

Gendered Bodies and God's Design

Mere Sexuality Sermon 3

Genesis 1:26-28; 2:5-7,18-25; Romans 8:18-25

July 25, 2021

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26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." **27** So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. **28** And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." **5** When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, **6** and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground— **7** then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. **18** Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." **19** Now out of the ground the Lord God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. **20** The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. **21** So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. **22** And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. **23** Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." **24** Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. **25** And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:5-7, 18-25, ESV)

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. **19** For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. **20** For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope **21** that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. **22** For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. **23** And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. **24** For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? **25** But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:18-25, ESV)

Today we conclude our three-part series, *Mere Sexuality*. We've considered marriage, and God's design for men and women to complement each other in that holy institution. Next, we considered sexuality more broadly, noting that Jesus delivers us from the idolatry of sexuality, and ministers to us in areas of unmet longings, sin and brokenness in this sensitive area.

We conclude with this sermon, by considering gender. We are not so much interested here in proper expressions of masculinity and femininity, but must turn to a more fundamental question:

What is gender? Do we even understand it? Is gender God-given, or man-made? Are we born with our gender, where gender is written into our biology? Or do we craft our gender ourselves, where gender is an expression of our psychology?

Questioning whether one's maleness or femaleness wasn't simply as obvious as their anatomy, is something human beings have never asked until very recently. But due to an array of developments over the past few centuries, we are suddenly in what *Time* magazine has called "The Gender Tipping Point," and what *National Geographic* described recently as the "Gender Revolution." From entertainment, to education, to legislation, gender has become divorced from biology, and is now as fluid and varied as human personalities.

Over the past ten years, I've had the opportunity to befriend a few individuals with gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is the technical term describing the condition when a person's inner sense of gender does not align with their biological sex. My experience walking closely with two individuals who were considering transitioning genders has taught me three things I always remember when engaging this topic:

1. Pain

Number one is pain. Though each story is unique, anyone who has experienced legitimate and long-term gender dysphoria has suffered in an acute way. To feel foreign inside your own body, and to often hide this for years, creates much personal and social pain. I try to remember that this topic involves real people who are really suffering.

2. Uncertainty

The second thing I've learned has to do with uncertainty. The gender revolution and all it represents are shrouded in uncertainty. People I've walked with who are exploring transitioning are often sure about their inner discomfort, but they have little certainty about the path before them. The science in this area is dangerously novel and half-baked, as much psychology and ideology as biology. The path before those transitioning involves a life of hormone therapy, multiple surgeries and amputations of otherwise healthy organs. Long-term effects are hard to predict, and treatments are invasive and, in many cases, inalterable. It's not easy making such a massive decision on uncertain footing.

I also recognized uncertainty, however, in the Church. Besides a few instances of confusion in the early centuries, Christianity has always taught that the body was a gift from God and essential to who we are. But the Church has never been faced with whether it was possible for a girl to be trapped in a man's body. The gender revolution raises very deep questions. Walking with someone who is truly confused in this area forces deep thinking. *How does the Bible understand gender? Is maleness and femaleness written into are biology, or is it part of some deep inner sense we have, or both?* As I've walked with friends exploring transitioning, I've found I've needed to turn to deep study of God's Word on these matters, and much prayer.

3. Compassion and Clarity

This brings us to the third thing I've learned. Christian engagement with this topic requires compassion and clarity. Wherever Christians encounter people in pain, we must show compassion. And whenever Christians encounter a topic this significant, with this much uncertainty, we must put in the hard work to find clarity. As we proceed, we do so with hearts full of compassion and desirous of more clarity. Christians in fact believe that clarity, or truth, offered in arms full of grace, is the best type of compassion.

Achieving more clarity about the gender revolution requires addressing the two most fundamental issues that underlie it. The first issue has to do with **anthropology**: the gender movement raises the question of what it means to be human as a gendered being. *For human beings, is gender a matter of the body, or some inner experience?* The second issue has to do with **hope**: *Where do we find hope in the face of our pain, especially pain such as gender dysphoria?* The gender movement holds out a specific type of hope, called transitioning. We need to ask if this hope is worthy of the human heart, or if there may be a better way.

We start with the first issue, how the gender revolution raises questions about anthropology, and what it means to be a gendered human being.

I. Anthropology:

What Does It Mean to Be a Gendered Human Being?

When I met Kevin (not his real name) it was the spring of 2011. He was a self-proclaimed agnostic, skeptical about organized religion. As we became friends, he shared with me that he was battling depression and thinking of taking a semester off from his PhD program. As time went on, he courageously shared with me that part of his discontent had to do with confusion about his gender. Though biologically male, Kevin explained to me that since he was quite young, he always felt like he was a woman. A few years into hormone treatment now, he was experimenting with cross-dressing and planning an initial surgery. But Kevin was not doing well emotionally or academically and was filled with anxiety and uncertainty about the road ahead.

Kevin was curious enough about my Christian faith to agree to be prayed for regularly. Over the course of more time, Kevin expressed more interest in Christianity and eventually would himself come to faith. In the midst of all of this, Kevin needed help understanding how God had made him, what God's design for his gender was, and what all this had to do with his body. Together we took to studying Genesis 1 and 2, which recount God's creation of humankind. We discovered three fundamental facts about being human as a gendered being.

1. Humans Are Created, so Identity Issues from Our Creator: Genesis 1:27

The Bible's account of Creation stresses who God is and who we are. A quick read through Genesis 1, which culminates in the creation of humankind, tells us that God is the Creator. Notice how God is the subject of the verbs, stressing that He alone is the actor and Creator:

God created (1:1, 21); *God said* (1:3); *God separated* (1:4); *God called* (1:5); *God made* (1:7); *God set* (1:17). All of this culminates in the creation of humankind in Genesis 1:27, where stated three times in a single verse is the fact that *God is the Creator*:

So **God created** man in his own image, in the image of God **He created** him; male and female **He created** them. (Genesis 1:27)

The stress is striking and seems to underscore the most fundamental fact about being human: **a human being is a creature with a Creator.**

The obvious implication is that we are not our own authors. The Creator determines His creature's identity. God grants us great dignity to steward and cultivate our identity, but not total license to define or create it. We do not have the liberty to choose what species we are, what time period we live in, our family of origin, or our ethnicity. And this includes our gender, as the passage emphasizes that God made us, male and female.

We are creatures with a Creator. Therefore, human identity is God-given, not man-made.

A second thing we learn from this Creation account that is relevant has to do with the role of our bodies in signaling to us our gender identity. Thus, our second point is:

2. God Creates Humans as Embodied Beings, so Identity Is Never Less Than Our Body

A *Washington Post* article titled, "Transgender at Five," tells the story of a two-year old girl who insisted she was a boy.¹ The girl's older sister succinctly explained the situation to a reporter in a sentence: "It's just a boy mind in a girl body."

This statement sums up well a basic feature of the gender revolution's view of being human. The body is important, but it is not essential to true identity. Who we really are lies somewhere deep inside of us. When we discover this inner identity, it may require changing our body to align with it. This might suggest that when God makes us male or female, He writes that part of our identity into our minds, not necessary our bodies. But does this cohere with the Creation account? Genesis chapter 2 takes a closer look at the creation of humankind in God's image as male and female and gives important details about our bodies.

The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

We see two very different elements that go into making Adam: the dust of the earth and divine breath. The dust of the ground represents the *physical aspect* of Adam. In Hebrew, *'adamah* is the word for earth, or soil, and from it comes the name of the first man: *'Adam* is from the *'adamah*. The “breath of life” signals that Adam is not a living being until God breathes into him Spirit.

Man is a combination of physical and spiritual elements.

But although two elements, man is not divisible into parts. It is not correct to think of man as one-part mind and one-part body. Man is more like a chemical compound, where the physical and spiritual elements, fused together, form something altogether different than the parts.

Consider an analogy. In science class, we learn that water is a compound, meaning it is made up of two elements, hydrogen and oxygen, which fuse together in a chemical bond. In a sense, water is made up of two different things, hydrogen and oxygen. But you cannot reduce water to just one of these elements. You can't speak of “hydrogen water” or “oxygen water”. Water is only itself when these two elements are dynamically bonded together, creating something altogether different than the individual parts.

The logic of the gender revolution requires dividing human beings into parts. “A boy mind in a girl body,” is like splitting up the compound water and trying to talk about the hydrogen's type of water and the oxygen's type of water—but these things simply are not water when divided. And neither can we speak of a gendered human being when we are just speaking of a mind. Our fundamental identity as male or female is a matter of the *whole being*, never reducible to just parts.

There is one more insight from Genesis. And this has to do with the role of the physical body as giving the decisive clue as to what our gender is.

3. God Writes Gender into the Body

The Bible teaches that God writes our gender into our very body. Notice that in Genesis 2:7, as God creates the first man, we read, “God formed the man out the dust of the ground.” Later when God makes the female, Eve, from a rib taken from Adam, we read: “And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he **built** into a woman and brought her to the man” (Genesis 2:22).

God is working with physical materials—dirt, ribs, flesh, and bone. And the term “formed” used for Adam is the same word used in the Bible of a potter working with clay. The term “built” used for Eve calls to mind an architect designing then bringing to completion a building. To underscore that the male and female reality of gender is written into the body, the creation of Adam and Eve culminates with their “one flesh” union in Genesis 2:24, a union only sensible because of the fit of the male and female body.

There is no sense in this passage that our gender, being male or female, is something placed in the inner person, in the deep recesses of the mind. Rather, when the Bible recounts God making the man then the woman, the emphasis lies on the careful shaping of the body. God writes gender into our bodies. Biblically, gender is never less than biology.

Kevin and I, as we considered the Biblical view of being human as a gendered being, discovered these three crucial facts:

- 1. Humans Are Created, so Identity Issues from Our Creator**
- 2. God Creates Humans as Embodied Beings, so Identity Involves the Whole Person**
- 3. God Writes Gender into the Body, so Gender Identity Is Never Less than Biology**

While this is clarifying, it wasn’t immediately liberating for my friend Kevin. Even after Kevin started following Jesus, he still experienced Gender Dysphoria. For him, to learn that his male body was a gift from God and the clue to his true gender identity didn’t at first feel like good news. Following Christ was not an easy thing for Kevin.

Kevin’s ongoing struggle with dysphoria meant we had to consider the larger vista of the Bible. *Did the Bible offer further explanations for why we might have an experience like dysphoria? Did the Bible hold out any hope for those with such an experience?*

Here is where we arrive at the second fundamental question underlying the larger gender movement: the question of hope: *Where do I go to find hope for change in the face of my pain, even my dysphoria?*

II. Hope:

Where Do I Find Hope for Change in the Face of Dysphoria?

Here is where the experience of the person with gender dysphoria shares something with the experience of us all. Dysphoria indicates a “state of unease or generalized dissatisfaction with life.” It’s the opposite of euphoria.

The Bible goes on to depict humankind falling into sin. And sin and its ensuing cursedness bleed into every nook and cranny of creation; it affects all of us, and at times in differing ways. Sin and brokenness can certainly lead to dissonance between our sense of who we are within, and life without. Gender dysphoria is a particularly acute experience of this more general experience we might call *human dysphoria*—incongruence between feelings within and life without. Humans are wounded and broken creatures searching for hope—hope that in the face of their pain and dysphoria, they can be redeemed and changed.

My biggest concern for my friends either transitioning or considering transitioning genders, has to do with the false hope the gender movement offers. One may feel a temporary relief when their body is made to appear a different gender. But the fact simply is that this change is superficial. It’s cosmetic. And setting to one side all the possible other health problems, they are choosing a path out of alignment with their Creator’s design for them. One can never know true peace and deep meaning while living a lie.

The most important term of the transgender movement isn’t a word, it is a prefix, the prefix, “trans.” It sits affront the terms, *transgender* and *transition*. The prefix comes from the Latin term, trans:

trans- | prefix

1 across; beyond

2 through: into another state or place

The term captures the desire to move, *to transition*, from an unwanted condition to a better state. It captures the deep desire of a person with gender dysphoria to move from one state to another. They don't just want to be another gender; they want to be free of this horrible sense of alienation within their own body and society. Significantly, this term, "trans," appears in the Bible, too. But prefixed to a different word. Paul says of Christians:

And we all, who with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being **transformed** into the same image from one degree of glory to another....
(2 Corinthians 3:18)

The image Paul has in mind is Jesus. The Christian life involves being in a state of "trans," but in this case, transformation. The biblical vision of transformation has important differences from the gender revolution's vision of transitioning. Most fundamentally, the biblical vision works from the inside out, and entrusts the body into the hands of its Creator—the one who raises our bodies from the dead. Notice how this works:

1. Transformation begins with the heart and mind, not the body.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be **transformed by the renewal of your mind**...
(Romans 12:2)

The gender movement says the problem is on the outside and aims to align the body with the inside. The biblical vision says the problem is in the human mind and heart, and transformation must begin there.

2. Transformation culminates in God's Resurrection of the Body, not our alteration of it.

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, **the redemption of our bodies**. (Romans 8:22–23)

God raises us from the dead as embodied people, and our resurrected bodies cohere with our present bodies—but are them in their perfected form. Born a male, Jesus was resurrected as a man.

3. Transformation Happens by the Spirit, working through the Word and Community of Believers.

The agent of true transformation is not a doctor or educator, but God the Holy Spirit, working in our lives through the Word and Church Family. This is what Christians call sanctification and transformation. It happens slowly most of the time.

The hope set forth by the gender revolution is a false hope. The ceiling is too low. It asks a person to live against the grain of their Divine design, and against the grain of Redemption. But for those struggling with all types of dysphoria, there is a transformation and hope possible that aligns with our eternal design: and this is to begin a day-by-day walk with Jesus, relying entirely on Him and His people for what we need for the day ahead. I want to close with an application.

Individual Christians

First, a word to individual Christians. Your belief in God the Creator cannot be contradicted by how you treat your body. To amputate healthy organs, or to try and manipulate a male body to look female, or vice versa is a sin against your Creator. How you treat your body is part of how you preach the Gospel which says that He who created us will, through Jesus, raise our bodies from the dead.

For Christians with gender dysphoria, to live in your body, even while experiencing such painful dissonance, is to be a prophet who says, "I believe in the resurrection of the Body, and that God will finally and fully bring me into a place of peace and harmony in this body."

The Church

Second, a word to the local Church. The Church should be a safe place for individuals with gender confusion to talk about their struggles. If someone shares about their gender confusion it should not be met with disgust or mistrust, but a listening and understanding ear. What people in the transgender community ultimately need is love, community, friendship and to know Jesus Christ. Medical professionals, entertainers, and educators cannot give them this. But the Church can. We

must be prepared to walk alongside friends with gender confusion with compassion and for the long haul.

At the same time, the Church cannot do its job if it lies to people or tells half-truths. It will be tempting in a culture like this, to say what will be “easy to the ears.” But to lead dear people down a path that is ultimately a lie—that a biological man can actually and truly become a woman or vice versa—is not loving.

Parents

Next, a word for parents. *Talk to and teach your kids.* You need to talk to your kids about gender and their bodies, because the world already is. You need to teach them the biblical truths about how God made them. Teach them that they are created in the image of God as male or female and that their body is a key part of this.

Teach them that because of sin, it is common, at times, to feel uncomfortable with who we are. This is okay and we can talk to our parents about this. But we can trust that God has a good plan for us, and who we are is written into our bodies.

We must carefully resist the mistruths. In her 2020 book, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*, Abigail Shrier explores what is known as Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria. ROGD is when gender confusion presents like a “social contagion,” large groups of teens say that they have it at the same time. Rather than a sign of true gender confusion, it is more likely an expression of a desire to fit in. Researcher Dr. Lisa Littman has found that ROGD seems to affect girls almost exclusively. Shrier’s theory is that the issue isn’t so much that girls want to be boys, but that they don’t want to be girls.

A child or teenager suddenly saying they want to be a different gender is not necessarily, or even likely, a case of clinical gender dysphoria. But educators will increasingly suggest that it is. As expert Dr. Paul McHugh has written, the 70-80% of children reporting transgender feelings spontaneously lost those feelings.² It is true that a radically disproportionate number of people suffering with gender dysphoria die by suicide, as compared with the general population. But it has also been found that

“gender-transition surgeries and hormone treatments do little, if anything, to reduce the danger of suicide in this population.”³

The Transgender Person

Finally, a word for the transgender person. You may be listening to this and reject all of it. And I don’t know what your journey will be like. But I know this:

God created you, and He did so with intentionality. God knows exactly who you are.

God extends a love to you unlike any love you will ever know.

There is no distance that God won’t traverse to find you—and nothing He can’t forgive.

Keep your heart open to Him, cry out to Him to know the truth. There is so much hope for you in turning to and trusting Him.

Endnotes

1. Petula Dvorak, “Transgender at five,” *The Washington Post*, May 19, 2012. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/transgender-at-five/2012/05/19/gIQABfFkbU_story.html Accessed July 24, 2021.
2. Paul McHugh, “Transgender Surgery Isn’t the Solution: A drastic physical change doesn’t address underlying psycho-social troubles,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 13, 2016. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/paul-mchugh-transgender-surgery-isnt-the-solution-1402615120> Accessed July 24, 2021.
3. Ryan T. Anderson, Ph.D., “Transgender Ideology Hurts Kids”, *The Heritage Foundation*, January 30, 2018. <https://www.heritage.org/gender/commentary/transgender-ideology-hurts-kids> Accessed July 24, 2021.