

GENDER & IDENTITY

OPENING

Firstly – real people: this week – gender & identity. Next week – sexuality and attraction. This is not simply a topic “out there” (I made the mistake of phrasing it that way when announcing the series) but one “in here”. There will be those among us who are, at the least, not certain of their gender identity; I’m sure that some of the people here at WCC have experienced or do experience some measure of same-sex attraction. For those who don’t, most of you will have friends or family members who do, whether or not you know it. And many of you will be wondering what it would be like if you invited your trans friend, or the lesbian couple from down the road to WCC.

GRACE AND TRUTH

John 1 – **We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.**

- When we see a conflict between the Scriptures and culture, most of us fall short on at least one of these, and we tend only to speak about it when one overpowers the other.
 - Sometimes we simply present what we see as the truth, and don’t do so in a gracious way
 - Other times our desire to be gracious causes us to let go of the truth
 - We need to be clear – grace without the truth is not real grace – it’s cowardice and conflict avoidance; and truth without grace is not the truth – God’s love and grace are an integral part of the truth.
 - Particularly want to highlight that last bit. God’s truth isn’t like maths, where you can state it all factually in a textbook. This is why God could not be fully revealed in a code of laws, but only in a Person. You can’t separate out the love and grace from God’s truth: what you’d have left wouldn’t be true.
- For Jesus, “Grace and Truth” was not an either/or situation. Jesus ate with fishermen, zealots, thieves, tax collectors, Pharisees, and lepers. In eating with them, he affirmed their equal humanity. He knew what was in their hearts, and still he loved them – just as he does today. The Rich Young Ruler came to Jesus, and although his wealth had taken God’s first place in his heart, yet we read that Jesus looked at him and loved him.
- At the same time, we also see Jesus being exceptionally challenging
- How come people could hear it from Jesus, but we end up in arguments when we try to have those conversations today?
 - I suspect that much of it comes down to our imperfect love for people.
 - However, let’s be under no illusions – some people heard Jesus’s teachings and found them too hard to swallow – and left, grumbling. (John 6:60-66)
 - Perhaps it’s also that Jesus led a sinless life – we can cope with Jesus telling us we’re doing wrong, but we find it hard to hear it from a brother or sister who is also a sinner.

So – I’m going to teach through some of what the Scriptures say about gender and identity, and next week on sexuality. At its core, it is the same *theology* that the Church has taught for 2000 years, and the Jewish faith held to long before that, and as an evangelical church it is the view that derives from saying that the Scriptures are more authoritative than our culture – however, I don’t want to call it either “the historical view” or “the evangelical view”, because for significant periods of history and in large swathes of evangelicalism, it has been taught without listening and without love. (baggage)

I will add that there are some people who love Jesus whole-heartedly, have a high regard for the Scriptures, and disagree. This is actually the case with quite a lot of topics, not just ones around sex. However, I think it’s fair to say that none of the people who this Church looks to as teachers and preachers of the Word would agree that their arguments hold up. We disagree with respect and love, but we still disagree.

WHAT ABOUT THE SCRIPTURES?

So front and centre I want you to hear this from me as pastor – whether you’re already a part of WCC, thinking about it, listening to a random video that YouTube suggested to you, or a visitor coming to WCC for the first time, however you are or aren’t affected by today’s topic – you are welcome, and you share the same dignity as everyone else in the community – a child of God, falling short of the glory of God and yet incredibly precious to him. You are welcome to attend, to worship with us, and when we finally get to do these things again, you’re welcome to eat with us, walk with us, and to make the WCC community your home.

Fundamentally, we have all agreed to accept each other as we are – sinners saved by the grace of God, perhaps along with some who are sinners and are still deciding whether they want to believe and accept the grace of God. Our aim in this is that we all experience 100% grace – I’m sure we fall short, but that’s our aim, and we won’t be content with less than that.

In my previous role at Oxford Community Church, I was asked in various different ways whether we were an “affirming church”. I’ve not yet been asked that question directly here at WCC, but the same conversation has come up a few times. This is where the going gets less comfortable for some. Just as we don’t want to offer anything less than 100% grace, we also don’t want to offer anything less than 100% truth. There is much in the Scriptures that we affirm and which sits very well with our current culture. However, there are some things which we affirm which are not currently popular, and some things culture affirms that we don’t see aligning with the Scriptures. From the Scriptures:

GENESIS 1, 5 & 9, JAMES 3, JOHN 1, ROMANS 8, GALATIANS 3, 2 CORINTHIANS 6, MATTHEW 18

- Our primary identity in life is in relationship to God. **We are created, and we are image-bearers.** This means that we don’t ultimately choose our identity – we are given it. The idea of “be who you want to be” has some real positives to it: there are lots of artificial barriers that society or difficulties can throw up, and we shouldn’t allow those to limit us. But it falls down where it’s taken to extremes and seeks to make us the creator, reinventing God’s work.
- The word used for “create” in Genesis is used only by God.

GENESIS 2, MATTHEW 19, MARK 10

- **The sexes are not interchangeable.** When Adam was alone and it was not good, it wasn’t enough simply to make another of him. God made a new *kind* of human. This differentiation of men and women continues throughout the Scriptures. While Jesus and Paul underlined radically the equality-of-value of men and women, neither claimed that they were interchangeable. Frequently quoted: “no male no female” (Gal). Same author who consistently through Corinthians, Ephesians, both Timothies differentiates between man and woman in certain settings.
- This really matters – one question raised was why plastic surgery or laser eye surgery are OK and having gender reassignment surgery isn’t. The first thing I’d say is that I wouldn’t want to stand up and make a blanket statement like “all gender reassignment surgery is wrong”. Whatever I think, I’m not sure that those kind of statements, devoid of any engagement with the real people involved, are helpful to anyone. **But I would say** that reassignment surgery introduces an additional barrier between the identity God has given us, and the identity we try to live out.
- The question is sometimes raised – what about those who have an intersex condition or have ambiguous genitals? Don’t they prove that gender isn’t binary?
 - Raises an interesting point about how we see things as a society. Disability is a protected characteristic, and we talk about wanting to remove any stigma from disability, but call something a disability when somebody else doesn’t see it that way, and you’re in hot water.
 - So avoiding whether to call it a disability, it is still a medical condition (or a set of medical conditions) which change an otherwise very clear genetically-unambiguous norm.
- Worth noting that Jesus did talk about this, in Matthew 19. Three types of eunuch: those born that way, those made that way by others, those who choose to live that way. What is that first category? Those born without the physical ability to have normal sexual relations.

1 CORINTHIANS 6

- **What we do with our bodies really matters** – they are a part of our being. So in cases of body vs mind, it shouldn't simply be the case that the mind wins out. Sometimes we need to bring our body into line (self-control) but at other times it's our mind that needs to be brought into line – for instance, not starving someone with body dysmorphia because they think they're fat.
- When somebody experiences gender dysphoria, the automatic assumption is now that their bodies are out of touch with the "reality" of their mind; but why do we assume that this is the right way around? Simply because the opposite – convincing somebody that they are something they don't want to be – is now considered culturally unacceptable.

PROVERBS 31, JUDGES 4

- **There are different ways of expressing masculinity and femininity.**
- So far I've spoken mostly about when people feel their body doesn't line up with their mind.
- However for some, it's not about their body at all, but simply about their sense of self. Hence some trans men and trans women don't feel the need to dress differently, take medication, or think about surgery. It's hard to get at what this is about. If gender isn't linked to biological sex, and if (as is now commonly held to be true) no roles or occupations should be off-limits to either gender, what does it mean for someone to say that they identify as trans or non-binary, but that they're happy with your body? What aspect of masculinity or femininity are they identifying with?

You wake up wearing baggy grey sweatpants and a T-shirt. As you walk into your kitchen to prepare breakfast, you're expressing an androgynous-to-slightly-masculine gender. However, you see your partner in the kitchen and decide to prowl in like Halle Berry from Catwoman, then you are expressing much more femininely. You pour a bowl of cereal, wrap your fist around a spoon like a Viking, and start shovelling Fruit Loops into your face, and all-of-a-sudden you're bumping up your levels of masculinity. After breakfast, you skip back into your bedroom and playfully place varying outfits in front of you, pleading with your partner to help you decide what to wear. You're feminine again. (source: Sam Killerman, genderbread.org)

- In part, we've historically pigeonholed what men and women should be and do so that some feel that how they long to live is incompatible with their current gender. We need to give people confidence to express manhood and womanhood in different ways - but without treating the two as interchangeable. Eg Deborah - v rare for a woman to lead (judge) Israel, but she did - never claimed to be a man, but fulfilled what was generally seen as a man's role.
- But loop back – some of it is our desire to define our identity rather than discover it. People talk about finding out who they really are as though they are starting from a blank sheet, but scripturally that isn't the case.

SO WHAT?

- The way that we live as Christians is supposed to be loving and open, without pretences and without condemning others. We're committed to that as a church.
 - That should make it a really safe place for people to say if they are struggling with conflict between their body and their sense of self. I'd love this to be a community where people feel free to do that.
 - The fact is, we don't live like that in a lot of areas. There are lots of things we all keep hidden from each other. And the truth is, that nearly always causes us harm. 1 John 1 talks about "walking in the light" – i.e. not hiding things in the shadows.
 - I'd like to set this out as a goal – we should be a place where that kind of conversation could happen without anyone jumping to conclusions or passing judgment.
- As Christians, we also commit to lifelong change in any place where our lives don't line up with God's intent – and that means using the plumbline of the Scriptures.
 - So as Christians, we don't get to say, "this part of my life is off-limits – I'm going to do what I like", because we claim Jesus Christ as our Lord.

- But God takes things at His pace, not ours – and he is often way more patient and gentle than we humans want to be. So just because something in someone else’s life doesn’t line up to the Scriptures, it doesn’t necessarily mean that right now that’s the thing to address. Jesus took his time addressing Simon Peter’s rash impulses, and James & John’s fiery temper.
- So if you’re well-embedded in the community and start to talk about questioning your gender, you should be able to expect continued love and a lack of judgment, but over time you should also expect those closest to you to ask some searching questions and occasionally be provocative. It’s our call – “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.” (Col 3:16)
 - And others should keep their views to themselves and trust those who are more closely involved. We wouldn’t all expect to get involved in marriage counselling if there’s a couple who are in need of that help.
- If you’re a transgender or non-binary visitor walking through the doors, you shouldn’t expect anyone to make any comment on your gender at all. If you stick around and increasingly become part of the community, you’d expect increasingly for other believers to be able to speak into your life – in a context of love and relationship, not judgment.

IN CLOSING

If pastorally we want to be gentle, respectful, patient, why teach on it on a Sunday?

- Importance of boundaries. Some people undoubtedly experience genuine gender dysphoria. But 90+% of people who experience some form of desire to be another gender in their youth or childhood revert back to being comfortable with the gender that matches their body – this has been the finding of scientific research over the years. However, if we take away any sense of there being a “norm”, any sense of boundaries, what in most cases is the result of a surge of hormones or processing our upbringing can be interpreted as something much more.
- Again, 100% love and 100% truth. We hold Scripture to be true, and it’s not loving to diminish what they teach simply because it can be hard to hear.

There is an exercise of faith which is very easy for some and harder for others. That faith is to accept that the way God made us is better than our own reinventions, however fitting or comfortable they might feel. God reminds us again and again throughout the Scriptures that he is the Creator, we are the creation; and he invites us to trust him in that.

We’re going to sing a song now which declares that truth – “I am who you say I am”.