

Gender and Sexuality: Biblical Visions, Contemporary Questions

Fall 2019 Adult Sunday School – Trinity Baptist Church

In the last few decades the prevailing consensus in our society has shifted away from traditional Christian understandings about gender, sexuality, and marriage. This is an opportunity for Christians to carefully examine biblical teachings, not simply holding to inherited traditions nor simply conforming to current culture. Rather, we will consider these matters in light of the overarching biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, and glory. We will consider how to relate to one another in the church as well as to our friends, co-workers, and neighbors.

Class Schedule

Oct 6: Beautiful and Broken: Why Bodies, Gender, and Sexuality are Good Gifts from God; And, Why nothing's quite the way it's supposed to be anymore

Powlison, *Making All Things New*; Welch, *Shame Interrupted*

Oct 13: The Shape of Redemption, Part 1: From a Barren Wilderness to a Fruitful Garden: God's Design for Earthly Marriage and Sex to anticipate the Marriage Supper of the Lamb – Genesis 2, Song of Songs, Ephesians 5, Revelation 21

Mason, *The Meaning of Marriage*

Oct 20: The Shape of Redemption, Part 2: Undivided Devotion to the Lord: The Crucial Witness of Christian Singleness to Christ's Sufficiency – Isaiah 56:5-7, Matthew 19:10-12, 1 Corinthians 7

Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*; Roberts, *True Friendship*

Oct 27: But What About...Part 1a: Homosexuality: Does the Bible really mean what it says? What does redemption look like if I'm a same-sex-attracted Christian? – Romans 1 and 8, 1 Corinthians 6

DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Say About Homosexuality?*; Hill, *Washed and Waiting*;

Butterfield, *Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*; Shaw, *Same Sex Attraction and the Church*; Hill-Perry, *Gay Girl Good God*; Rachel Gilson's blog (rachelgilson.com); Living Out (livingout.org)

Nov 3: But What About...Part 1b: Relating with wisdom and love to LGBT folks outside the church. Interacting fruitfully with changing cultural assumptions, worldviews, and political movements. Healthy ways of addressing gender and sexuality with children and youth in Christian families.

Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*; Bennett, *A War of Loves*; Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*; Sprinkle, *Living in a Gray World*

Nov 10: But What About...Part 2: Trapped in the Wrong Body? Intersexuality, Transgender Identity, Gender Fluidity, etc.

Vaughan Roberts, *Transgender*

Nov 17: Break from this class (Visiting Missionary Presentation – Dr. Adams Shaba from Nigeria)

Nov 24: But What About...Part 3: Pornography and Its Effects

Chester, *Closing the Window*; Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy*

Dec 1: But What About...Part 4: Lament and Hope: What the Bible Has to Say to Victims and Perpetrators of Sexual Abuse/Assault

Holcomb, *Rid of my Disgrace*

Dec 8: The Hope of Glory: Washed and Waiting – Romans 8, Revelation 21-22

This class will be most beneficial if you come as regularly as possible, because the sessions will build on each other from week to week. If you miss a week and want to read the notes from the past week, feel free to email Pastor Greg (gregory.hendrickson@gmail.com). The audio files will also be posted on the church website in most cases. If you want to explore particular topics in more depth, I have listed some recommended books next to many of the topics. I can also recommend some articles if you are looking for something shorter than a book to read.

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October 6: Beautiful and Broken: Why Bodies, Gender, and Sexuality are Good Gifts from God; And, Why nothing's quite the way it's supposed to be anymore

“God created us with bodies; that is how we begin to know that He cares how we order our sexual lives. God created us with bodies; God Himself incarnated in a human body; Jesus was raised again from the dead with a body; and one day we too will be resurrected with our bodies.”¹

In the ancient world, Christianity was rather unusual in the high level of honor that it gave to the human body, even while it simultaneously called for a high level of bodily discipline and personal sacrifice. Below are three common attitudes toward the human body in the ancient world:

1. **The body is evil/dirty/inferior (Gnosticism)**
 - a. Gnosticism: God created the spiritual world; a lesser/inferior god created the material world. The body is a prison and our goal is to escape from it.
 - b. Can result in either asceticism (harshness toward the body) or hedonism (do whatever you want with your body because it doesn't matter anyway)
2. **The body is non-essential (Platonism/Stoicism)**
 - a. Soul is to body as captain is to ship. I am my soul; I am not my body. Soul is immortal, body perishes and is not resurrected. Body is relatively unimportant, possibly a hindrance, not part of what truly makes us human. Body is a “can” that will one day be thrown in the trash.
 - b. Tends to emphasize importance of “spiritual” over “material” things, or “rational thought” over “instinct/feelings”; tends to emphasize the difference (more than the interconnection) between body and soul. Kant is a modern philosopher who trends in this direction.
3. **The body is all there is (Epicureanism)**
 - a. No soul distinct from the body, no life after death, no God or spiritual world. Goal of life above all else is bodily pleasure/tranquility.
 - b. Doesn't always result in a complete lack of restraint, as one may pragmatically calculate that some measure of self-control (e.g. moderate eating rather than gorging oneself all the time) contributes to overall bodily happiness. But still, the goal is always measured in terms of our *bodily* experience (how I feel).

All of these views have been influential throughout history, and many modern attitudes toward the body borrow from one or more of these frameworks.

What is a Biblical/Christian Understanding of the Human Body, Gender, and Sexuality?

1. **From the beginning, God created us with bodies and called them good**
 - a. God orders and fills the physical world to display his sovereignty and glory (Genesis 1)

¹ Lauren Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity*, p. 33.

- b. God called our bodies good (Genesis 1:31; 2:25). We do not see God creating human souls apart from human bodies.
- c. Body and soul are not identical, but Bible emphasizes unity and interconnectedness of the human person (e.g. Genesis 2:7)
 - i. “Man can neither be understood nor explained in his full depth with the categories taken from the ‘world’, that is, from the visible totality of bodies. Nevertheless, man too is a body.”²
- d. Our body-soul unity makes us unique in God’s creation, in contrast to angels (purely spiritual beings who only take on bodily form temporarily) and animals (purely physical beings who were never created to be immortal).
- e. Therefore our bodies have great dignity and value to God.

2. From the beginning, God created us as gendered beings

- a. “In the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). The author of Genesis recognizes that many animals also exist in male and female pairs (e.g. in the account of the animals entering Noah’s ark), but in the creation story the male-female pairing is specifically noted only in regard to human beings, and it is specifically connected with bearing the divine image. Human beings are not created “according to their kinds”; we are created male and female in God’s image.
 - i. This seems to imply that being male or female is closer to the core of our identity than other characteristics (such as race/ethnicity, national origin, class or social status).
- b. Genesis 2 describes the creation of woman from man (2:18-23), emphasizing their complementary nature. The account climaxes in Adam’s poetic celebration of Eve.
- c. Genesis does not tell us explicitly why God created us as gendered beings, but in the rest of the Bible we see that his purpose is connected to (1) God’s inherently relational nature (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and (2) God’s covenant relationship with his people (God-Israel in the Old Testament, Christ-Church in the New Testament).
 - i. The human body “has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world, the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it...God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and he has destined us to share in that exchange.”³

3. From the beginning, God created us as sexual beings

- a. In Genesis 1:28 God blessed human beings and commanded them to be fruitful and multiply. There is only one way that human beings can fulfill this command. God could have made us so that we would reproduce in some other way, apart from a sexual union of male and female, but he did not choose to do so.
- b. God blessed the sexual union of husband and wife. At the end of Genesis 2 we see the man and his wife “naked and unashamed.” Elsewhere in Scripture, nakedness is almost always a dishonorable and humiliating state (endured by criminals, prisoners of war, and slaves). Clothes are consistently a sign of dignity and honor. But in the state of original innocence, and in the context of marriage, nakedness is not shameful. In God’s design there is complete freedom, giving of the self and receiving of the other, and complete security in the marriage promise.

From the standpoint of creation, the Bible has a high and honoring view of human bodies, gender and sexuality as they are part of God’s beautiful design for his image bearers.

² John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline, 2006), p. 135.

³ John Paul II, quoted in Christopher West, “Preface”, in *Man and Woman He Created Them*, p. xxviii.

However, this is not the whole of the biblical story! We are created by God, but we are also corrupted by sin. And in this fallen world, in our present experience, nothing is quite the way it's supposed to be...

4. In Genesis, we see that the consequences of sin are written on our bodies

- a. The first sin is depicted as a bodily act: eating from the forbidden tree (Genesis 3:6-7)
- b. The first sin resulted in bodily consequences
 - i. Shame connected to nakedness (3:7)
 - ii. Pain and sorrow in childbearing (3:16)
 - iii. Pain and frustration in working the ground (3:17-18)
 - iv. Bodily death (3:19): the earth will one day swallow us up

5. In the rest of the Bible, we see that every aspect of our human nature and experience has been affected by sin. This is traditionally called the doctrine of "total depravity." It does *not* mean that everything is now as bad as it could possibly be (God still restrains much evil through his "common grace" provisions for humanity). But it *does* mean that no part of our human nature or experience is presently immune from sin's effects. For example:

- a. Our bodies become weak, sick, disabled, and ultimately destined to die.
- b. Our minds become darkened. We don't think clearly. Our reason is impaired (though not completely destroyed), often because we attach ourselves to faulty assumptions and then arrive at misguided conclusions.
 - i. "Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but *they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened*" (Romans 1:21)
 - ii. "They are *darkened in their understanding*, alienated from the life of God because of the *ignorance* that is in them, *due to their hardness of heart*" (Ephesians 4:18)
- c. Our desires become disordered and deceitful
 - i. "Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is *corrupt through deceitful desires* (Ephesians 4:22)
 - ii. "Do not be conformed to *the passions of your former ignorance*" (1 Peter 1:14)
- d. Our identities become idolatrous
 - i. Many "idolatries" come from fixating on some part of God's good creation that is nevertheless twisted by the fall, and looking for salvation from that created thing, rather than from the gracious action of God himself.
 - ii. Examples: the citizens of Babel idolized their national identity (Genesis 11:1-9), Leah idolized being loved by her husband (Genesis 29:32-35), Rachel idolized having children (Genesis 30:1).
- e. Our self-perception becomes distorted (see Tim Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*)
- f. Our relationships become troubled
- g. We experience all sorts of unwanted afflictions (by definition, nearly all human afflictions are unwanted!)
 - i. Just a few examples: chronic pain, depression, trauma, betrayal, being born into a dysfunctional family, being the victim of racism or persecution, parenting a rebellious child, marriage to a difficult spouse
- h. Our experience of gender and sexuality must also be deeply affected by our fallen state, in a wide variety of ways, both chosen and unchosen

Some implications so far:

1. We need to hold these truths together: (1) we are created by God, and (2) we are corrupted by sin.
 - a. If we emphasize only the first truth, we may be prone to identify all aspects of our present human experience as reflecting God's creational goodness ("Love is love and God loves you!")

God made you just the way you are, so the only proper response is total affirmation and celebration and self-expression!”)

- b. If we emphasize only the second truth, we may be prone to fall into self-hatred and despair. (“I am so wretched and messed up, God could not possibly want me or redeem me”)
 - c. Emphasizing one of these truths to the exclusion of the other is both psychologically unhealthy and theologically unbalanced. The Bible holds both truths together. (Almost all important and beautiful Christian doctrines involve multiple complementary truths held together.)
 - d. “What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, glory and refuse of the universe...Man’s greatness and wretchedness are so evident that the true religion must necessarily teach us that there is in man some great principle of greatness and some great principle of wretchedness!” (Blaise Pascal)
2. These two truths apply to all human beings without exception.
- a. In every human being there is beauty that reflects the person’s status as an image-bearer of God.
 - i. Do we take time to recognize this beauty, to affirm what is good and God-honoring, even in the people who are most difficult for us to love, even in people whose lives, bodies, and relationships are obviously disfigured, distorted, addicted, or living in open rebellion against God’s design?
 - b. In every human being there is brokenness that is ultimately a result of sin (even if it is not a direct result of that person’s particular sin).
 - i. Some people’s brokenness may not always be immediately apparent (some people tend to hide it more effectively than others). But it is there, nevertheless.
 - ii. Do we idealize some people as if they are not broken? If so, we are setting ourselves up for disappointment.
 - iii. Can we identify our own particular manifestations of brokenness? It is dangerous to attempt to minister to other broken people without being aware of one’s own particular brokenness.
3. We need biblically informed discernment in order to sort out what in ourselves is *beautiful*, a reflection of God’s creational design, to be received with thankfulness and pursued with wisdom, and what is a manifestation of our *brokenness*, deceitful, misguided, idolatrous, a temptation to be resisted. Again, because sin confuses us, this is not always self-evident. We can reject our God-given beauty, and we can embrace our sin-infused brokenness. It takes time in God’s word, in prayer, in confession and repentance, in receiving the love of God, in conversation with wise people who are willing to ask hard questions, in order to begin sorting out our thinking, desires, habits, intuitions, perceptions, etc. in light of God’s character. Thankfully, God has given us his Word as a lamp to our feet and a light to our path; God has given us his Spirit to inform our conscience and lead us toward holiness; God has given us each other to help us in this process.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

- 1) In what ways do we feel/think that our bodies are dirty and inferior? Or, irrelevant and non-essential? Or, that our bodies are all that is really worth living for?
- 2) What are some common attitudes toward the body in our current culture? Do they follow or combine any of the ancient paradigms?
- 3) Which is harder: to receive your body as a thing of beauty given by God, or to recognize the many and various ways that sin and brokenness manifest itself in your body?