these underlying assumptions I believe that this group is doing a massive disservice to people who are suffering with gender dysphoria. They claim that society is the problem and that there is nothing wrong in the mind of a person with gender dysphoria. Their advice supports people suffering

with gender dysphoria in going down a path that is against God's purposes in creation and will ultimately be unfulfilling.

- Perhaps a parallel condition will help you to see what I mean. Imagine for a moment a healthy 16-year-old boy. He is fit and plays in the top teams for all the sports that he participates in at school. Then imagine at one point he becomes convinced that he is overweight. He starts eating only very small meals and sometimes after he eats he goes into the bathroom and forces himself to vomit. Imagine he comes to you one day and confides that he is unsatisfied with his weight.
- How would you respond – I think I can be bold enough to assume that most of you won't tell him that he's right and that he should consider getting liposuction. You'll most likely recognise that he is struggling with anorexia and will seek to treat that condition – to do otherwise would be madness.
- I'm not saying these two things are exactly the same, but there is a case to be made for not embracing our own understandings of our identities – since we clearly don't always know what's best for us.

God makes us male and female. It isn't arbitrary and it isn't something we can opt out of. We should be cautious then not to fall into the trap of looking at the way God made us and saying he made a mistake when he formed our bodies – all the while assuming that our minds are healthy and thinking clearly.

That I think is a good way to approach the topic of gender identity with biblical conviction. But we must move now to the equally important point of how to approach the topic of gender identity with Christ-like compassion.

Compassion

In my research I heard of numerous people cutting ties with family members who are transgender. The worst part is often their justification for doing it. One mother of a transgender child recounted family members blaming Satan's influence on the family for the child's transgenderism. And with that they cut ties.

That should break our hearts.

- Christians can't just treat those with who are slaves to sin and whose thinking is misguided as somehow beyond hope.
- In fact, we shouldn't be surprised when we see the brokenness in people's lives.
- In Romans 8 Paul describes the world as we experience it as in a state of decay as we wait for Jesus to return. But at the same time there is hope for all those affected by the decay of our world – which is all of us – that at Jesus' return

everything will be made new and the frustrations and pain that come from living in a decaying world will be no more.

So what must we do?

- We can neither condemn those who struggle with their gender identity as though they are irredeemable and cursed nor can we say that the way they are is perfect as is by encouraging them to embrace an identity that is at odds with the body God gave them.
- There is a third option. It basically stems from Jesus' own example. That is to love and to offer hope.
 - The hope we offer isn't an easy life where someone with gender dysphoria will necessarily feel comfortable in their own skin, but rather a life of dying to self and living instead for Christ. (Col 3:5).
 - The hope offered by the Gospel isn't an easy fix. It calls us to give up all our idols, many of which we treat as fundamental to our identity.
- Let's not be hypocrites when we approach topics like gender identity. Every one of us compromises our identity when we tie it to sinful things, or even to good things in a way gives that thing too much power over us. You might not struggle with gender dysphoria and still sin with regards to gender identity by placing some aspect of what we think it means to be a man or to be a woman on a pedestal and treating that as the be all and end all of who we are as people.
- When we approach the topic of gender identity – we're not just out to win a debate. We want to introduce people to Jesus, about whom Matthew wrote – ***"A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out"*** (Mt 12:20). Jesus wasn't scared to associate with sinners and he wasn't out to win debates. What this passage means is that Jesus doesn't come along and break people down – he knows our weaknesses and our sin and he deals with them without destroying us in the process.
- That is the kind of compassion with which we must approach a topic like gender identity. Let's beware of pushing hurting people beyond their breaking points and in the process misrepresenting, the Lord Jesus in whose name we are speaking.

Some resources that are worth checking out:

Sam Allbery, 2017. *How Writing on Transgenderism Changed Me*.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-writing-on-transgender-changed-me/> [Short article in an interview format with the author of the book that I recommend later on this list]

Andrew Sloane. 'Male and Female He Created Them'? Theological Reflections on Gender, Biology and Identity. *Ethics in Brief* Summer 2016 (Vol.21 No.4) [This is more academic than other sources]

The Nashville statement. <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/> [A number of Evangelical leaders came together to clarify their beliefs on these matters and put it into a short document]

Andrew T. Walker. 2017. *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say About Gender Identity?* [This book was incredibly helpful in shaping my own thinking on the topic]