

## Male and Female

A few months ago, when the #metoo movement was really gaining steam, the comedian and actor Aziz Ansari went on a date with a co-worker. From his perspective, the date went well and they ended up back at his place where they started messing around and ended up having sex. A few months later, the woman wrote her story in an online magazine and created a firestorm because what Ansari thought was consensual sex, she, in hindsight, viewed as sexual assault because she felt pressured into it.

Now, I'm not going to go into that particular incident, but while this was happening, I saw a sketch on SNL that pretty much summed up the current climate these days. [Dinner Conversation clip]. Well, that's how I feel about preaching on the topic of sex and intimacy. I tread very carefully, but it's something we do need to talk about.

The Bible much to say on issues of sex and gender, and it's not always what people today want to hear. But there's a lot of misunderstanding about what the Bible teaches. The misunderstanding comes from the fact that many Christians think the Bible only gives us a list of rules—don't have sex outside of marriage, don't have sex with a close relative, don't have sex with children, don't have sex with someone of the same sex, etc.

So, to many outside the church, Christians are hopelessly old-fashioned at best or viewed as bigots on the same level as racists whose sexual ethics are only motivated by

hatred for sexual or gender minorities and gender norms only prop up patriarchy and devalue women.

Now, I'm sure there are some Christians who are bigots, but most Christians who hold to traditional Biblical views of sexuality and gender, aren't motivated by hatred, but simply want to be faithful to Scripture. But the reason Christian beliefs seem so strange to people today is because we've tried to apply Biblical rules to a secular anthropology.

Now, don't be afraid of the word anthropology. It's just the word for our understanding these creatures called humans. Who are we? Why are we here? Are we an accident or are we the masterpiece of a loving creator? And then there are other questions like, "Is everything the way it should be or are we broken in some way?" How we answer these questions informs how we view sex, gender roles and sexual morality.

People make a lot of the fact that popular opinion is moving away from a traditional, Biblical understanding of sex, but our morality can't be based on popular opinion. It has to be based on a consistent understanding of human nature.

But we live in a society that doesn't have consistent answers to these questions. And the result is that it's not Christians against gay activists or feminists. It's second-wave feminists against third-wave feminists. It's trans-activists against feminists. It's gender non-binary people against anyone who says gender is only male or female. It's sex and gender essentialists vs. social constructionists. It's everyone against gray-haired, straight,

cis-gender, sex negative, body negative, conservative white males. Did I leave anyone out? And if you don't know what a lot of those things mean, you're not alone.

Now, the point isn't to make you cynical or get you fired up so you'll go to the coffee shop tomorrow and talk about how stupid everyone else is or to fight some culture war. We are not into fighting the culture war. But I bring it up to help you see that it's impossible to say that "society believes X or Y" about sex and gender. Pun intended. (think about it). The truth is it's chaos out there. But most people are not activists. They're just regular people like us, trying to figure this stuff out.

There are many who believe that when we knock down the walls traditionally set up around sex and gender and everyone does what their heart desires, everyone will be happier. But the problem is that even as those walls are coming down, people are not becoming more satisfied, but less satisfied and more confused.

Think about it this way. Aren't you tired of the restrictive grid system of streets in Minneapolis? I mean, why should I have to follow the roads the city planner mapped out 80 years ago? It would be so much better if I could just drive straight to where I want to go. People should be able to build their house where they want and I should be able to drive where I want. Minneapolis would just be better if we got rid of all these oppressive rules about where you can build a house and where you can drive?

Well, I think you get the point. Of course, it wouldn't be better. It would be chaos. Traffic would be worse. It wouldn't be easier to navigate, it would be harder. The city wouldn't be more beautiful, it would be more confusing. As much as rules can become oppressive and suffocating, purpose and structure don't limit freedom, they allow it. The current deconstruction around sex and gender isn't necessarily better because these aren't simply private matters.

So, it won't do for us to just talk about the Bible's *rules* about sex. We have to go to the foundation of what the Bible teaches about who we are. I don't want to give you ammunition to argue with people. I want to give you the tools to think Biblically so we can get our own sexual world together; to change how men think about women and women think about men; and to get our own marriages together so we can live faithfully.

More than anything, I want to see that the Biblical teachings on sex are not about strict and oppressive rules, but the beauty and wonder of God's creation, your sexed body and how Scripture provides us with a holistic way to think about flourishing.

With that in mind, turn to Genesis, chapter 1. The creation story is not primarily about modern science. It's a foundation story that tells us who we are and why we were created. This is where we go to find answers to some of those foundational questions.

The story in Genesis 1 *shows us how God ordered the world*. Verse 2 tells us the earth was *formless* and *empty* and *dark*. The point is that it's chaos. There's no order or

purpose and because of that, it's uninhabitable. So, God started to *separate* things. In verse 4 he separates the light from the darkness and day from night. In verse 6, he separates the waters above from the waters below. Then in verses 9 and 10, he separates water from the land. God is *ordering the universe* by separating things.

I don't know if you've ever thought about this, but we have to *separate* things to *make sense of* them. We teach my 13-month old granddaughter shapes and colors by placing a red object next to a yellow object or a square next to a circle. You call one red and the other yellow. Then you place a red square next to a yellow square and so on. When she learns to differentiate between things, her mind can comprehend the world.

Then God does it with living things. Verse 11, **"Then God said, 'Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.'"** God separates plants and then animals.

Then look at verse 26, **"Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'" So, God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; *male* and *female* he created them."**

Two more separations here. First, humans are separate from the other creatures because we're *made in the image of God*. That means that humans reflect God in a way

animals and the rest of creation do not. And we reflect the glory of God, because of a God-given responsibility. Verse 28, God tells them to, **“Fill the earth and subdue it.”**

Of course, they fill the earth through *procreation*, which reflects God’s work of creating. The second instruction is to *subdue* the earth, which reflects God’s work of bringing order out of chaos, so we can understand the world and bring about flourishing.

But there’s another separation with humans. Genesis 2 is another account of creation that doesn’t contradict the first chapter, but it focuses specifically on humans. Verse 7 says that God formed man out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Skip down to verse 15 and it says, **“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.”**

Then skip down to verse 18, **“The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”** Up to this point, everything has been “good” or “very good,” but here, it’s “not good for the man to be alone.” Something isn’t functioning the way God intends.

Verse 19, **“Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So, the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found.”**

So, here we have an object lesson of sorts for Adam. God says, *Adam is alone and he needs help fulfilling his duties of filling the earth and subduing it.* God parades the animals in front of him and again as if to say, “As you look at the animals, see if you can find one that can help you fulfill the responsibilities I gave you.” But he goes through all the animals and comes to realize that none of them is a “suitable helper.”

Then verse 21, **“So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.”** The word translated “rib” isn’t the word for the rib bone. But some scholars say it means God split Adam in half and made one side man and the other woman. In other words, man and woman are each half of a whole.

Well, Adam looked at Eve and was so smitten, he wrote her a poem. Roses are red, violets are blue... No, actually it’s in verse 23, **“This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.”** Ladies, doesn’t that cause you to swoon? OK, maybe he needed some work on his poetry skills.

Adam was so excited because God created a *“suitable helper.”* The word, “helper” is the Hebrew word *ezer*. If you just read this in the English, it sounds like the man is the leader and the woman is “his little helper.” But that’s not really what it means. *Ezer* is actually used a lot in the Old Testament and most of the time, it refers to God. Psalm 46:1

says, for instance, **“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present (help) ezer in trouble.”** Men would not be able to accomplish God’s purpose without women. And I would say vice versa. That’s the helper.

But it says the helper is “suitable.” *Kenegdo* in Hebrew. *Kenegdo* is a compound word made up of *neged*, which means “in front of” or “opposite” and the prefix *kaf* which means “like” or “the same as.” Put them together and get roughly “*complementary*.” The woman is *like* the man because she’s not like the animals. But she is *different* from the man in that she has different biology, which includes but isn’t limited to the reproductive system that corresponds to the man. Adam was excited, not just because she looked sexy, but because he knew that God had created a perfect partner for him.

Then we get to verse 24, **“That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.”** This is why we say that Genesis is the foundation of the family. It says it explicitly. And what’s even more remarkable is that it’s not describing Adam because Adam doesn’t have a father and mother to leave. Adam and Eve are what we call archetypes. This story is the basis for the most basic organizing unit of society. It’s not the government, it’s the family. Husband and wife are to form a family to work together to “fill the earth and subdue it.”

Verse 25, **“Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.”** This is the metaphor of perfect intimacy. There was nothing between them and they worked

together in harmony to accomplish what God wanted. Notice that it's no longer man and woman, it's husband and wife. This isn't just describing a random hookup, it's describing marriage in the ideal world. Now, we know we don't live in the ideal world. We live in a fallen world—and we'll get to that next week, but let's stop here for today and apply what we have so far.

**Men and women are created different.** I just blew your mind, didn't I? Actually, I have to say it because there are some people who believe there's no difference between men and women or if there is any difference, it's only incidental. In fact, some would say that gender isn't binary—it's not male or female. But the creation account in Genesis tells us that not only are men and women different, but that difference is the foundation of the most basic organizing principle of the society.

In fact, sexual difference is the ONE created difference in humanity. Race, class, and nationality are ways humans divide ourselves, but sex difference is created and it's not intended to separate us, but to bring us together. Male and female are ordered *toward* each other, like positive and negative electrical charge—not to push us apart, but to bind us together. The sex act itself is the act creates that bond among *differents*.

But we also have to remember that **men and women were also created equal.** Nowhere in the Genesis account does it say that men are better, more important or valuable than women. This is critical for us to remember because throughout history,

rather than treating our differences as equal, in many ways we've valued men more than women. In the past it's been believed that women aren't as smart as men. We've denied women the right to vote, denied them positions of leadership and told them the woman's place is in the home, and too often viewed women only for their sexuality.

One of the problems is that we've often over-emphasized the differences between men and women. Studies do show that there are both *physical* and *psychological* differences between men and women. But these differences aren't absolute, they're on average. [men women height pic] For instance, the average man is taller and has greater upper body strength than the average woman, but there are plenty of women who are taller or stronger than men.

The same thing is true for how our brains are wired. Women on average are more nurturing and men on average are more aggressive and risk-taking. Men on average are more interested in STEM professions and engineering and yet in this congregation we have Karen Rogers, who is an MIT educated engineer and the head of the engineering department at Bethel. I've never seen her engineer anything, but I suspect she's pretty good at what she does.

But today, there's an equally dangerous attitude. In much of western society today, there's an underlying devaluing of men. There are all kinds of programs to help girls to succeed, but study after study shows that boys continue to get left behind. It's easy for

many to lump all men in with the creeps perpetrating sexual assault. Saying all men are perverts. Many women think men should be more like women. Dads on TV are still often portrayed as incompetent buffoons. Men and women are equal and we need to be able to appreciate the unique gifts of each of the sexes. That brings us to our third takeaway...

**The Bible does not prescribe strict gender roles.** I've been using two terms throughout that are similar but different. When I use the word sex, I'm referring to biology. When I use the word gender, I'm talking about the way men and women work out their roles in the world based on their biological sex. Throughout much of the ancient world, there were some pretty rigid gender roles by necessity.

There was no birth-control so people tended to have large families. And besides, large families were necessary to run the family business, which was often run from the home. So, women needed to stay home with the children and nurse the babies. Whether it was hunting, farming or building, most of the work was hard physical labor, so men worked outside the home.

But things are different today. Women are still biologically tied to a newborn because of breastfeeding. And one of a couple is going to stay home with a baby, it's true that more women than men prefer to be the one. The vast majority of women work outside of the home at least part-time and usually full-time.

Today, more women get college degrees than men and the Bible isn't against that at all—although it does say something about the state of men in our day. Beyond the healthy nurturing of children, the Bible doesn't tell women they have to cook and do the laundry and the man should do household repairs. I know a number of couples where those roles are reversed and we should allow individuals, man or woman to work and operate according to their gifts and interests. We might expect that men and women will generally follow some trends, but we shouldn't force it. If a mom wants to be a stay-at-home mom, awesome. If she wants to be a CEO, that's great, too.

That includes in the church. The Wesleyan Church is an egalitarian denomination. We believe men and women are both gifted for ministry. We were one of the first denominations to ordain women and have always believed that women can hold any role in the church—leading, teaching, anything.

**Fourth, marriage is not just between two people.** Genesis shows us that marriage is a societal issue. Your relationship isn't just between the two of you. Healthy, intact marriages and healthy families are the best bargain for human flourishing. Children grow up far healthier and well-adjusted when they grow up with their mom and their dad. They are more secure in their gender identity. They're less likely to experience poverty, do drugs, drop out of school and a load of other things.

But I know that we don't live in an ideal world. Life is messy, so if you've lost a spouse or you've been a part of a marriage that has failed for some reason, don't despair and don't beat yourself up. Sure, it'll be harder, but through the grace of God and supportive family and church family, you can do it.

**Finally, in Genesis, we see that marriage has a purpose far beyond “two people loving each other.”** Our society has bought into the idea of the romance-focused marriage. That the primary purpose of marriage to fulfill you sexually and make you happy with your soul-mate forever.

I hate to disappoint you, but this is not the primary Biblical design of marriage. Yes, I do hope romance is a part of your marriage. It's just a lousy foundation. Romance is fleeting. And the best way to sabotage a marriage is to make your marriage the point of your marriage.

Genesis tells us that marriage is intended to accomplish something in society. If you have children, then part of your purpose to work together to raise your kids to know and love Jesus. But whether you have kids or not, your marriage still extends beyond your marriage. You and your spouse are together to accomplish what you couldn't accomplish alone. You are suitable helpers for each other. After 30, 40, or 50 years of marriage what difference did it make to the world and to the Kingdom of God that you were together?

That's all we have time for today. Questions. Resources. Singleness. Pornography