God and Gender
“Topics you always wanted a sermon on” series
Genesis 1:27, 2:18-25

God has a funny way of dropping additional training on me for some upcoming teaching, whether that be for a group or just an individual’s question. Last week, the question I was given by someone in the congregation dealt with the whole LGBT area. Well, the Sunday before while I was away, my daughter asked where I wanted to go to church – the church she goes to or the church that Kim Canavan’s college roommate’s husband preaches at as they now live on the same block as my daughter. I had met him here before (besides he has one of those cool foreign accents). I choose checking out my daughter’s place, and unbeknownst to any of us, a gal named Rachel Gilson was there for the weekend. Her testimony was one of those in last week’s additional group of 5 articles (additional copies of that packet are on the corner of the office desk as we ran out last week). Rachel grew up lesbian & came to Christ in her first year at Yale. Although now married to man for 10 years with a son, she shared that her same-sex attractions never left. God gave her a heart for her husband, but if she has any romantic thoughts beyond him – they are for a lady. So the pastor went through a series of questions with her after her testimony to give all of us a better idea of how she approaches pleasing Jesus in everyday life when some of her feelings regularly want her to do actions God does not approve of.

Then this week a pastor e-mailed me asking for last week’s sermon text as he suspected someone in their church wanted to talk with him about this subject. Later in the week that person appeared female but said they were actually born intersex – that is where a person is born with a combination of both male & female sexual organs at birth due to a mutation of the DNA: XXY rather than XY or XX. This person had been brought up male, then transitioned to female and now feels she is living a lie, wants to have the breast implants removed and return to living as a guy. Real situations real people deal with in a broken world that clearly aren’t solved long term by just going with one’s feelings.

Then yesterday, there was a Freedom March held in Washington D.C. You probably didn’t hear much about it. Many former transgender, lesbian, & gay men and women participated including Luis Javier Ruiz who was living a gay lifestyle and nearly killed along with 49 others at the massacre at Pulse Nightclub, an LGBT club in Orlando. "I should [have] been number 50," said Ruiz, "but now I have the chance to live in relationship and not religion, not just loving Christ but being in love with Christ and sharing [His] love. I know who I am and I am not defined with who the enemy says I used to be but who Christ Jesus says I am." Daren Melh, president of Voice of the Voiceless who helped organize the event yesterday, said it is "an opportunity for those of us who have a new life with Jesus to come together in fellowship and praise Him for the love and grace available to everyone who seeks it [and] to testify publicly of the life-changing grace available to leave the LGBT identity for something greater.” They offer a warm welcome to others who may be struggling with their identity.
The question given to me for today by someone in the congregation clearly touches these happenings. *Is God genderless? Or is He definitely male?* That question then naturally leads us to the confusing things we are hearing about gender in our American culture today. Is it really wrong to think of male and female since that is in our very DNA? We will first look at gender, then answer the question about God, then take our remaining time to see how Biblical clarity in these answers helps us have clarity in the gender issues we are facing today in America.

**PROPOSITION:** Gender is a wonderful gift God has given each of us that both reminds us we need others and gives us something valuable to help others.

I. What is gender?

If we are going to accurately answer our question today, then we need to first define what gender is. That has gotten a lot tougher because some in America & the world started pushing for a radical change in the definition of ‘gender’ around 30 years ago.

A. Culture has radically changed the definition recently

When I went back to the dictionaries I used in college and then the early ‘80’s there were just 2 definitions given for gender: 1) someone’s sex and 2) the divisions in grammar, like in Greek where there are masculine, feminine and neutral gender ending to words. The only difference between the early ‘70’s dictionary (Websters) and the early ‘80s dictionary (Oxford) was the order of these two definitions. Your gender was your biological sex. But has been changing. Currently, there is a redefining of the word “gender” to refer to either what society says a sex should do (gender role) or one’s inner feelings (gender identity). To give you an idea of how recent the changes are, Wikipedia tells me, that the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) used to use gender to refer to the physiological differences between male and female organisms — those with male parts are men, while those with female parts are women. But in 2011, they reversed their position on this and began using sex as the biological classification and gender as "a person's self representation as male or female, or how that person is responded to by social institutions based on the individual’s gender presentation."

What changed? Nothing biologically or scientifically – in fact, in non-human animals (monkeys, birds, cats) gender still corresponds to the animal’s biological sex. If one has female body parts, they are female. While rare, there have always been some people who were born with both male AND female genitalia at the same time. That is called “intersex”. And there has always been people who were clearly born with either male or female parts – no intermixing – but then FELT like the opposite sex inside. That’s called “transgender”. So what does the Bible say?

B. First seen in Genesis 1

We first encounter gender is Genesis 1:27. READ. Here we see that God created, designed, & made humans, or mankind, in God’s likeness. But that likeness is divided between 2 genders – male and female. This is deliberate on God’s part. Each of these
two genders equally share the “image of God”. Each gender is different in some way that is complementary. That is each gender gains something from the other that they do not themselves have. And all this is very good. God first looks at all people as first and foremost humans made in the image of God and then secondarily God designed in a differentiation of people into two sexes or genders – male and female. So the planned difference between men & women is secondary to the planned image of God in all humans.

C. Key in marriage

We encounter more on gender in Gen 2, READ 2:18, 21-24. While there are clear differences between men and women, as v 21-22 alludes to the overwhelming majority of our DNA is similar as humans but then we have one chromosome which has our sex characteristics on it – men have XY and ladies have XX. This gender is set at conception and that sex chromosome is found in every single cell of our body.

God goes on to show the importance of this difference in marriage in v 23-24. God’s plan for marriage is for a union of one man and one woman for life which will produce future generations of humans, raising the offspring with influence from both a male and a female. Clearly the genders here are different – it isn’t just any person marrying any person, but specifically a man and a woman. And those differences are seen as complementary. Just as physically, God made man and woman to fit together in sexual relationship within that marriage to become one flesh, so each brings something different to the marriage, to the bringing up of the next generation and to the foundation of society. Complementary.

As we see in Genesis 2, men and women need each other in profound ways. Man’s existence is “not good” without woman and woman is initially created from man. But remember humanity as a whole is even greater than any gender so if we had time I would show you from Genesis 3, that man’s deepest need really isn’t for woman, nor is man woman’s real reason for existence. The deepest need of both men and women is God – a personal relationship with God. Our greatest need, our greatest duty and our greatest hope is not found in a spouse but in Jesus Christ. If we make gender or sexuality a substitute gods, we’ll put a burden on a spouse they could never bear. Our identity must be in God – our highest identity is defined by our relationship with God.

D. What about the unmarried?

This points us to another theological tension. What about the unmarried? Aren’t they then missing out on something foundational? That is what is so special about the church. Marriage is also a picture of Jesus’ relationship with the church – those who have surrendered to follow Jesus. Both Jesus and Paul commend those who remain single for the sake of the Kingdom and serve Jesus more. (Matt 19:12, 1Cor 7:32-34, 7:38). Marriage will be fading out in heaven. Jesus and Paul both showed complete contentment and fulfillment as singles.
II. Does God have gender?
Clearly God designed two genders for humans and God has made clear distinctions in those two genders. But does God have a gender? Is God genderless? Or is He definitely male?

A. God reveals Himself in terms we can understand
What we know of God is what God reveals to us. The highest revelation of God is special revelation – through God’s clear actions, words through the prophets, and most clearly through Jesus’s life and teaching. Now God must communicate to us in terms we understand because we humans are very limited by space, time and understanding. We need to accept what God reveals, but then not simplify it so we can understand it, feel good about it or have it fit our pre-determined ideas. Take God’s nature as Trinity – ONLY ONE God but in three persons. Push the ONENESS too much and we deny the unique personhood of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Push the THREE too much and we have the false idea of three gods. There is a tension that must remain where God transcends our simple understanding. So we must NOT take one aspect of God and then run with just that or we will head into clear error. We must hold ALL of what God reveals in an area. This is especially true in terms of gender. On the one hand, God uses many more masculine terms to describe God’s character than feminine ones. But on the other hand, it would be wrong to say or make God “male”. Why?

B. God doesn’t have a body
God doesn’t have a “gender” because God doesn’t have a body. God doesn’t have facial hair or a “Y” chromosome or male hormones or male genitals that a human male does. Gender is connected to the biological and God doesn’t have a body. God is spirit (John 4:24). But neither does that make God “genderless” or "androgynous" (pronounced “/an’dräjəˈnəs”) from which other false conclusions come when pushed. For example, some claim people should be free to choose their own gender because both are in God’s image and God is genderless or both sexes then we reflect God either way. God is neither male nor female. God transcends all such categories. It would be a diminishing to God to make God a gender or genderless or both genders. It is not God, but humans who are set apart in terms of male and female.

C. What about Jesus (incarnation)?
What about Jesus? Since Jesus was clearly male and Jesus is God incarnate, doesn’t that prove that God is male? The gender of Jesus is something that belongs to Jesus’ human nature which must not be confused with Jesus’ divine nature. Jesus’ masculinity no more proves that God is male than that it proves that God is Jewish (because Jesus was Jewish) or that God is mortal (because Jesus was mortal).

D. Occasionally describes Himself in motherly terms
(Hosea 11:3-4; Deut 32:18; Isa 42:14; 49:15; 66:13; Psalm 91:4 [12 times])
But God does use masculine and feminine terms in God’s revelation of who God is and not in equal amounts. We must also hold on to this revelation by God at the same time. God is NOT genderless – God transcends gender. I am told that God is
referred to as “Father” about 170 times. God is never referred to as “Mother” but
God does freely describe Himself in motherly terms in that God does some of the
things that mothers were known for doing, like comfort or feed her children. (see
[12] in your outline simply refers to the fact that about a dozen times God speaks of
gathering His children under His wings like in Psalm 91:4: “He will cover you with
his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be
your shield and rampart.” Covering with feathers is a picture of the actions of a
mother bird. Like the Trinity we must hold on to ALL that is said about God.

D. Always male in relation to ...
Now there are a number of relationships where God is always pictured in the
masculine – God is called “Father”, but never called “mother”. God is called
“King” but never “queen”. God is never pictured as Israel’s wife, just as Christians
are never pictured as Christ’s husband but only Jesus’ bride or wife. But if we try to
simplify things and conclude “God is male” then we can easily come to false
conclusions when God uses terms like Father, King or Lord. God wants us to view
the way of relating in these relationships, not how human males do it. Jesus did this
when He refined what “Lord” meant – not lording it over others like the male lords of
Jesus’ day did, God always wants us to reinterpret our human relationships in terms of
who He is—so always hold simultaneously God is not male, but refers to Himself
most in masculine pronouns and titles. With practice that helps keep us from error.

For example, when we read that God is our “Father” our human inclination is to then
view God like we view our human father. We imagine God as a bigger version of our
Dads. But even the best of our fathers are but sketchy & misleading reflection of God.
Instead, we want to learn how a human father should respond by how God the Father
responds to His spiritual children. God’s true fatherhood is different from ours and it
is not mere gender.

Everything in a woman that is different than a man was modeled on God. Just like
everything in a man that is different from a woman is modeled on God. We are all
equally made in God’s image and equally necessary. Sin has corrupted both men and
women including their masculinity and femininity. God is spirit. As such God is not
male or female. Maleness and femaleness are God’s creation as biological bearers of
masculinity and femininity both of which are rooted in God.

III. What about “gender” today
Notice how this Biblical picture of gender then makes our current redefinition of gender
today clearer as well as what will truly bring greater freedom & life in our different desires.

A. Current ‘feeling’ becomes your identity – do feelings change? Are they always beneficial?
First, we must notice that one’s gender identity is now proposed to be on the basis of
one’s inner feelings and not on something objective like DNA. That is a huge change
that you have heard little discussion of—just declarations. That change will have incredibly powerful ramifications in the future because gender is so fundamental in God’s design of humans. Because we want the best for a person for the long run (that is our definition of love) it would be wise to discuss the question, “How accurate are our feelings?” Just consider yourself. Is there anything in your life that you felt very strongly about but now wish you had never acted on? I’ve definitely have some of those which is one reason I believe so strongly in God’s revelation that our own heart is deceptive above all things. Because of our deep sin nature, every one of us has things we feel strongly about which are very deceptive—like in the Garden of Eden, we think if we do these things, they will bring great good into our lives, but then reality shows those actions bring far more pain than the good. How many of us as kids thought our life would be so much better if we could eat chocolate and junk food all the time, skip school, and just go to amusement parks. I am so glad my mom said, “no”, because the long term results would have been disastrous.

Like my mom, I’m not being “unloving” by objecting to our culture’s move away from time-tested, moral absolutes to making our own truth based on our feelings. But neither will people be excited about my opposition since they are feeling so strongly at that moment. So unless they are showing inward conflict, I ask more questions than try to convince others of my Biblical perspective. Do you always believe a person’s feeling lead to what is beneficial? Have you ever desired something and then changed your mind? How do we really know what will be helpful 50 years from now? Is it always best to encourage a person in their strong feelings? How do we know which feelings will last and lead to good and which we need to deal with in another way?

B. It is a reaction against some frustration
Second, it is helpful to remember than any radical change from the past is partially a reaction against some past pain or frustration. This is particularly true in this area of gender identity. Don’t think lightly of the internal struggle that goes on when one feels the opposite of their biological gender. Instead, let it first remind you that victory in pain doesn’t usually come by eliminating the pain immediately, but by learning to become overcomers of that pain for a greater purpose. As we apply that to ourselves in our own temptations to do the opposite of God’s plan, then we can be much more helpful in guiding people to put the ways of God before their own feelings. Applying their suggested solution to other areas sometimes brings more clarity. A Bible translator was told by a woman struggling with gender roles, “To be fair to women, you should only feminine pronouns for God.” The translator asked if feminine pronouns should be used to refer to the devil as well: “Resist the devil and she will flee from you.” She didn’t like that idea at all.

C. Completely separates nature and nurture
Third, the current attempted distinction between “sex” and “gender” tries to completely separate nature and nurture at the very time we are gaining more & more evidence that our behavior as humans is a complex interweaving of these two
elements. ‘Nature’ refers to that which impacts our behaviors because of our biological elements – our hormones produce certain initial feelings. ‘Nurture’ refers to the impact our family and culture has on our behavior. Very few human responses are completely by either nature or nurture alone. So we are not being unloving or unenlightened by resisting the change which doesn’t fit what is happening around.

D. Creates internal conflict – will you & I be there to help when they want to be free?
When one claims they should be one sex and their biology is clearly another sex (we are not talking genetic intersex here), there is going to be an internal conflict. Every cell in our body is stamped with our sex. There are over 1,500 sex-specific genes. These affect far more than our genitalia – skin, skeleton, heart, brain, lungs, stomach and more all are directly influenced by whether you are a man or a woman biologically. Ladies having heart-attacks have different symptoms than men having heart-attacks. Gender is inherently biological. That means internally, those who are trying to live opposite their biological sex are going to have internal conflict sometime which is totally biological and has nothing to do with society.

The most common long term story I have heard is the person has inner desires to have, or be, some aspect of the opposite sex physically. They go through times of dreaming they are the opposite gender which arouses them. Then feelings of guilty or conflict come in when those emotions die down. After a lot of back & forth, the person frustrated with the inner conflict tries some kind of transition. In the beginning, the inner conflict seems to go down. But as time goes on the real conflict of the heart comes back. Now remember these are people who have talked with me. They didn’t find the long term answer they were looking for. So the question is, “will you and I be there to help with the good news of Jesus?” Society will keep saying do what you feel, but that hasn’t freed them. Jesus says that any desire we have for things that God has forbidden are a reflection of how sin has distorted us, not how God has made us. When we responded to Christ in repentance and faith, our union to Jesus removes the need for any lasting guilt or shame about our sexual feelings. We are free to acknowledge our temptations while then responding differently by using all the tools of the Holy Spirit to say “no” to that temptation and yes to actions which glorify the Lord. It’s the same as whatever unique sin struggle every one of us face in our own lives – but in different areas. Don’t let society mold you into their image, but be ones transformed by Jesus in the area you struggle with. Then we are a good witnesses and can really help others even though we are flawed ourselves!