



**KING'S  
CHURCH**  
EDINBURGH

(<http://kingschurchedinburgh.co.uk/>)

# What is Gender?

## Questions:

- What are the issues that make this such a difficult topic to think wisely about?
- Is your instinctive reaction to transgenderism a “Yes!” of affirmation, or a “Yuk!” of confusion and repulsion? What are the faults with both of these responses?
- What does the example of Jesus teach us about how to respond to this?
- We spoke about sin dividing and distorting – how does this help us to assess what is happening around us? How can we work out which changes are for good, and which are bad?
- How can the church show the goodness of God’s design in making us male and female?

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## Resources list

Here’s a long list of videos, articles, and books to help you think through these issues. Them being on this list doesn’t mean I necessarily agree with every point. If you were to just pick two, I’d suggest you go for Andrew Wilson’s talks on “A Theology of Femaleness” and “A Theology of Maleness” which go into a lot of helpful detail in a short period of time. Our own document, “Defining Leadership at King’s Church”

(<https://www.dropbox.com/s/6w0emzk99l5fbu4/Defining%20Leadership%20at%20King%27s.pdf?dl=0>), gives an outline of a biblical theology of gender and why we only appoint men as elders.

- Is the Bible Good for Women?, Wendy Alsup, 2017, Multnomah
- Made For More, Hannah Anderson, 2014, Moody
- “College Kids Say the Darndest Things: On Identity” (<https://youtu.be/xfO1veFs6Ho>), Joseph Backholm
- “Image of God” (<https://youtu.be/YbipxLDtY8c>), The Bible Project
- “A Beautiful Design” (<https://www.tvresources.net/resource-library/sermons/by-series/a-beautiful-design>), preaching series, Matt Chandler

- The Righteous Mind, Jonathan Haidt, 2013, Penguin
- “Women, Stop Submitting to Men” (<http://www.russellmoore.com/2011/12/05/women-stop-submitting-to-men/>), Russell Moore
- “Jordan Peterson and Powerful Men” (<https://alastairadversaria.com/2018/01/19/jordan-peterson-and-powerful-men/>), Alastair Roberts
- “Natural Complementarians: Men, Women, and The Way Things Are” (<https://calvinistinternational.com/2016/09/13/natural-complementarians-men-women/>), Alastair Roberts
- Primer: True To Form, ed. David Shaw, 2016, FIEC
- God and the Transgender Debate, Andrew Walker, 2017, The Good Book Company
- “A Theology of Femaleness” (<https://vimeo.com/122319773>), Andrew Wilson
- “A Theology of Maleness” (<https://vimeo.com/113589260>), Andrew Wilson
- “How Did Pink Become a Girly Colour?” (<https://youtu.be/KaGSYGhUkvM>), Jennifer Wright
- “The Bible’s Big Picture of the Complementarity of Man and Woman” (<https://youtu.be/AsB-JDsOTwE>), Professor N.T. Wright
- Understanding Gender Dysphoria, Mark Yarhouse, 2015, IVP

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## Full notes

God brings order out of chaos, and hope where there is none. Tonight we’re asking a massive question: “What is gender?” There is a lot of chaos and a lot of hopelessness in our culture about this at present. A few years ago Facebook changed its gender options from two to seventy-two, and then after a backlash against them for that being too restrictive now simply offers “Custom” as an alternative to male and female. Sports bodies are uncertain about how to classify transgender athletes when there are such pronounced physical differences between biologically male and female bodies. Alongside these kind of issues, we’ve heard a lot in the news recently about men mistreating women, and I expect that many if not most of the women here will have experienced some form of this. 93% of British FTSE 100 companies have a man as their Chief Executive Officer – most people think this wrong. 95% of prisoners in the UK are men – most people don’t think about this. This year is the centenary of any women being able to vote in British general elections, and it was another ten years until all of them could. Around three-quarters of all suicides in 2016 in the UK were male, and this rate has been steady for over 30 years of records being kept. Cultural forces going back a couple of hundred years, such as the enlightenment and the industrial revolution, combined with the sexual revolution of the last fifty years or so, are in the mix with faults that are nearly as old as humanity. There’s a lot of confusion. At the same time God is working for the good of those who love Him, and will one day bring all things under the Lordship of His Son Jesus Christ.

Cultural changes may be good or may be bad, or possibly both – and we need to pray for wisdom to work out what is what. Tonight I'd love you to pray that God would give us wisdom to hear what He is saying about gender. By His grace, we'll look at how Jesus gives us clarity about gender, shows compassion to all of us, tells each of us to take up our cross and offers us new creation – the only hope that there really is.

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## Clarity

One day some of Jesus' opponents asked him about marriage and divorce, and He replied in His usual way by asking them a question and zooming out from the immediate issue to the big picture of God's truth and purposes. *"He answered, 'Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female...?'"* (Matthew 19:4) Here's our short answer to the question "What is gender?": God made humans biologically male and female. We need to dig into the long answer implied in Jesus' words to see fully what He wants us to see. He points us back to "the beginning", and that means *Genesis 1-2*. Very famous, very controversial, very misunderstood. Let's look at how it tells the story of creation, and what this tells us about pairings and purpose.

The first words in our Bible: *"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."* Immediately, summarising what's about to be described, we're presented with a pairing: two things. We tend to think of the heavens and the earth as opposites, and definitely as distant from each other, but that isn't the intention here. The creation account is full of pairings which are profoundly related to each other: God and His creation. Light and darkness. Land and sea. Sun and moon. Plants and creatures. Man and woman. It repeatedly uses binary language: there is distinction between "this" and "that". The repetition in this tone-setting document is meant to help you think, "This is how life goes." Our observations support this: We need time to be awake and time to sleep. We need land and water. We need food and drink. We need a male sperm and a female egg to begin existing. These pairs are not meant to be separate from and independent of each other: They are distinct but they are also meant to work together in harmony. The pairings are real, and they are for purpose: they are how life works.

The man and woman pairing is unique in the account. What is said about them is not said about anything else in creation: *"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) Nothing else is made in God's own image. Every human being ever conceived carries this dignity, bears this image of God Almighty. So this pairing is distinct from everything else. Although we are also clearly told that male and female are different from each other, men and women are far more like each other than they are like anything else in creation. As we both are made in God's image there are no grounds for denigrating each other. And we can only fulfil our calling of displaying His

image to the rest of creation when both real maleness and real femaleness are flourishing. Believing that men and women have exactly the same worth doesn't mean believing that men and women are exactly the same. Science and culture shows us this, so does the Bible. There are typical characteristics for either gender, which may be expressed differently in different cultures: Men's strength tends to be physical, women's strength tends to be social. Men are more likely to lean towards forming the world with structure and security, and women towards filling it with life and community. The Bible doesn't give us a list of masculine characteristics and female characteristics that we must follow, but it does give us a variety of examples of godly men and women - as individuals and in relationships - to learn from and imitate. God is the source of every good thing and neither gender can represent Him fully to the world without the help of the other.

The pairing has one other purpose. The climax of the creation account is a marriage between the man and the woman, the two become one flesh (*Genesis 2:24*). At the very end of the Bible, in its final two chapters, *Revelation 21 and 22*, we see Heaven come down to Earth, and a marriage take place between Jesus and His people, and all things are united in Christ for eternity. This marriage will bring about the new eternal age of perfection and joy and peace, when Heaven and Earth are fully united once more. That is our destiny, male and female, married and single, and we need to be reminded of it all the time. God gave us marriage between a man and woman, the distinct but interlocking pair, to point us towards Him and what He is going to do.

So it isn't arbitrary or random that there are two genders, there is purpose. Maleness and femaleness both point us back to our creation, point us up to our Creator, and point us forward to the conclusion He's got for us. We are called to be living symbols of these truths. We're called to act out the story we have been placed in by the Author.

Jesus speaks clearly from *Genesis 1-2* that God made us from the beginning male and female. But He knows that what follows *Genesis 1 and 2* is *Genesis 3*: the man and woman's disobedience which allowed sin into the world: the Fall. We live in a world designed to be like *Genesis 1 and 2* but disfigured by *Genesis 3*. Sin separates us from God, makes us ignorant of the truth, divides us from each other, and pollutes creation. Gender relations and identity are deeply affected by this. The first argument between man and woman immediately follows the first sin - the man blames the woman for giving him the forbidden fruit - because sin splinters what God brought together. God says that this is what it will be like for as long as there is sin the world, saying to the woman: "*Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.*" (*Genesis 3:16*) The battle of the sexes is a trite phrase for what is so tragic, but it starts right here. Both genders see the differences in each other as failings, or opportunities to be exploited. Because men tend to have greater physical and political strength, they have sinfully used these to dominate or discriminate against women. Jesus describes it tersely to

the people he's debating with in Matthew 19: *"your hearts are hard"*(Matthew 19:8). Some people's response to the trouble of these differences becoming divisions is to try to abolish all differences between the genders, or abolish gender altogether. But that isn't what God designed and His purposes will not be defeated by our sin.

Sin brings gender division but also gender distortion. Romans 8:22-23 tells us:*"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 firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."* The earth itself writhes in agony, afflicted with the consequences of sin, and so do our bodies and minds. Many of us are born with or develop physical imperfections in one way or another, and all of us are going to die – these are distortions of God's good design. We can see the medical condition of intersex as an example of this. It's a generic term for a number of physical conditions "in which a person is born with sex characteristics or anatomy that does not allow clear identification as male or female." These physical abnormalities are sometimes identified at birth, or later such as at puberty, and can bring many difficult consequences for the person and those around them. Just as the Bible tells us to expect physical problems in this fallen world, it also tells us to expect psychological ones. Jeremiah 17:9 observes, *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"* This includes what has been known as "gender identity disorder" and is now commonly called "gender dysphoria". This is a psychological condition in which a person experiences from early childhood or from later in life, deep distress over the sex they have been born with. Whereas the causes of intersex conditions can be scientifically identified, the same is not yet the case with gender dysphoria. When experienced from early childhood, this is recorded as affecting fewer than one in ten thousand adults in the UK, which would mean around 5,000 people. Increasing numbers are being referred for gender reassignment treatment. In a culture that is confused about what a person is and who gets to define truth, it's not surprising that we are repeatedly and powerfully told by the stories we consume in the media that people should be able to decide who and what they are, and express themselves however they want to. We're hearing this evening a different narrative, and that should lead us to different conclusions. In just a few lines, Jesus has addressed several massive questions. God makes humans male and female. Both men and women bear His image and are to rule creation on His behalf. Both need the other in profound and personal ways, and are designed to live in glorious harmony with each other. Because sin has entered the world, our differences have become divisions, and we experience distortions of God's good design. Jesus has given us clarity – what else will He give us?

## Compassion

*“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”* (Matthew 9:36) Jesus’ example is the model for all His followers: to love our neighbours with compassion as He loved us, and to honour every person as a fellow bearer of the divine image. He invites all of us, whatever our mess and however unhappy we are, to come to Him. Many of us carry burdens of trying to live as everyone else tells us to: A simple peer pressure to be on “the right side of history” and agree with what “everyone else” is saying about men and women and issues of gender. A resentment of gender stereotypes that have trapped or diminished you or others. A desperate internal struggle with your body or mind. Here’s what Jesus says to all of us: *“Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* (Matthew 11:28-30) God promises about Him: *“a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench”* (Isaiah 42:3). We see this throughout the gospels, and many of us here who are Christians have experienced his extraordinarily compassionate and transforming love in our lives. He knows exactly what we’re like. He knows the things that are our fault, and the things that aren’t. And He offers us rest if we will follow Him. But how do we follow Him?

## The cross

There’s a famous story of a rich young man who wanted to follow Jesus without changing his life: *“And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honour your father and mother.’” And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.”* (Mark 10:17-22) What is the thing you won’t give up for anything or anyone? For that man it was money, for some here it is their desires for love and acceptance, or the hope of feeling comfortable in their own skin. Jesus loves you, just like He loved this guy. But that doesn’t mean He’ll change for you. *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”* (Matthew 16:24) Following Jesus and receiving eternal life is a matter of death. Death to ourselves and our old way of living. Denying our preferences, and the claims of our culture. Refusing to believe that you’re in charge, that you are able to define right and wrong and who you are.

In the specific situation of people experiencing gender dysphoria, they need to be given massive amounts of care and love. But that does not mean agreeing with them if they want treatment for gender reassignment. Paul McHugh, University Distinguished Professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins Medical School, has made the comparison with another condition in which the brain's perception of the body is not biologically accurate: anorexia nervosa. It's a very different condition but the point is: We would not give diet advice or weight-reducing surgery to someone who falsely thought they were massively overweight, so should we give hormone treatments or body-altering surgery to someone who thinks they are in the wrong sex body? Much more care besides that needs to be given but this is a foundational principle.

Whatever you are struggling with: Jesus offers you better than the choices you might be tempted to make that don't fit the story we've told tonight. He says to a guy with a lot of money in this life: I will give you treasures in Heaven. "You think you're rich now, just you wait!" "The blessings I've got for you will make everything you want in this life seem laughably small – you'll be amazed that you even hesitated at the choice." It takes faith to believe that, trust that Jesus is right and you are not. Will you believe Him? Or will you go away from Him sorrowful, trying to write your own story? Don't think for a moment that it's easy for Jesus to say this to you. That encounter with the rich young man began, we're told, *"as he was setting out on his journey."* Where was He going? To Jerusalem, to carry the cross for all of us. To be shamed, abused, broken – for us. To take all the sin in us on His shoulders, to be filled with all the sickness of this world, to have God's righteous anger for all we've done vented on Him. *"The punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed."* (Isaiah 53:5) Why is this good news for us? Because He triumphed over all of it, He defeated sin and death, which have ravaged us and overpowered us so totally. Neither of them could hold Him, and He was raised to new life. This is the Christian hope...

## New Creation

In those last chapters of Revelation, when the story as we know it comes to its end, Jesus says beautiful words of hope: *"I am making all things new."* This is what He promises to do for each of us who follow Him: To take our fragile, messed-up, broken bodies and make them brand new, like His is now. To take our divided relationships and bring them into eternal harmony. To unite all things in Himself, to the glory of God the Father. *"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."* (Revelation 21:4) If you will put your trust in Him alone, He will begin this transformation now. It's such a profound change that the Bible calls it being born again, becoming a new creation. All of us need this. People with gender dysphoria feel a powerful sense of alienation – and they're right to. Romans 8 talks about the earth and us groaning with longing to be changed. All of us sense

the disconnect between how we are and how we should be, how the world is and how it should be. There is a transition to glory to come. For some, the journey to that moment will feel long and difficult. God's plan to bring all things together in Christ cost Him the agony of the cross. So for us too there will be challenges, sacrifices to be made in following Him. Here's how one writer imagines a Christian who had struggled with gender dysphoria but stayed faithful to what God has said being greeted by Jesus in eternity: "Well done. I know it's been hard. It's over now. I love you so much that I brought you to a place where who you feel you are, and who you truly are, are completely enmeshed... what you longed for – to feel like, look like, and to be the same person – is reality. I know it's been painful. It won't be now." All of us need to know this hope. All of us need to become new creations, the results of which are to be *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control"* (Galatians 5:22-23).

So, how should Christians live at present? Jesus has given us clarity that God made us male and female. He did this and declared it "very good". This means Christians should have a higher regard for all people than anyone else does, and for maleness and femaleness too. We should treat others respectfully. Our differences should humble us. We'll see more about this as this preaching series continues over the coming weeks. And Jesus also told us to expect to see the effects of sin in all of us, and in issues of gender as much as everything else. He calls us to love our neighbours, to share His compassion with everyone. This means not shying away from issues like this because they intimidate us or confuse us. We need to have wisdom to work out which changes are for the good and which are not, and courage to make the case for what God has said. In the notes from this talk I've put a very long list of resources for you to dig into, from YouTube clips to talks and books. I'd love for you to discuss it in your midweek small groups. And if this is an issue that you have struggled with, please speak to someone. God is speaking to you tonight with love and understanding, and He wants to bring order out of your chaos, and hope where you have none.



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