

## Interrogating Gender

If someone had told me ten years ago that a woman would lose her job and another would face being thrown off their degree course for stating that biological sex is real, immutable and important, I would have found it hard to believe. Thirty years ago, I would have laughed and considered it incredulous. However, both situations have recently occurred in the UK. The good news is that Maya Forstater has won her high court appeal, and for the time being, the right to hold gender-critical beliefs has been upheld in law.

Gender is a controversial topic right now. When a baby is born, we ask whether it is a boy or a girl. We assume the information communicates something of importance; being born as a biological boy or girl has implications. Traditionally we dressed boys in blue and girls in pink. We bought them different toys and encouraged other traits; boys played football and girls did craft, girls were to be gentle and nurturing, and boys allowed to be more physical and adventurous. That all changed many years ago, and our culture continues to challenge everything once considered normative. Christians must consider how to respond to the change around us. Those fighting to establish the new gender ideology are passionate and fierce in their condemnation of anyone who disagrees with them. Those who have challenged this ideology in public have been on the receiving end of much hatred, even such previously loved figures as J.K. Rowling. What are Christians to think? In AMiE we believe that men and women are equal and different but what does it mean to be 'different' when considering gender?

The bible is clear that men and women are created equally in the image of God but distinct from one another as male and female. The bible acknowledges the biological difference between the sexes, which means our physical experience of the world will be different. For example, women menstruate and can give birth, although not all women will have children. But what do people mean when they talk about gender? The Oxford English dictionary defines gender as: 'the state of being male or female (typically used with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones)'. This is important to understand: gender is something other than physical reality. One of the reasons there is a gender war is that old-style feminists saw gender as an oppressive system of social relations. Simone De Beauvoir's description of not being born a woman but becoming a woman was about the male patriarchy forcing women into performing particular roles. The new gender ideology is focused on the individual's self-perception and identity. This philosophy centres on the subjective experience of masculinity and femininity within an individual and how they chose to express that outwardly. Their key question is, "do you feel female or male?" Individuals can have a variety of answers to this and

embrace a range of different identities. This view ultimately separates the body from the self. Nancy R. Pearcey, in her excellent book, *Love thy body*, identifies this as a new form of Gnosticism.

God created us as embodied souls. The physical body matters. Christ came to us embodied; he rose from the grave embodied and promised that we too will have physical resurrection bodies. There is great liberation in understanding this. One teenager who had been struggling with their feelings about gender and identity made this observation:

*I realised that the only reason I was trans was because I wanted to feel big and safe, and also, I didn't conform to what I thought being female looked and felt like. But then I learned that being female isn't a feeling. It's a biological reality, and I could feel however I feel without it meaning I was male.*

We have a responsibility to help our children love their bodies, treat their bodies with honour, be good stewards of their bodies, treat others' bodies with integrity, and realise that we are not separate from our bodies. Pre-puberty and puberty is a difficult time. I am convinced that a sense of body dysphoria is a normal part of adolescence for many young women. I certainly experienced it. Our sense of self will be confused. It is part of our brokenness due to the Fall.

Does the bible have more to say to us about what it means for us to be men and women? Does the bible describe gender? Does it promote masculine and female virtues? As I studied Scripture searching for answers to these questions, I did not find definitions of what it means to be male or female in terms of our innate nature. The bible does not define our internal sense of self as gendered. However, it does use gendered characteristics as metaphors to help us understand truths; for example, Paul talks of being both like a father and like a nursing mother (1 Thessalonians 2:7,11). There is an acknowledgement of the tenderness that generally comes with motherhood, but the bible does not describe or prescribe femininity or masculinity. Women are encouraged to display gentleness (1 Peter 3:3-4), but this quality should likewise characterise all leaders (1 Timothy 6:11, 1 Timothy 3:3).

The heart of the bible's teaching for men and women is not about masculinity or femininity, which are concepts that are hard to pin down and generally culture dependent. The bible does not confine us to a set of gender characteristics. There is enormous freedom in how we express ourselves. This is important. In the past, we have placed unhelpful cultural stereotypes on one another, leaving those who do not fit struggling on the sidelines. Not all women enjoy cooking, and crafts and evangelistic

outreach based solely on those can alienate some—likewise, not all men like football or curry nights. I remember talking to a young man in his early twenties who described being made to play football at his Christian camp when all he wanted to do was craft with the girls. This experience had left him feeling that he was not a 'proper' man. When he finally understood the freedom he had in Christ, it was enormously liberating.

We have great freedom, but Scripture does talk to our practice as men and women (Ephesians 5:22-23 and 1 Timothy 2:11-3:7). The bible describes our differences in terms of relationships rather than in masculine or feminine temperaments. The heart of the bible's teaching for men and women is about relationships and not prescribed roles, with rigid rules and expectations linked with a set of characteristics. It is concerned that we live together well as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters. The identity that matters in the bible is Christlikeness. Both men and women are called to be conformed to the image of Christ and to display the fruit of the Spirit. We have the embodied Christ as our role model.

In the middle of all the discussions about gender identity, many people struggle with their sense of worth. The playwright Charlotte Josephine put it like this: 'I need to show you my best bits on-line; I need to look attractive or I'm worthless, I am not enough'. Without Christ, we are lost; our sense of self is broken, insecure, fragile, and unanchored. We need rescue! It is no surprise that people are confused and searching for an explanation for their pain. We have a message of hope to a world of young people who know that they are not enough. We have a message of immense affirmation: whilst we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We are not enough, but He is enough. What a wonderful message we have to share with others.

However, we describe ourselves, whatever our experience of being male and female, our primary identity is as people created in God's image, who rejected our Creator and need rescue in Christ. The good news is that in Christ, we are given a new identity, a new status, more significant than anything we can imagine. This is the message we all need, cisgender and transgender alike. In Christ, we do not have to conform to the pattern of this world and its muddled expressions of femininity and masculinity: boys do not have to play football, and girls don't have to like craft. We have much freedom within our gendered relationships and many ways to express ourselves as godly men and women. As Nancy R. Pearcey says: 'Contrary to what postmodern gender theory says, there is greater diversity and inclusivity when we anchor our psychosexual identity in the objective knowable reality of our biology male or female.' God made us male and female and we can rejoice in that.

As we work together as brothers and sisters in AMiE, we want to avoid unhelpful stereotypes and to grow in Christlikeness following the excellent pattern of relationships outlined in his word. This will mean constantly examining ourselves, so we do not drift into lazy and unhelpful attitudes. And when we feel despair at our failure to be all that God wants us to be, we look to Jesus, who promises that he who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ.