

Finding Our Identity in the *Imago Dei*

What the Image of God Tells Us
about Who We Are

By Kathy Myatt

“What does it mean to be a woman?” I asked my friend Beth. Astonished by the question, she pointed to herself and said, “It means to be me—I am a woman!” Evidently it had never crossed her mind to doubt her femininity or her essential identity. To her, being female was not a role, a look, or a style. It was not a set of confining attributes. It was a joyful freedom. I was envious of her.

The question of identity has become a hot social and political issue. New terms and definitions have muddled the already-murky water as the debate over women and men’s roles and identities continues to reverberate throughout the church. One common accusation is that going against traditional roles for women and men constitutes a violation of sound biblical teaching, which will lead to the denial of biblical authority, followed by a rapid descent into theological liberalism. But are gender-based roles biblical? Do they define what a woman or man *is*? If a

woman does not fit within a particular role, is she less of a woman? A look at the original *imago dei*, or the image of God, may make things clearer.

First, how can we approach the Bible with integrity and “handle accurately the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15)? We know the Bible is an ancient book, written and compiled over 1500 years in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) by multiple authors. The miracle is that it hangs together in a unity of thought that is supernaturally inspired by God. The challenge is that many of us are not conversant with these ancient languages, nor are we aware of the cultural norms surrounding God’s interactions with the Jewish nation thousands of years ago. Many of us may also not understand the influence of Gnostic thought as it began to pervade the church and infect those who assembled the books of the Bible, numbered its verses, and eventually translated it into modern English.



As missionaries in Brazil, my husband and I have noticed differences in the way certain verses have been translated into Portuguese compared to their translation into English. One example is the simple switch from Jesus being described as the “Word of God” in English translations, to being called the “Verb of God” in Portuguese translations. It gives a different slant, doesn’t it? When the term “inerrancy” is used for the final authority of Scripture, it refers to the original texts and the way those who heard its teachings would have understood them *in their time*. It does not refer to translations or modern cultural norms which are often superimposed on them. In order to respect inerrancy, we must be meticulous in our study of the Word as it was written and not look to use it to support an opinion we already hold or prefer.

With that in mind, let us answer the question: where do we derive our identity? The short answer: from

God. In the beginning God created us, male and female he created us in his own image, “in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). We are being described as having been made “in” God’s image; here we find the preposition “b” in Hebrew, which is translated to “with regard to, or as” in English, describing the capacity in which one *behaves*.¹

Further, “Then the Lord God said, “it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper corresponding to him” (Gen. 2:18). The word “helper” here is “*ezer kenegdo*” in Hebrew; *ezer* refers to someone who brings aid that the recipient badly needs but is unable to provide for himself. This can be military aid, or someone with superior knowledge or ability, as in God’s aid to Israel.² Of the twenty-one times that the word appears in the Old Testament, it is used sixteen times to refer to God himself.³ It

does not describe someone of subordinate or inferior status. The notion that women were created to assist men with their agendas, or their exclusive callings, is to misunderstand what is being said here. God directed the man and woman to rule over creation and to be fruitful and multiply, and the man could not accomplish these tasks without the woman equally contributing.

Psalms 118:7 ties it all together: “The Lord is on my side as my helper.” We are to view ourselves (female and male) powerfully as God’s image, representing him to creation and to one another. We are not God, but we act as he directs in the world, to exercise rule, to emulate his character, to be his ambassador, as sons and daughters of God, the image of family.

Our worth and dignity come from this identity and cannot be lost. This is true of all of humanity, not just Christians. As a psychiatric nurse practitioner, this truth helps me to see my patients through God’s eyes. When they believe they have no value, I ask them to trust my perception until it can become their own. When Christians fall for the lie that they have no value, not only have they lost sight of their creation, but they are also—without realizing it—disbelieving the fullness of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Even in the early church, there were arguments about what men needed to do to be considered “true believers,” including things like circumcision. Yet what did Paul say? “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith

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working through love” (Gal. 5:6). **There is nothing we can add to his work, and nothing we can take away from it. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise (Eph. 1:13–14).**

God has gifted believers to build up his body, the church (Rom. 12:4–9; 1 Cor. 14:12). As one body, we have many members, and each member receives gifts and may have different callings. There is no mention of women being limited to certain functions within the Bible. In fact, both the Old Testament and the New highlight women in leadership as prophets, judges, teachers, and evangelists (Jdg. 4:4, 2 Kings 22:14, Lk. 2:38, Acts 2:17–18, Acts 21:9). They prayed publicly, led worship (Ex. 15:21), ministered to the poor (Pr. 31:20), financed Jesus’s ministry (Lk. 8:3), and were the first witnesses to the resurrection (Matt. 28:1–10, Lk. 24:8–10). Proverbs 31 describes a woman of valor as owning her own businesses (v. 18, 24), caring for her household (v. 15, 21), making independent financial decisions (v. 16), and being a source of wisdom and strength to her husband and community (v. 20, 26, 28). She is hardly the caricature of women as emotionally unstable, weak, and in need of male guidance to function.

It’s often asserted that women and men are spiritually equal before God, but that we are given different roles—men for leadership and women for submission. Does the Bible prescribe roles for women or men? Quite the opposite; Galatians 3:28 does away with culturally imposed roles for slaves and free, male and female, Jews and Greeks because, as Paul states “you are all one in Christ Jesus.” What the Bible does teach, and Jesus reiterates, is that believers are to love one another, to serve one another, to submit to one another, to put one another’s interests higher than their own (Lev. 19:18, Jn. 13:34, Rom. 12:10, Rom. 12:13, Eph. 5:21, Phil. 2:4). Husbands are to love their wives sacrificially and tenderly; wives are to walk in sync with their husbands in mutual respect and care. There is to be no power struggle or hierarchy. Notice: “but Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you.’” (Matt. 20:25–26a). For one person to demand that another “submit” is a Gentile move, an abuse of power. Submission is a freely offered gift, one that is not limited to women or men.

If not roles, then is there some kind of image we are to conform to in order to be properly masculine or feminine? While this question involves many historic and cultural issues as believers sought to grow in grace, there are no universal mandates. Why? These

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would be equivalent to establishing another law: “You must be like this in order to be acceptable.” Paul was outraged at the Galatians for re-establishing rules to conform to rather than remaining entirely in grace. Our worth and identity do not come from so-called biblical manhood or womanhood. They come from our creation in the image of God, and Jesus’s completed work on the cross. Paul exhorts the Galatians, “it was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1).

“Do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.” Do not allow yourself to be put into a straitjacket that does not come from God or how you must behave as a woman or man. There is plenty we are to do as the image of God in the world and in our quest for sanctification. We are to grow in faith, love, and hope. We are never to hold up a standard to try to measure ourselves by that which comes from man-made rules — especially culturally based, transitory ones, at that. Are you masculine enough? Feminine enough? What is this “enough” but a works-based criteria for acceptability? Is this not a new kind of law?

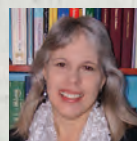
If there are no gender-based roles or defined behaviors for women and men, does that mean that women and men are the same or interchangeable, that gender doesn’t matter? No. Remember that the *Imago Dei* is active, having to do with our behavior in the world, in relation to each other, and toward God. The fact that we are created female and male in God’s triune image enables us to enjoy the unity as well as the diversity of his being. Neither aspect is more ultimate than the other, just as there is no hierarchy in the Trinity. Rather than looking to build our identities on gender-based rules or roles, we must turn back to the *Imago Dei* and to Christ’s work on the cross.

How can we live in the joyful freedom of our individuality as women and men created in the image of God? By pursuing integrity and recognizing our value which was set before us at creation. Seeing ourselves and each other as God does means we are

no longer bound to gender-based cultural rules. We are able to grow in love, work to promote the growth and well-being of others, whether that be a child, a friend, a partner, female or male in accordance with our gifts and callings. We are to represent God’s nature to one another, and to the world. That is what we were made for, and the foundation of our identities.

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1. Carmen Imes, *Being God’s Image* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023), 4.
2. Imes, 40.
3. Alice Matthews, *Gender Roles and the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 39.



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