DEFINING TERMS

Some cultures view women as fragile and in need of constant shielding from the elements, while others see them as the burden bearers who must shoulder every weight. Men may be viewed as worthy of all deference simply because they are male, or in other contexts, as incidental participants in the reproduction process. If you are from a culture that views the gender roles one way, it is not uncommon to view an alternative as morally repugnant. But is the Bible silent on the topic of gender?

First, some definitions will help facilitate this conversation. At a biological level, most people are born either male or female—we may refer to this as someone’s biological sex. The binary designation of biological sex coheres with the creation account in Genesis 1:27 and will be referenced in this lesson. Then comes the concept of gender, which is related to biological sex. A part of the challenge when speaking of gender is the conflation of gender roles (with its attendant gender attributes) and gender identity.

Gender roles refer to the way a society defines the behaviors associated with each biological sex. What is referred to as gender identity has to do with the way an individual views themselves as aligning with society’s definition of their gender role.

In this lesson, we shall focus our attention on the gender roles and attributes that accompany the binary biological sex designations created by God. In the Bible, God presents the archetypes of male and female first to reveal His own character as well as to provide principles to guide the citizens of His kingdom.
Write out Genesis 1:26–28 from the Bible translation of your choice. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
BIBLICAL FEMININITY

Different cultures have different ways of understanding the genders. When it comes to femininity, they range from feministic self-sufficiency to effeminate, helpless, second-class citizenship. Both are unbiblical pictures. One seeks to create a dependent, weak (or effeminate) gender while the other reacts by painting an aggressive, non-gendered identity. In Scripture, God affirms the female gender attributes by reference to Himself in that they reveal aspects of His character.

Word pictures are used to describe the heart (or the emotional burden) of God. Isaiah 66:13 likens God’s comfort to the comfort of a mother. Isaiah 42:14 likens God’s pain and passion to that of a woman experiencing labor pains. Paul uses the same illustration for himself in Galatians 4:19. The woman’s ability to create through childbirth and the womb motif are used in Isaiah 66:9, Psalm 71:6, and Psalm 22:9, 10. Though a mother’s love is great, Isaiah 49:15 contrasts it with the love of God, extolling His compassion and lovingkindness above any human love for a child.

The Scripture testimony is not limited to human mothers but also uses maternal examples from the animal world. Deuteronomy 32:11 uses the motif of a mother eagle destroying her nest to teach her offspring to fly, while using her wings as a means of safety, protection, and forbearance. Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34 describe Christ’s statement of God’s tender love to gather His children together like a mother hen. Not only highlighting the passion of protection and love, Hosea 13:8 likens God’s heart to the passion and fury of a mother bear that is bereaved of her cubs.

One of the clearest passages on ideal femininity is found in Proverbs 31. Here the traditional virtues of beauty, diligence, and wisdom are highlighted. A further look into the passage shows the woman to be entrepreneurial, embodying the characteristics of diligence, sacrifice, insight, intelligence, enterprise, initiative, innovation, and courage.

These pictures do not posit a passive gender, but one that is merciful, tender, and patient, as well as just, energetic, and strong. These characteristics are not exclusive to the female gender, where one gender is completely absent of them while the other is their fullest manifestation. Rather the genders reveal different embodiments of God’s character and are best revealed together in the form of a union of the two, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.
BIBLICAL MASCULINITY

Similar to femininity, masculinity has been understood in different ways in different cultures. Masculinity ranges from dominating authoritarianism to repression of any forceful, active trait. One caricature seeks to create a dependent non-gendered identity, eschewing any traditionally male trait. The other caricature swings to the other extreme, where it accentuates one male trait at the expense of another, ranging from vain metrosexuals and musky lumbersexuals to assertive, alpha, testosterone-fueled meatheads and shiny, ostentatious ubersexuals. Once again, God, in the Bible, uses the motif of the male and its permutations of father, son, brother, and husband to portray Himself in relation to His people.

It is emphatically clear in Scripture that males are not to dominate over and abuse females in any way (and vice versa). There are many who twist the tenets of Scripture to support a misogynistic chauvinism and an exaggerated sense of machismo, or masculine pride. A subsection in Ephesians 5 starts with verse 21, where husbands and wives are to submit to each other. This is one of the foundations for romantic relationships: mutual submission. In verse 22, wives are instructed to submit to their husbands. The connotation for submission here is mutual respect, deference, and a yielding. It is clear that husbands are to be the heads of households, just as Christ is the head of the church (v. 23). Husbands are instructed to lead their families through love, and not just any love, but to model love the way that Christ loves the church (v. 25) and as men love themselves, for their spouses are in fact a part of themselves (v. 28). So, clearly the love of Christ is the masculine model that should be followed.

Psalm 103:8–14 portrays the tenderness of God the Father. Verses 8–10 mention both His anger and His mercy. The psalmist then uses the vertical distance between heaven and earth and the horizontal distance between east and west to describe the role of God’s mercy in removing our sins. It climaxes with the imagery of a father having pity upon his children in knowing their weaknesses and their origins (vv. 13, 14). More than merely strength of body, there is also strength of character and love are embodied in biblical manliness.

The providence and tender care of God the Father is highlighted in both the Old and New Testaments. This is done by Moses (Deut. 32:6), David (1 Chron. 29:10), Isaiah (Isa. 63:16; 64:8), Malachi (Mal. 2:10), and even God Himself (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 89:26; Jer. 3:19). Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, uses the title “heavenly Father” or “Father in heaven” multiple times (Matt. 5:16, 45, 48; 6:1, 7–11, 26, 32; 7:21), and on many other occasions. In fact, Jesus always addresses God as “Father (see, for example, John 17). The only “exception” is His quotation of Psalm 22:1 while on the cross. Paul also describes God as “Father” in Hebrews 12:7–10 where God deals with His children through discipline and correction that they might partake of His holiness. Isaiah 40:11 points to God’s gentleness and tenderness with providence and strength. Paul uses the motif of masculinity in 1 Corinthians 16:13, where he writes, “Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong” (16:13). The Greek root of the phrase “be brave” is andrizomai, which means to be brave like a man. The character traits of bravery, faithfulness, strength, and steadfastness are intertwined with the male gender.
inSpect

What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Proverbs 31:19–31
Isaiah 66:13; 42:14; 49:15
Psalm 103:8–14
Ephesians 5:22–28
Matthew 6:7–11; 25–30
Isaiah 40:11
1 Corinthians 16:13

What other verses come to mind in connection with gender in Scripture?

Review your memorized verse from Genesis 1:26–28.
What God asks of us is beyond our human capacity to accomplish! This ought to bring us to our knees in humble supplication to the omnipotent Creator-Redeemer, that He might fulfill His law in us. Instead, we often find ourselves diminishing the standards God has set forth in His Word to match our lowly human attainments. Rather than looking to Scripture as defining how we ought to live, we substitute our natural inclinations or that which we observe in nature as normative. For us as Christians, to do this is almost pagan and amounts to accepting a form of godliness but completely denying its power to make us like God. God does not just want us to act like Christians, but He wants us to be like Christ.

At the declaration of His intention to create humanity, God was clear that they were to be made in His image. In their maleness and female-ness, humanity was created to reflect aspects of God’s characters. A man alone would not suffice, nor would a woman alone. Two men or two women would not fit the bill. To fully bear the image of God, humanity had to exist as male and female.

The reality is that the existence of same-sex attraction is the result of our sin-damaged nature. It is not the only result, nor the worst result. However, man-man and woman-woman sexual intercourse is unequivocally condemned in Scripture and is one of the few sins labeled an “abomination” (Lev. 18:22; 20:13). It is also one among many sins that will exclude people from the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9–11).

Some suggest that God is only interested in the innate conceptual attributes of a sexual relationship. But it is not only about the quality of the relationship itself, in terms of commitment, duty, affection, and love. There is the structural prerequisite of different-ness, namely in gender, that God has formally created in the creation order of sexuality.

One way of humanity’s understanding of the divine is through the means of marriage and sexuality. In the revelation of one gender, a need for the understanding of the other is created. The incompleteness of the self apart from relationship, and the inadequacy of the singular gender alone is the clearest revelation of need of the other gender. This concept does away with misogyny, misandry, and agenderism.

The Bible points to the gender attributes of both male and female as reflective of Him. However, these attributes may not necessarily be manifested in a particular male or female life. A man may find himself far from the servant leader ideal, and a woman may find that she is not a Proverbs 31 woman. And this may cause some to despair. Moreover, those who may experience same sex-attraction, while acknowledging God’s ideal of sexual difference for marital sexuality, sometimes have their struggle compounded by social stigma.

Sadly, the church has too often responded poorly to those who struggle with these feelings. Christians are called not to despise those of same-sex attraction, but to welcome and encourage them as they seek to live a morally pure Christian life—as we should do with anyone struggling with any sinful urge.

We are all sinners in need of a Savior and through dialogue, gentleness, forbearance, and patience the gospel of hope must be communicated and allow the Holy Spirit to change the heart. We must live by Christ-like example, embracing sinners and challenging un-Christian attitudes that members display toward sexually deviance.

God’s ideal for His people is higher than the highest human thought can reach. We cannot of ourselves attain to His standard for the citizens of His kingdom. But that is precisely why we need Jesus! He has never intended that we should do His will independent of His strength, but His strength is made perfect in our weakness. By His strength, we may be representatives of a higher-order society even while here on earth. Will we invite Jesus to transform us into the men and women who will be reflectors of His image in this sin-sick world? And will we be to others a harbinger of hope as they pursue a relationship with Jesus?
“God made from the man a woman, to be a companion and helpmeet for him, to be one with him, to cheer, encourage, and bless him, he in his turn to be her strong helper. All who enter into matrimonial relations with a holy purpose—the husband to obtain the pure affections of a woman’s heart, the wife to soften and improve her husband’s character and give it completeness—fulfill God’s purpose for them.

“Christ came not to destroy this institution, but to restore it to its original sanctity and elevation. He came to restore the moral image of God in man, and He began His work by sanctioning the marriage relation.

“He who gave Eve to Adam as a helpmeet performed His first miracle at a marriage festival. In the festal hall where friends and kindred rejoiced together, Christ began His public ministry. Thus He sanctioned marriage, recognizing it as an institution that He Himself had established. He ordained that men and women should be united in holy wedlock, to rear families whose members, crowned with honor, should be recognized as members of the family above.

“The divine love emanating from Christ never destroys human love, but includes it. By it human love is refined and purified, elevated and ennobled. Human love can never bear its precious fruit until it is united with the divine nature and trained to grow heavenward. Jesus wants to see happy marriages, happy firesides.

“Like every other one of God’s good gifts entrusted to the keeping of humanity, marriage has been perverted by sin; but it is the purpose of the gospel to restore its purity and beauty. . .

“The grace of Christ, and this alone, can make this institution what God designed it should be—an agent for the blessing and uplifting of humanity. And thus the families of earth, in their unity and peace and love, may represent the family of heaven.

“The condition of society presents a sad comment upon Heaven’s ideal of this sacred relation. Yet even for those who have found bitterness and disappointment where they had hoped for companionship and joy, the gospel of Christ offers a solace. . .

“In the marriage relation there is a very important step taken—the blending of two lives into one. . . It is in accord with the will of God that man and wife should be linked together in His work, to carry it forward in a wholeness and a holiness. They can do this.

“The blessing of God in the home where this union shall exist is as the sunshine of heaven, because it is the Lord’s ordained will that man and wife should be linked together in holy bonds of union, under Jesus Christ, with Him to control, and His spirit to guide. . .

“God wants the home to be the happiest place on earth, the very symbol of the home in heaven. Bearing the marriage responsibilities in the home, linking their interests with Jesus Christ, leaning upon His arm and His assurance, husband and wife may share a happiness in this union that angels of God commend.

“My Dear Brother and Sister: You have united in a lifelong covenant. Your education in married life has begun. The first year of married life is a year of experience, a year in which husband and wife learn each other’s different traits of character, as a child learns lessons in school. In this, the first year of your married life, let there be no chapters that will mar your future happiness. . .

“My brother, your wife’s time and strength and happiness are now bound up with yours. Your influence over her may be a savor of life unto life or of death unto death. Be very careful not to spoil her life.

“My sister, you are now to learn your first practical lessons in regard to the responsibilities of married life. Be sure to learn these lessons faithfully day by day. . . Guard constantly against giving way to selfishness.

“In your life union your affections are to be tributary to each other’s happiness. Each is to minister to the happiness of the other. This is the will of God concerning you. But while you are to blend as one, neither of you is to lose his or her individuality in the other. God is the owner of your individuality. Of Him you are to ask: What is right? What is wrong? How may I best fulfill the purpose of my creation? (Ellen White, The Adventist Home, 99–103.)
inQuire

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Where do you see the issues of the gender discussion today?

How have you been involved in these discussions?

Where are areas that Scripture is fully embraced in society regarding this topic?

Where are areas that Scripture is fully rejected by society regarding this topic?

How does gender impact the way you interact with God?

Where are areas that the church can improve in interacting with same sex attracted individuals?

What is at stake in the debate regarding homosexuality?

In what way does Jesus inspire you to balance standing for principle as well as embracing with compassion?