

Genesis 2:15-25

An ordered relationship

Did you know that you had a worldview? It's a bit like having an appendix. Everyone is born with an appendix but unless something goes badly wrong you are not really aware of it. Well, you also have a worldview, but most of the time you are not aware of it.

A worldview is essentially what makes up your most basic beliefs and assumptions about the way things are. The world we live in is like this because . . . and what you say next is your worldview.

So how you would speak to someone who has been bereaved, what you think about why innocent people suffer, what you hope your children will get out of life, whether you ever pray . . . all these things will depend on your worldview, how you explain the way things are.

The fantastic thing about all this for Christians is that we have been given God's worldview. We have got the worldview of the one who made the world. That is really what the first three chapters – or may be the first eleven chapters – of Genesis are all about.

Why is the world so beautiful and also so dangerous? Why are people so wonderful and also so evil? Why do we do things we wish we didn't? Why is death and loss so painful? Why is there such a powerful attraction between male and female?

Here we find explanations – not easy pat answers, but explanations – that make sense of those big questions.

Now, one of the characteristics of the Bible's worldview as revealed in Genesis is that God has created all sorts of boundaries and distinctions. There is a fundamental distinction between the creator and what is created. There is separation between earth and sea and sky, between day and night. There is a difference between work and rest. There are distinctions between man and animals. There is a clear distinction between good and evil. And there are distinctions – created distinctions – between male and female: which is our theme for today.

Other religions challenge every one of these distinctions, and so does our own secular world-view of 21st-century Britain. God and creation, good and evil, night and day: they're all blurred. The most recent example is the desire to create animal-human hybrid embryos. And we all know that the distinction between male and female has been muddled and blurred in myriad ways.

So what should it mean to be male and female? Last week we heard those great words, 'In the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.' What does that mean? Biblically speaking, what does it mean to be male as opposed to female, or female as opposed to male? Or isn't there any difference?

These are big and crucial questions, and whether we ask them consciously or not, we all have answers to them, answers we have picked up from our parents, from our peers, from the world around us . . . or from the Bible.

I remember my older boys telling me, when they were in their early teens, that every other boy in their classes at school was surfing the internet for pornography. What were those boys learning about what it means to be female?

A mother at church showed me the magazines purporting to be for girls in their late teens, and therefore actually read by girls of 10 and 11, and I could hardly believe what I read. What were those girls learning about what it means to be female and how they should make themselves attractive to a man?

What about you? What do you believe about being male or female, and where did you get those beliefs from? Who gave you your worldview?

Christians have been given the truth from the one who made us; Genesis gives us God's worldview; so let's understand it and value it and teach it.

We'll look at what it tells us about male and female under three headings, three words: equality, complementarity and order. As male and female we are equal in our relationship to God, we are complementary in the way we relate to one another, and that relationship has a built-in male-female order.

Equality

Genesis chapter 1 verse 27:

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

If that phrase 'the image of God' means one thing above all, it means, as we heard last week, that mankind can have a relationship with God. The point I want to add today – a point which is stressed by the writer's addition of 'male and female he created them' – is that men and women are equally able to have this relationship with God because they are equally created in his image. It's a double equality we have been given: as those created in God's image we are equal in created dignity and worth, and we are equal in being made for a relationship with our creator.

This fundamental equality is picked up in a famous passage in the New Testament, Galatians chapter 3 verse 28:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (v.26-28)

Actually, a literal translation is 'neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male *and* female' – a deliberate harking back to the creation account.

'Sons of God' means 'fellow-heirs with Christ' – an astonishing privilege. So Paul's point is that whatever your religious background, whatever your social background, whatever your sex, there is no difference. Men and women, boys and girls, are fundamentally equal. We are all, uniquely and equally, made in God's image and therefore able to enjoy the full rights of a relationship with him.

This is enormously important. It means that everyone matters.

Any school teacher or school governor will have had a certain phrase drilled into them over the past few years: 'Every child matters'.

Every child matters. Absolutely. But I want to add to this. Every boy matters and every girl matters. Every man matters and every woman matters. Every black man matters. Every child born with cerebral palsy matters. Every unborn child about to be disposed of matters. Every old person worrying about being done away with by so-called euthanasia matters.

Everyone matters. So any thinking or practice that places more value on one type of person than another is an abhorrence to God. In particular, anything that devalues girls and women is an abhorrence to God.

That would include the obvious things like rape and wife-beating. It will include the more hidden things like internet pornography – many of us here will have indulged in that. It will include the monstrous practice common in several countries of aborting unborn girls or killing girl babies in preference to boys. Someone has calculated that there are something like 37,000,000 missing girls in India, lost to preferential abortion and infanticide. It will include the Islamic practice of counting one man's testimony in court as more valuable than that of four women.

Christians believe that men and women have a fundamental equality. That is why Christians were the ones who spear-headed reforms in this country such as education for girls, proper medical care for women, and so on. That is why, in numerous places and cultures around the world, whenever the gospel has invaded and spread the lot of women has improved.

Genesis chapters 1 and 2 are good news for women . . . and for men.

That's a word about equality. What about the differences? Assuming we are different – and not everyone does – in what does that difference consist?

This brings us to our second word: complementarity.

Complementarity

There is a popular book which set out to explain male-female differences called *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus*. Someone writing in a Christian newspaper asked whether we could reword the title thus: *Men are from Mars, women are from Venus, but some men are from Venus and some women are from Mars, and all of God's children have Mars and Venus qualities within them, so why not just say that men and women are from the earth and let's get about the business of developing the unique God-given Mars/Venus qualities that God has given all of us for the sake of the Kingdom.*

It's a witty and very revealing comment. Underneath it lies a basic assumption which is this: there is no fundamental difference between male and female. We all have so-called male and female qualities, but there is no necessary male-female difference. That assumption, I want to say, is both wrong and deeply damaging.

To understand the male-female distinction, let's get back into the story in Genesis 2.

Adam has been created and has been given a job to do: to tend and develop and nurture the creation. And in that context, after having declared how very good his creation is, God suddenly says that something is not good. Something is missing. "It is not good for the man to be alone," God says. The job is too big for him. (So much for male chauvinism.)

He needs a helper. He needs a helper so that together they can fulfil the mandate given them by the creator.

And only the right helper will do. The writer paints such a poignant picture as Adam names the animals one by one – as if wondering whether any of them might do – but, we read, for Adam no suitable helper was found.

We need to imagine Adam wandering through the garden, searching and lamenting, “I need a woman! I need a woman!”

And God makes him one. Adam’s response, his outburst, is one of pure joy. Literally, it is something like, “This time! This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh! This shall be called a woman, for from a man was she taken, this one!” At last! This is what I’ve been waiting for.

And please note – obvious point – she is a woman. She is not an animal. Nor is she another man. She is a woman: equal but different.

And that is what we mean by complementary: equal and different. The animals are different. But they won’t do. Another man would be equal. But God doesn’t give Adam a man. He gives him the only one who can be both equal and different, who can complement him: he gives him a woman.

Have a look again at verse 18:

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

The phrase ‘suitable for him’ – I am told – means something like ‘as opposite him’ or ‘like opposite him’. Like him but not the same as him. Equal to him but different from him. Complementary to him.

“Why can’t a woman be more like a man?”, asks Henry Higgins. Because God has made her different. She is meant to be different, not the same. God has made her that way.

So what is the difference? How is this difference and complementarity to be expressed?

And here we need to follow up the implications of this creation account. For what Genesis gives us in summary and essence the rest of the Bible develops. Whenever the subject of marriage or divorce or men and women in the church-family is aired, whether it be from Jesus or Paul, we are taken back to these first three chapters of Genesis. And what we find is that the fundamental difference between us is not a difference of attributes or qualities, and certainly not a difference of value or worth, but a difference of relationship and of function and of role. The difference consists in how men relate to women and how women relate to men.

Which brings us to our third word: order.

Order

A few years ago I happened to catch part of Radio 4’s ‘Woman’s Hour’ when the presenter, Jenni Murray, was speaking about male-female relationships and referring to herself and her partner in particular. She was asked the question, “Do you see any difference, then, between men and women?” Her reply was, “Only in the bedroom.”

That is to say, the differences are purely physical.

The Bible sees it differently. The New Testament specifies three differences between Adam and Eve, which are these: the man was formed first, the woman was formed for the man, and the woman was made from the man. And to make it clear, it adds that it was not the other way round. In other words, this order is deliberate on the creator’s part, not accidental, and it is not reversible.

This is where the whole notion of headship is founded: in creation. It is because of this creation order that Paul can say, in 1 Corinthians chapter 11, that man is the head of woman, and in Ephesians chapter 5, that the husband is the head of the wife. So we are equal and complementary, and this complementary relationship is expressed in a created order in which the man is the head.

Paul explicitly likens this to the Holy Trinity in which God is the head of Christ. So just as the Son submits to the Father, but never the Father to the Son, yet they are fully and equally God, so too with God’s image bearers: a wife may submit to her husband without in any way being inferior. So we can talk about headship and submission and order . . . and complementarity and equality . . . all in the same breath.

I hope that makes sense to you. I realise that while probably the majority of us here believe and rejoice in this, not everyone does and some will struggle with this. And while I don’t want to apologise for the Bible’s presentation, I do want to encourage us to talk freely and openly about our questions.

As it happens, we will be teaching on male and female in marriage on Sunday evening in a couple of weeks’ time, so I don’t want to anticipate that too much. And for today and this series I am really trying to help us think through what it means to have a Biblical worldview.

So let me finish with a few words of encouragement to men and to women to rejoice in this wonderful God-given created difference, and live it out.

Christian husbands and fathers: are we giving the godly lead which we have been called to give? Are we loving and serving our wives to encourage them to grow in Christlikeness? Are we talking with our children about the faith? Do we take a lead in family devotions appropriate to the age of the

family? Back at St John's a number of women said to me that there was nothing they would have loved more than for their husbands to take more of a spiritual lead at home.

Are we teaching our boys anything about what it should mean for them to become men in a few years' time? How are we helping our daughters to learn what it means to be female? They will be taught at school and in the playground and by the television and by the internet. Who is going to give them a positive worldview and a Biblical one if we don't?

We'll see next week that Adam was an abdicator, and I suggest that we men, by and large, follow in his steps. By inclination, I certainly do. We leave it up to our wives. So often it's the women who go to the prayer meetings, who pray with the children, who keep some spiritual life alive in the family. I'm generalising, of course, but do you see any truth in that?

Let me stress, this is not about being macho, tough and brawny. It's not about going off to the woods to hug trees. It's not about fitting any stereotype. It's about gladly taking the responsibility God has given us.

Christian wives and mothers: be the helper God made you to be. Respect and encourage your husbands. Help them to take the responsibility which God has given them. Work with them, in partnership, to fulfil the task which God has given you to do together. Encourage men to be men.

Again, this is not about fulfilling the stereotypes. Women don't have to be weak, diminutive and blandly pretty. No one is asking anyone to be a doormat – I hope. Strong women are a blessing. Your gifts, abilities and strong opinions are highly valued.

It's about rejoicing in the different and complementary role God has given you – and supporting your husbands as they fulfil theirs.

Really, for all of us, it's about being more like Christ, if in slightly different ways. Do you want to know what it means to be a godly man? Follow Jesus who gave up his life for the sake of his bride, the church.

As a woman, do you want to know what godly submission should look like? Look at how Jesus submitted himself to his Father's will so that together, as Father and Son with the Holy Spirit, they fulfilled the eternal plan of God for the salvation of the world.

Jesus, of course, is the image of the invisible God: he is the only ever perfect human being. It is not surprising, therefore, that to learn what it truly means to be human, male human or female human, we need to look to him.

In the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. Equal, complementary, ordered: fearfully and wonderfully made.

God help us, men and women, to become what he created us to be.