

Study 6

Topic: Made as men and women?

Sub-theme: Made for relationship (2)

Sunday date: June 2

Key ideas: Sex, gender, roles and dynamics, transgenderism

Key texts: Gen 1-2, Rom 1, Eph 5

Further reading/resources:

- Mark Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*
 - <http://thinkingofgod.org/2016/05/gender-transitioning-possibilities-limitations/>
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NOTE: This is an immensely complex and pastorally sensitive topic. Please proceed with great love and care for one another and those in our broader community.

Let's start by clarifying some terms:

a) Biological sex, birth sex, or natal sex: These terms all refer to the physical or physiological characteristics that help us differentiate between what is male and what is female: chromosomes, hormones, gonads, genitals, and secondary sex characteristics—e.g., body shape, voice pitch, and hair distribution. Biological sex is often simply referred to as “sex.”

b) Gender: Historically, the terms “sex” and “gender” have often been used interchangeably. Even today drawing a distinction between them is not universal. Where a distinction is made, however, “gender” is “often intended to emphasize the social and cultural, as opposed to the biological, distinctions between the sexes.”² As such, the term usually encompasses three aspects: gender identity, gender expression, and gender roles.

c) Gender identity: This refers to the way individuals perceive themselves and wish to name themselves. When a person's subjective gender identity aligns with their objective biological sex, which is the case for most people, they are sometimes referred to as cisgender (cis = on this side of).³ When there is a clash, however, then they are commonly referred to as transgender (trans = on the other side of). See further below.

d) Gender expression: This refers to the psychological and social aspects of how masculinity and femininity are presented in things like dress and demeanor, social roles and conventions, and other cultural gender norms. These vary from culture to culture, if not from person to person.

e) Gender roles: This refers to the commonly accepted expectations of maleness or femaleness, including social and behavioral expectations. While some roles (for example, who cooks the meals or irons the clothes) vary from person to person, household to household, or culture to culture, and often change over time, others are biologically determined (most obviously, pregnancy and breastfeeding).

f) Gender bending: This refers to the intentional crossing or bending or blending of accepted gender norms in a given culture. This is done either by adopting the dress, mannerisms, roles, or behaviors of the opposite gender (sometimes referred to as transvestitism), or through the attempt to obscure one's gender and to appear as either asexual, agender, pansexual, omnigender, or androgynous.

g) Gender dysphoria: This is the latest diagnostic term (c/-DSM-V, 2013) for the distress experienced by those whose psychological or emotional gender identity differs from their biological sex. It replaces the previous term, Gender Identity Disorder (c/-DSM IV, 1994), which saw the mismatch itself as a psychiatric disorder. Now, however, it's only the distress that is (normally) caused by gender incongruence that is regarded as a problem, not the incongruence itself.⁴ For this reason, I will use the term "gender dysphoria" only occasionally in this essay and, for the most part, prefer the language of "gender incongruence," which I deem to be a more helpful descriptor of the condition.

h) Intersex: This is a term that covers a range of disorders of sex development (DSDs) where there is some biological ambiguity in a person's genitalia or gonads, or more rarely still, their chromosomes. Except in very rare instances, a person's biological sex can be known from their DNA. Because intersex conditions are medically identifiable deviations from the binary sexual norm they are not regarded as constituting a third sex.⁵ Because they are biologically (rather than psychologically) based, some intersex people do not wish to be associated with the LGBTQ+ movement.⁶

i) Transgender: This is an umbrella term for people who are born either male or female, but whose gender identity differs from their birth sex (to varying degrees), and who want to express the gender with which they identify through cross-dressing, if not also cross-sex hormone therapy (CHT), if not also sex reassignment surgery (SRS). The term transsexual is sometimes used interchangeably with transgender, and sometimes used only of those who seek medical assistance to transition. Because of its breadth, the transgender umbrella also includes those who identify as bigender, pangender, omnigender, gender fluid, gender diverse, or agender.

j) Heteronormativity: This is the view that biological sex is either male or female (gender binarism), that sex and gender are meant to match up (cisnormativity), and that only sexual orientation toward and sexual relations with a member of the opposite sex is normal and natural. As we will see, the ideas conveyed by the term heteronormativity are central to the biblical view of sex and gender. However, because these ideas are increasingly regarded as bigoted, oppressive, homophobic, and transphobic (especially by LGBTQ+ activists and allies), heteronormativity is a somewhat tainted term.

According to the British Medical Journal, citing a 1975 chromosomal study of 14,069 newborn infants, "The incidence of genital ambiguity that results in the child's sex being uncertain is 1 per 4500", that is 0.02 per cent. The latest data suggests somewhere between 1 in 2500 and 1 in 4500.

Historically, there have been three broad views on gender:

Essentialist	fixed and biologically determined ... set at birth, unchangeable
Constructivist	socially constructed, fluid and dynamic ... a construct of language and discourse...individual agency

In Australia, in the 2016 Census, 3,700 people identified themselves as a gender other than male or female, which is a rate of 16 per 100,000 people or just 0.016 per cent.

How would you summarise the main different ways our culture views gender? Where is our gender 'located'?

Read Gen 1:26-28 (pre-Fall), Gen 5:1b-2 (post-Fall) & Mark 10:6-8a (Jesus). How does this portray God's intention for the nature of sex? What does this shape of sex allow? What does this diversity of sex tell us about the image of God?

Read Gen 2:15-25. Whereas earlier passages speak of 'male' and 'female', this passage describes 'man' and 'woman'. What does this suggest about the relationship between sex and gender? Can you think of cases that don't seem to fit this rule? How should these affect how we think about sex and gender?

Read Matt 19:7-12. What circumstance does Jesus indicate he is aware of?

In the ancient world, the biggest consequences of some kind of some kind of sexual disorder was (a) being ritually excluded from community and (b) being unable to bear children and therefore continue the family line. Read Isa 56:1-8 and Mark 10:29-30. How is the Christian vision different?

One of the key issues related to gender is gender stereotypes. Second wave feminists like Germaine Greer have spoken sharply against some forms of transgenderism, especially those that seem to rely on the stereotypes of gender that feminists have worked so hard to dismantle. John McLean, principal of the conservative Presbyterian Christ College, writes:

Being violent may be macho, but the Spirit teaches gentleness; raunch culture might want women to be flirtatious and sexually provocative, that is not the Christian way. The sexualisation of girls and boys is a destructive effect of appalling gender stereotypes.[3]

The documentary *The Mask You Live In* gives a heart-breaking account of the way a narrow view of gender expression cripples boys growing up in the US and robs them of their own emotions, good friendships and healthy relationships with women and leaves them with violence as the only way to resolve conflicts. Lots of Aussie culture is just as destructive.

Beyond the ungodliness, lots of the stereotypes are far more limiting than the Bible. Men are told to be tough; Jesus was ready to weep. Why should men be presumed to be more competitive than women; or women more nurturing than men?

John McLean, Christ College

Where do we see stereotypes applying pressure in contemporary life? How do you experience them? What does Jesus' own life tell you about gender stereotypes?

What (does it)/(do you think it might) feel like to wrestle with your sex and gender in the context of church? How can we help?