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Mutuality

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To Be A Woman

Women are Valued by God

by Sheri Bradley

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Who Do You Say I Am?

by Terquoise Ebony Gwyn

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Body Designed to Kill

by Steph Penny

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"Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Rom. 14:19, NRSV).

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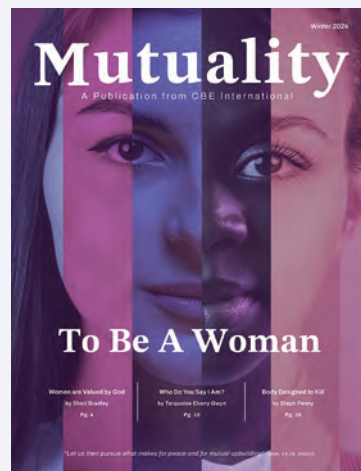
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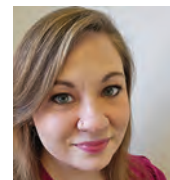
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Defined by God, Not by Culture

A young woman in her third year of seminary approached me after a CBE conference. With her brow furrowed, she said that while she loved her classes and her ministry, she was worried. “Am I being a woman wrong?” She explained that she and her husband were feeling pressure to start having children. They didn’t want to start a family while they were in school, and a recent post-graduate opportunity would keep them there a few more years. “We should be having a family, right? Am I a bad woman if I’m focusing on seminary education and ministry instead?”

These questions often come up in the face of shifting cultural norms and stereotypes. “Biblical femininity” has been the subject of countless Christian books and women’s church retreats. Many set out to define womanhood, especially for Christian women. They lay out detailed instructions related to appearance, what women can or should wear, their hair and makeup; instructions related to behavior, especially in relation to members of the opposite sex; and instructions related to roles and purpose. Specific personality traits are elevated as models for Christian femininity, while others are discouraged: women are expected to be quiet, calm, peaceful, submissive, nurturing, with an affinity for children and homemaking, and so forth. While these things are not bad in and of themselves, the message rings clear: If you deviate from these expectations, you are missing the mark on what it means to be a woman.

But each of these measures and instructions have (at least) one serious problem in common: They are external and performative. A woman is a woman because of *who she is*, not because of *what she does*.

There are certain components that define women at a foundational, biological level. Women and men are not interchangeable; they are different, but these differences move from inward to outward, rather than the other way around. How someone dresses, whether she has a bold or quiet personality, or whether she is able or wants to have children, do not define her as a woman. These may be ways in which her womanhood, couched in her culture, can be expressed and can shape how she sees herself, but she comes to them *already a woman*.

Many of the criteria used to define women are culturally bound, based on particular archetypes that are held up as a standard to which all must conform. As we look throughout the world and through history,

though, this standard falls apart. What one culture views as appropriate and feminine may be considered inappropriate or masculine in another. Culture itself is fluid, an ever-shifting set of beliefs and mores influenced by countless variables. Rather than attempting to define what it means to be a woman, man, or even human, through a cultural lens, we must turn to that which is consistent and eternal, which transcends time and history: We must turn to God’s word.

In spite of what many seem to believe, Scripture sets forth a broad range of women involved in every area of life: leaders, financial supporters, wives, businesswomen, prophetesses, mothers, warriors, and so on. Unlike so many popular books on “biblical femininity,” the Bible spends almost no time on what women, specifically, should wear or how they *alone* should behave.¹

Instead, throughout the Bible, women and men are given joint callings. Women and men are equally called in the Garden (Gen. 1:26-30) and commissioned after the Cross (Matt. 28:18-20). When Paul describes different callings in the body of Christ, he does not mention gender at all, let alone divide gifts or callings as being for women or for men (1 Cor. 12). Women and men are different, but that is precisely why it is so important and so beautiful that they are equally gifted and called.

In this issue, we will wrestle with the question of what it means to be a woman. Each author brings a different perspective on womanhood in the face of cultural expectations and stereotypes, physical issues related to reproduction and strength, and the diversity of women and their work celebrated in the Bible. I hope these articles inspire you to set aside faulty cultural standards and to find freedom in who you are as a human being, reflecting the fullness of the image of God.

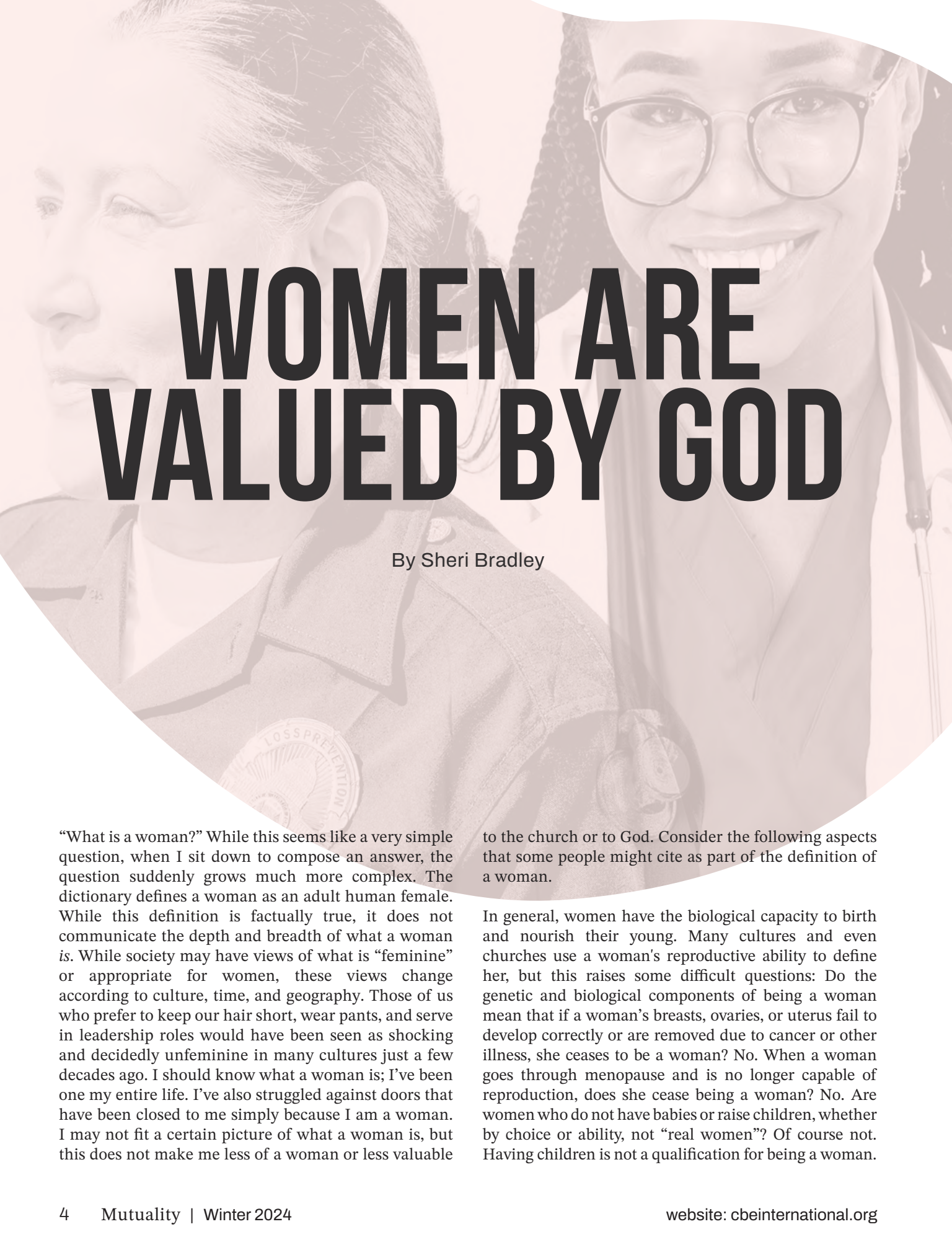
Notes

1. 1 Tim. 2:9–10 specifically addresses how women should dress in relation to limiting displays of wealth (gold, pearls, expensive fabrics), drawing focus to their good work rather than their material goods. Marg Mowczko, “Paul’s Instructions for Modest Dress,” *Marg Mowczko*, December 2011, <https://margmowczko.com/pauls-instructions-for-modest-dress/>.

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WOMEN ARE VALUED BY GOD

By Sheri Bradley

“What is a woman?” While this seems like a very simple question, when I sit down to compose an answer, the question suddenly grows much more complex. The dictionary defines a woman as an adult human female. While this definition is factually true, it does not communicate the depth and breadth of what a woman is. While society may have views of what is “feminine” or appropriate for women, these views change according to culture, time, and geography. Those of us who prefer to keep our hair short, wear pants, and serve in leadership roles would have been seen as shocking and decidedly unfeminine in many cultures just a few decades ago. I should know what a woman is; I’ve been one my entire life. I’ve also struggled against doors that have been closed to me simply because I am a woman. I may not fit a certain picture of what a woman is, but this does not make me less of a woman or less valuable

to the church or to God. Consider the following aspects that some people might cite as part of the definition of a woman.

In general, women have the biological capacity to birth and nourish their young. Many cultures and even churches use a woman’s reproductive ability to define her, but this raises some difficult questions: Do the genetic and biological components of being a woman mean that if a woman’s breasts, ovaries, or uterus fail to develop correctly or are removed due to cancer or other illness, she ceases to be a woman? No. When a woman goes through menopause and is no longer capable of reproduction, does she cease being a woman? No. Are women who do not have babies or raise children, whether by choice or ability, not “real women”? Of course not. Having children is not a qualification for being a woman.

Some people, consciously or unconsciously, believe that women are inferior to men by design. Aristotle (384–322 BCE), the famed Greek philosopher, proclaimed that females were merely “mutilated males,” so breaking the natural order of men’s authoritative rule over women would result in “disaster and dysfunction.”¹ Ancient Romans believed that weakness and “ignorance of legal matters” were characteristics inherent to being female, so women were kept under the power of a male guardian, either their father or their husband.² Early Christian writer Tertullian (AD 197–220) called women the “devil’s gateway” and the “first deserter of the divine law.”³ Augustine (AD 354–430) taught that women deserve to have men in authority over them because they are less intelligent.⁴ Even though some people still believe these statements to be true, science has proven that although women may generally be physically weaker than men, differences between their cognitive and intellectual abilities are negligible.⁵ Women are not less intelligent than men, and are not inferior to them.

Historically, many church leaders interpret God’s creation of the woman as a “suitable helper” for the man (Gen 2:18) to mean that women were created to be in “helping” (subservient) roles and never in leading roles. This opinion has supported the elevation of men as leaders and the subjugation of women as helpers and followers. Some who hold this position maintain that women and men are equal, but they have different roles “without making one inferior to the other.”⁶ How is this even possible? If one category can never lead and must always follow, based solely on their nature as women, this means they are not equal. A woman is not defined by her suitability for helping roles.

The broad categorization of the members of any group can be dangerous. According to traditional stereotypes in some cultures, women are emotional, irrational,

WHEN SOMEONE DOES NOT FIT A STEREOTYPE, THEY MAY FEEL ALIENATED, OUT- OF-PLACE, OR INFERIOR.

illogical, indecisive, sensitive, and nurturing. While these traits are not bad, they are not necessarily true of all women, nor is it always true that all men are rough, gruff, insensitive, distant, and career driven. Such stereotypes may make it easier (in a way) for us to define what a woman is or what a man is, but such generalizations are simply not true for every man or every woman. When someone does not fit a stereotype, they may feel alienated, out-of-place, or inferior. Stereotypes are also spatiotemporal or culturally bound, meaning femininity in one time and place looks very different from femininity in another. In previous generations, women who first began wearing pants and short hairstyles were considered to be very unfeminine. There was a day when nearly all women in Western culture married young, wore dresses, kept their hair long, and stayed at home to raise their babies while their husbands provided for the family and made all the decisions. Few American households look like this now, which might make it feel more difficult to define what a woman is. Changing and inconsistent standards of beauty or behavior cannot be used as

WHEN A WOMAN GOES THROUGH MENOPAUSE AND IS NO LONGER CAPABLE OF REPRODUCTION, DOES SHE CEASE TO BE A WOMAN?



qualifications for being a woman. Because we are less and less bound to stereotypes or misconceptions, many of us now have the opportunity to utilize our God-given gifts and passions and follow our own career goals to make a difference in the world outside the home.

If a woman cannot be defined by stereotypes of ages past, how do we define her? We must go back to the beginning, to her original creation. According to the writer of Genesis, God created women as an *ezer kenegdo*,⁷ often translated as a “suitable helper” (Gen 2:18). As mentioned, many church leaders and scholars over the years believed this meant God was limiting women to function in supporting roles (i.e., homemaker, secretary, nurse, etc.) for men who were destined for leadership, but this is not what this Hebrew phrase means. In almost every Old Testament usage of *ezer*, the Hebrew word translated as “helper” refers to God as our helper (Ex. 18:4; Deut. 33:7, 29; Hos. 13:9; Pss. 20:2; 70:5; 89:19; 121:1–3; 124:8; 146:5). In light of these passages, this word cannot mean a subservient being since the word is so often applied to God. As an *ezer kenegdo*, the woman is a “strong and able companion who is able to lead and work alongside the first human rather than serving as an inferior assistant . . . These two beings were designed to function together as strong, equal partners and close companions whose efforts are multiplied when they stand together in solidarity and fidelity to fulfill their God-given task of caring for the world.”⁸ God blessed both male and female, and he commissioned both of them to “be fruitful and multiply,” a task that involves both sexes (Gen. 1:28). God’s very next instructions are for both of them to function as co-regents who are to subdue and rule over the rest of creation. Why would anyone think that God meant for only the man to do the subduing, ruling, and leading when this entire instruction is addressed to both of them? God did not create women as less intelligent, less capable beings to be in perpetual subservience. God created women as *imago Dei*, reflections of the divine image, just like men.

What is a woman? A woman is a unique, beautiful reflection of the image of the Creator God. She might be a judge, teacher, and military leader like Deborah (Judg. 4–5), a prophet and authority on Scripture like Huldah (2 Kings 22; 2 Chron. 34); a deacon like Phoebe (Rom. 16); a church leader who serves alongside her husband like Priscilla (Rom. 16; Acts 18) or Junia (Rom. 16); a homemaker like Martha (Luke 10); a student like Mary (Luke 10); a preacher of the gospel like Mary Magdalene (Matt. 28); or any number of other roles God might call her to fulfill. Women are valued by God, who gifts us and calls each of us in

unique ways to show the world a reflection of God just by being the person God created her to be.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, Book 2, Section 3, <http://infomotions.com/etexts/philosophy/400BC-301BC/aristotle-on-270.htm>; see also Patterson, *The Forgotten Creed*, 39.
2. Ulpian, *Edict*, Book 11, in Lefkowitz and Fant, *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome*, 101, as cited in Patterson, *The Forgotten Creed*, 48.
3. Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women, Book 1*, Translated by the Rev. S. Thelwall, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ter tullian27.html>.
4. Augustine, *On Genesis*, 459–563.
5. D. Giofre, K. Allen, E. Toffalini, et al. “The Impasse on Gender Differences in Intelligence: A Meta-Analysis on WISC Batteries,” *Educational Psychology Review* 34, (2022), 2543–2568, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10648-022-09705-1>.
6. John MacArthur, “The Role of Women,” *Grace to You*, 2002, <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/DD08/the-role-of-women>.
7. Some texts use the phrase with the root word: *ezer neged*.
8. Sheri A. Bradley, *Valued by God: Elevating the Value of Women’s Voices in the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024), 27.

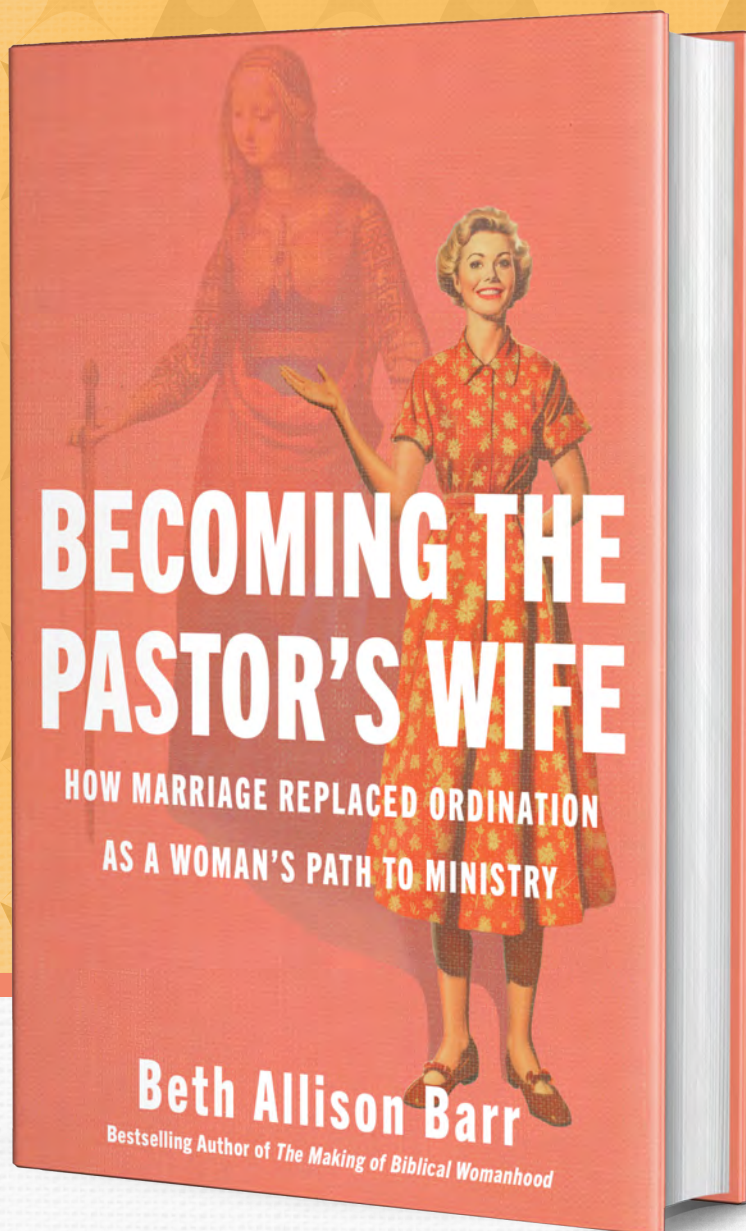


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GOD DID NOT CREATE WOMEN AS LESS INTELLIGENT, LESS CAPABLE BEINGS IN PERPETUAL SUBSERVIENCE. GOD CREATED WOMEN AS *IMAGO DEI*, REFLECTIONS OF THE DIVINE IMAGE, JUST LIKE MEN.



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Are Women Human?

Lessons from the Rugby Pitch

By Elizabeth Devlin

Years ago, I heard a sermon in which the preacher expounded on the idea of strength. As he spoke, he categorised different strengths according to gender: According to him, men are physically strong whereas women are strong in the way they manipulate others (primarily men). As long ago as it was, I remember the sermon because it seemed so disconnected from reality as I knew it.

As a young woman, I had both the privilege and pleasure of playing rugby at the club level in Sydney, Australia. It was the late '90s, and the sport was newly opening up for women to play at competition level.

Playing rugby was an immense pleasure. There was the team camaraderie, the full-body experience of pre-match nerves mixed with the knowledge that there were fourteen other women on the paddock who had my back, as I had theirs, and my self-esteem that grew as my body's strength grew. To this day, the solidarity in women's rugby circles remains: There is a sisterhood of former and current players, and we still have each other's backs.

As women's club competition was just beginning, there was only one level in the competition. Consequently, beginner players like me were playing alongside and against seasoned athletes: a "baptism of fire" if you will, and a front-row seat to the Lord's creation of women's bodies in every shape, size, and strength. I continue to be blown away by the way the rugby culture included every body type and how the game was open to anyone willing to train hard and work as part of the team.

In contrast, my experience in churches has been one of an unquestioned culture that dismisses women's strength. If my life experience was purely gleaned from church culture, I would be forgiven for thinking that all women looked and acted a certain way, and that way was always expressive of an inherent weakness. From the preacher I mentioned, who believed that only men possess real physical strength, to a popular teacher who openly discourages women from going to the gym,¹ the message is that women are always—and should remain—physically weak.

This teaching of women's weakness seems to be married to a prevailing myth that men are God-ordained to physically protect women. I can count on the fingers of one hand the

number of men I've met in church who would be willing and able to step onto the rugby pitch with a women's team, and yet how many Christian men believe that all women need some form of physical protection that only a man can provide? Further, while the possession of physical strength might afford a person a prized position in a rugby team's forward pack, physical strength is not a prerequisite for inclusion in church community or leadership. Indeed, for Christians, "The parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary" (1 Cor. 12:22). However, this is not how we see the prevailing view of women's physical weakness play out in church communities.

Unfortunately, belief in women's physical weakness is often linked to a belief in women's spiritual weakness. There is a corresponding leap from the belief in men's physical strength to a belief in men's spiritual strength. Supposedly men are not only God-ordained to physically protect women—they are God-ordained to protect women *spiritually* as well. We believe in the priesthood of all believers,² we believe that every believer has the same indwelling Holy Spirit,³ and yet we also believe—incongruously—that the Holy Spirit dwelling in women bows to the Holy Spirit dwelling in men.⁴

Where have these gender exclusive ideas come from? They don't come from the Bible. Teachings that create hierarchical categories for the sexes bear a greater likeness to pop psychology and Greek philosophy than to the teachings of Scripture. The very popular Christian book *Love and Respect* by Emerson Eggerichs does just this, framing "love" as something that women "most desire" and "respect" as something that men "desperately need."⁵ Women and men are framed as being fundamentally different creatures, rather than fundamentally the same: human beings. In contrast, the Bible teaches that women and men—though not interchangeable—are made from the same material: "Eve was formed from the same substance as Adam."⁶ Further, women and men are both created in God's image and commissioned to steward the earth.⁷

Contrary to the premise of *Love and Respect*, the Bible teaches that love is respectful⁸; for all Christians, love and respect are inseparable.⁹ We should be wary of teachings that separate love from respect, just as we should be wary of teachings that assign women and men into separate categories, prescribing different treatment as well as

different strengths or weaknesses for each category, as if we are not all human. There is no Bible verse that says, “You don’t need to respect this type of person,” just as there is no verse that says, “You don’t need to love that type of person.” Nor is there a Bible verse that says, “Women are weaker than men.”¹⁰ So why do these ideas get taught?

Jesus taught his disciples to “love your neighbour as yourself” and to “treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you” (Mark 12:31 and Luke 6:31). How can you love someone as much as yourself if you believe that that person is so different that they don’t need the same type of love (or worse, any love at all)? How can you treat someone the way you want to be treated if you believe that person requires different treatment from yourself? Women and men are made from the same substance—not because they are interchangeable but because they are interdependent, and that interdependence precludes both a hierarchy between the sexes and better or worse treatments for one over the other. As the Apostle Paul wrote: “As woman came from man so also man comes from woman. But everything comes from God” (1 Cor. 11:12 CEB).

The famous writer Dorothy Sayers recounted an exchange she had with a reader in her book titled *Are Women Human?*:

A man once asked me . . . how I managed in my books to write such natural conversations between men when they were by themselves. . . . ‘I shouldn’t have expected a woman (meaning me) to have been able to make it so convincing.’ I replied that I had coped with this difficult problem by making my men talk, as far as possible, like ordinary human beings. This aspect of the matter seemed to surprise the speaker; he said no more. . . . One of these days, it may quite likely occur to him that women, as well as men, when left to themselves, talk very much like human beings, too.¹¹

It is interesting to me how many Christians seem to have the same outlook as the man in this story. On the one hand, we affirm the teaching of Genesis 1:27 that all humans—male and female—are created in the image of God for shared governance in Eden, and yet on the other hand, we can’t help but want to add (or subtract) from this teaching by creating special hierarchical categories for the sexes. We lose sight of our common humanity every time that we promote Christianity as manifesting in distinctly “blue” and “pink” forms of human beings.

Imagine the strength and community of a church that welcomes all women and men just as they are created: in God’s image, and in a glorious variety of different sizes, strengths, and gifts. All of those strengths and gifts can and should be used for the building up of the entire community.¹² Just as a rugby team includes players of

different sizes and skills, so the church needs all the different strengths and gifts of women.

Why does the church exclude and/or “bench” some of their best players? To push the analogy further, I ask, why do some churches prefer to run onto the pitch with only half a team? The church “team” is extraordinarily weaker without the strength of women.

Notes

1. Dee, “John Piper: the Pharisaical Expert on the Submission of Women,” *The Wartburg Watch*, November 12, 2018, <https://thewartburgwatch.com/2018/11/12/john-piper-the-pharisaical-expert-on-the-submission-of-women/>.
2. “You yourselves are being built like living stones into a spiritual temple. You are being made into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” 1 Peter 2:5 (Common English Bible, CEB).
3. “We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink.” 1 Corinthians 12:13 (CEB).
4. “Here’s the thing: My wife doesn’t need me to parent, chide, control, manipulate, exploit, dominate, “lead”, or subdue her. We walk together—side by side. Also, I make my own damn sandwiches and do laundry. The Holy Spirit in her doesn’t bow to the Holy Spirit in me.” *Orthodox Barbie*, quoting Will Soto’s Twitter, Facebook, September 9, 2023, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0ASaRUTiCk9WxxM4PpVwUKzd8xvPDpLwgPLVQGrQ4SZJyCYZccrQDUj6rWWj3juurl&id=100066734191060.
5. Wray, Sheila Gregoire, “An Open Letter to Focus on the Family about Love & Respect and Emerson Eggerichs,” *Bare Marriage*, January 15, 2020, <https://baremarriage.com/2020/01/open-letter-focus-on-the-family-love-respect-emerson-eggerichs/>.
6. Kidson, Lyn M., “Created Order is not a Biblical Principle: Eve’s Creation after Adam is not the Basis to Restrict Women in Church Leadership Roles,” *Engendered Ideas*, June 16, 2023, <https://engenderedideas.wordpress.com/2023/06/16/created-order-is-not-a-biblical-principle-eves-creation-after-adam-is-not-the-basis-to-restrict-women-in-church-leadership-roles/>.
7. “God created humanity in God’s own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them.” Genesis 1:27 (CEB).
8. Kidson, Lyn M., “How to Treat and Archbishop Even if She is a Woman,” *Engendered Theology*, September 16, 2023, <https://engenderedideas.wordpress.com/2023/09/16/how-to-treat-an-archbishop-even-if-she-is-a-woman/>.
9. “Love is patient, love is kind, it isn’t jealous, it doesn’t brag, it isn’t arrogant, 5 it isn’t rude, it doesn’t seek its own advantage, it isn’t irritable, it doesn’t keep a record of complaints. . . .” 1 Corinthians 13:4-5 (CEB).
10. Some may argue that 1 Peter 3:7 (“Husbands, likewise, submit by living with your wife in ways that honor her, knowing that she is the weaker partner. Honor her all the more, as she is also a coheir of the gracious care of life. Do this so that your prayers won’t be hindered.” (CEB)) states that women are weaker than men physically and/or spiritually. However, this argument is not rooted in reality: it is demonstrable that some women are physically stronger than some men, just as some women are obviously stronger spiritually than some men. A more realistic interpretation is that the Apostle Peter is talking about social weakness. Women are (and often have been) in a weaker social position than men. Indeed, there is evidence from Greek papyri that women used the adjective “weak” to describe themselves when petitioning for justice. See Mowczko, Marg, “What Does “Weaker Vessel” Mean in 1 Peter 3:7?,” *Marg Mowczko*, August 12, 2015, <https://margmowczko.com/weaker-vessel-gender-justice-1-peter-3-7/>.
11. Nyren, Neil, “Dorothy L. Sayers: A Crime Reader’s Guide to the Classics,” *CrimeReads*, October 11, 2019, <https://crimereads.com/dorothy-l-sayers-a-crime-readers-guide-to-the-classics/>.
12. “A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good.” 1 Corinthians 12:7 (CEB).



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Who Do You Say I Am?

How Black Women Are Portrayed in the Media and Church

By Terquoise Ebony Gwyn

When asked how to define womanhood, I think of Matthew 16 where Jesus asks, “Who do you say I am?”¹ Over the years I have learned that the answer to who I am depends on who I ask. Our culture seeks to define women, both who they are and what they do. As an African-American woman, the cultural and social markers of womanhood are not all the same as those of our white counterparts due to the legacy of slavery and racism. How women, and especially Black women, are portrayed in the media and wider North American society is very different from what I see within my own culture.

The legacy of Sojourner Truth hints at this dissonance in her famous speech at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention. While the phrase for which the speech is known, “Ain’t I a woman?”, aptly highlights the

contrast between the treatment of White and Black women, it is not actually part of her original speech. This phrase came from a highly contested alternate version of her speech published by suffragist Frances Dana Gage. Her original speech, as presented at the 1851 Women’s Right Convention in Akron, Ohio, was transcribed by her friend Rev. Marius Robinson. In it, she describes how Black women lacked the same rights given to men despite doing the same work. “I am a woman’s rights. . . . I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that?”² Gage’s version, the more familiar iteration of the speech, notes that Black women received no special treatment and in fact, lacked even basic human rights. A White woman, Gage tweaked the speech to include some Southern phrases and language, fitting it into a



stereotype foreign to Truth, who was not from the South at all.³ The popularity of the less accurate version of the speech demonstrates how the media shapes the perception of Black women, even if it is well-intended.

Mammy, Jezebel, or Sapphire?

Stereotypes about Black women in media like popular TV shows generally fall into three categories: the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire. None are positive; most started during slavery.⁴ It is apparent that they are all adversarial and that these roles were defined *for us, not by us*.

The first corrosive and popular image of Black women is the “Mammy,” a trope borne out of slavery. The “Mammy” traditionally was an unattractive Black woman who was chosen to work inside the house, doing domestic chores and watching the master’s children. Submissive and non-threatening, a “Mammy” was sometimes considered part of the family. While this would seem like a positive mother figure, this role kept these Black women from

time their husbands could be sold or moved, and there was not always a choice of partners. As such, the Black woman was seen as a vehicle for vice and her role as a wife was limited by outside forces.

Another way Black women are defined by American society is the “Angry Black Woman” or “Sapphire” trope. The “Sapphire” is any Black woman who complains or speaks out about anything. In reality, verbal dissent was often the only tool Black women had against mistreatment of themselves, their husbands, and children. Although the censoring of women’s voices is common across cultures, it is rarely seen as a defining characteristic with few to no positive counternarratives. Like the “Jezebel,” this popular trope is common in media created by Black people as well.

Despite all the negatives that come with these labels, they have also contributed to the development of our self-armor, a positive aspect of Black womanhood. Black women are not stereotypes.

*The cultural and social markers of womanhood
are not all the same as those of our white counterparts.*

tending their own children; they were expected to put the needs of their master’s children first. In addition to preventing them from tending their own nest, this frequently created an antagonistic relationship between the “Mammy” and the mistress of the house. This pattern of having to put others’ children and husbands before their own would follow Black women even after slavery ended.

The second stereotype still found in pop culture is the “Jezebel,” a figure named after the Bible character. Like her biblical counterpart, this type of woman is a controlling seductress who aims to bring strife and trouble to men. Her beauty is a weapon to trick men, an accusation familiar to all women. This particular trope is so popular that it is even common in Black media that promotes misogyny. Like the “Mammy,” this trope first started during slavery and was a way to shift blame for assault from men to women. At the same time that Black women were being defined as promiscuous, their White counterparts were often defined as virginal and virtuous. In addition, Black wives were constrained because at any

Where Are All the Fun Black Stories?

When thinking about what it means to be a Black woman, I have learned over the years that I cannot look to American popular media with its caricatures and one-dimensional depictions. As a particularly bookish person, I then turned to Black writing, hoping for a more balanced perspective. When I was a teen, my mother ensured I read books by and about Black people: authors such as Mildred Taylor, Maya Angelou, and Alice Walker. I resisted because, to me, these were all depressing stories about Jim Crow, slaves, or Zulus. I wondered, “Where are all the fun Black stories?” I see now that the point of these stories was that in spite of everything—being ripped from their homelands, enslaved away from their parents, sold apart from their husbands and separated from their children—Black women were *strong*, surviving the most difficult of circumstances. Even in the midst of it all, they never gave up their goal of freedom and self-definition. This led me to look for more positive images of Black women.



The powerful Black voice flips the dominant narrative of the "Angry Black Woman."

The Caged Bird That Sings

In her famous poem "Caged Bird," Maya Angelou alludes to the plight of Black women who still find a way to express freedom in the face of oppression:

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.⁵

As a caged bird can still sing, so did Black women who were enslaved. The powerful Black voice flips the dominant narrative of the "Angry Black Woman." Music has always been a means for advancement and empowerment for Black people. Many are familiar with the accurate image of a Black church with a choir full of Christian women who are God's Instruments. The Black church is a central figure in Black culture and is one of the few places that Black women are elevated.

It is common in Black churches to have a Church Mother, a person who serves as a mother to the entire congregation. In my Pentecostal church, she was the pastor's wife. As a child I remember watching with awe as she presided over Women's Day, which included some type of women's march through the center of the church and a sermon preached by a woman. The ordination of women is still debated in many places, but there are many Black women who lead churches, like Pastor Shirley Caesar, a popular gospel singer. Church Mothers are but one example of positive Black womanhood that contradicts the negative tropes in popular media.

The church not only celebrates Black women as mothers, teachers, singers, and preachers, it also affirms that

motherhood can look many different ways. One notable example is the Black homeschool movement. While the Black woman of the past was constrained in how she could be a mother, that is no longer the case. Growing up, people were always surprised that my mother was a SAHM (stay-at-home mother). We were not wealthy by any means; my mother simply wanted to be home with her children, to look after her *own* children. She explained to me that in the 1950s, my grandmother and all the Black moms she knew had to work. Even if they preferred not to, it was a financial necessity. This is a stark reminder of how the goals of the women's rights movement are not the same for everyone. Contrary to the experience of many White women, it was counter-cultural for my mother to stay at home. Now there is an increasing number of Black SAHMs focusing on their children and making work outside the home secondary. Instead of being forced into being Mammies serving other families, Black women can now focus on their own.

The church is also a place to see Black sisterhood in action. Since so many ancestral bonds were broken, the Black community had to create families with others in bondage to replace what was lost. Much like the church, Black Greek organizations at universities provide another place to create these bonds. During segregation, the Black community founded their own colleges and universities and within them, a network of fraternities and sororities called the Divine Nine. Of the nine, four are sororities, places to make life-long connections with other women. Sorors, as they are called, devoted themselves not only to supporting classmates but also to performing civic duties and service their entire lives. Zeta Phi Beta, the sorority to which one of my aunts belongs, was founded at Howard University over 100 years ago. Zetas commit to causes such as the March of Dimes and to supporting charities all over the world; they have sisters as far away as Japan. The Zetas and other such sororities, as well as women who actively participate in their churches and families,

prove that Black womanhood can look many ways and that Black women have made a way when there was none.

Diospyros Crassiflora

As I think about what it means to be a Black woman, I think of my middle namesake, *Diospyros crassiflora*, or African ebony. This type of hardwood can be polished to a beautiful shiny black and is found in several countries that supplied the Transatlantic Slave Trade. My mother, like many Black mothers, tried to remind me that “Black is beautiful,” and that is why she and my father chose this middle name. They taught me that ebony wood is highly prized, expensive, and versatile. It is used for wood carvings, doorknobs, piano keys, and chess pieces. Ebony is also commonly used for church instruments, just as Black women often participate in their churches’ music ministries. These are all direct contrasts to the media images of Black women as Mammies, Sapphires, and Jezebels.

Black Girls Are Magic⁶

In a world and society that attempts to define Black women, limiting them to roles such as Mammies, Sapphires, or Jezebels, they have had to create new definitions of themselves. Even today, these media stereotypes predominate, and those of us who are shy, bookish, and soft-spoken must work to find other examples that reflect our reality. While we no longer live in an iron cage or chains, those roles are still being shed. The Black church and Black sororities have given us a space to connect, create bonds, and grow in our gifts in ways that the larger culture has not allowed. Where Black womanhood has already succeeded is in coming to a place of self-definition and freedom. I have the freedom to be a working mother or SAHM; to be God’s instrument on my own terms; or simply to be myself.

Notes

1. Matthew 16:13–20.
2. *Anti-slavery bugle*, Vol. 6 (New-Lisbon, Ohio), June 21, 1851. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83035487/1851-06-21/ed-1/seq-4/>.
3. “Compare the Two Speeches,” The Sojourner Truth Project, last accessed November 13, 2024, <https://www.thesojournertruthproject.com/compare-the-speeches>. Also see: <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/aint-i-a-woman-may-291851/>.
4. “Popular and Pervasive Stereotypes of African Americans.” National Museum of African American History and Culture. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/popular-and-pervasive-stereotypes-african-americans>.
5. Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009).
6. Coined by Cashawn Thompson, the phrase “Black girls are magic” celebrates the positive achievements of women. “CaShawn, who at the time was a 38-year-old preschool teacher

and avid Twitter user, just wrote her truth — that Black girls are magic — to combat the messages Black girls and women were receiving through the media, social media included.” Sire Leo Lamar-Becker, “The Truth About #BlackGirlMagic: The Origin Story You Didn’t Know,” *Sesi Magazine*, September 2022, <https://sesimag.com/2022/09/19/black-girl-magic-the-origin-story/>. Also see: Dexter Thomas, “Why everyone’s saying ‘Black Girls are Magic,’” *LA Times*, September 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-everyones-saying-black-girls-are-magic-20150909-htmlstory.html>.

Where Black
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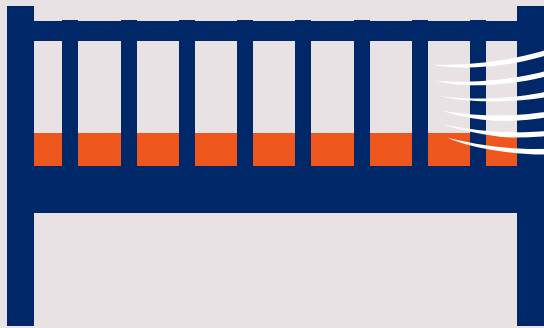
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A BODY DESIGNED TO KILL



By Steph Penny

Fifty percent. That was the fateful number.

I had just calculated the risk of a pregnancy going bad for me. The risks included things like miscarriage, a flare-up of my autoimmune disease, and significant deformities of the foetus. When I say “deformities”, we’re not talking about crooked noses; we’re talking about missing limbs and lifelong high needs. We’re talking about me, with chronic illness, becoming a lifelong carer for another human dependent upon me for everything.

Fifty percent.

What Am I Going to Do?

I wanted to have kids. I wanted to give them the names my husband and I had carefully selected for them. I wanted to teach them about God and the values of

kindness, compassion, and empathy. I wanted to give my husband the gift of being a father, a role to which he would be eminently suited.

But it was not to be. I had been diagnosed with lupus, an autoimmune disease that can attack any organ in the body at any time. Lupus was attacking my blood, significantly raising the risk of miscarriage and other pregnancy complications. I had also been diagnosed with endometriosis which, besides causing pain, can make it difficult to conceive.

The odds were stacked against me. By about fifty percent, apparently.

This discovery scuttled my plans for motherhood and blew my preconceptions about femininity out of the water. I had always thought of the female body as a safe harbour for new life, a nurturing space for a little one

to grow. Women are often seen as protectors of their young, as “givers of life,” and that women are “designed to have babies.” But my body, with its faulty immune system, was “designed to kill.” Lupus misreads normal body signals as error messages and overreacts, seeking and destroying perfectly healthy parts of my body. If I were to fall pregnant, lupus would see the foetus as an intruder. My own body would attack my baby.

What does this mean for me as a woman—to have a body that is good at killing rather than creating life? To never experience the sensation of a little person growing inside of me? Am I, as a childless lady, less of a woman?

It’s not such a far leap. Many cultures around the world and many of our churches (including well-meaning ones) treat women as child-bearing machines, idolising those women who “graduate” to motherhood and isolating those who do not. It’s a product of pronatalism: Our society favours women who give birth to and raise children.

Pronatalism and my own childlessness have had a profound impact on my identity. As much as I want to say that my identity is found in Christ, as I’m sure we all do, I have an undeniable attachment to the things of this world that give me a sense of who I am: my family, job, culture, the places I have lived, friendship groups. My body also gives me a sense of identity—just as losing parts of my body and mind can untether it.

I am still a woman, even if my immune system won’t allow me to participate in bearing and raising children. Being a woman in general, and being a mother in particular, is not just about fertility. It has to do with the many ways in which I, as a childless woman, actively “mother” others, nurturing them and helping them to grow: mentoring people at work and in my church band, praying for the younger generations, caring for my pet cat.

Every time I sit with a younger colleague and encourage them in their work, I’m mothering. Every time I check in with a band member I’m mentoring, I’m mothering. Every time I lead worship, gently encouraging the congregation to draw near to God, I’m mothering. Every time I pray for my nieces and nephews, I’m mothering. Every time I connect with my cat—feeding him, cuddling him, taking him to the vet kicking and screaming—I’m mothering.

The act of mothering is not just about giving birth to a screaming lifeform. It’s about how I love others. It’s about how I give back to the world, care for the environment, belong to my community and minister to my church.

It’s also about leaving a legacy. One way I try to do that is through writing. I create books, blogs, articles (like this one), short stories, and songs. It’s a way of leaving my mark on the world that has a positive impact on others. It’s a love language for me. Even though I have not been “in labour,” I have undertaken many labours of love and given birth to book-babies, blog-babies, and song-babies, all created to encourage others.

One day this body designed to kill will resign its last breath and I will leave this gentle world. But my words and hopefully my impact will live on and spread further, like a river flowing out to sea. In a way, I am attempting to mother the whole world through my words.

God himself provides a great example of mothering. He mothers us in the way he comforts us, protects us, and provides for us. In Isaiah 66:13, God says, “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you” (NIV). Jesus, in Luke 13:34, spoke of his longing to gather Jerusalem unto himself “as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.” Mothering is a part of God’s very nature, and he shows us how to do it well.

Non-mothering forms of mothering may not be a traditional approach to womanhood, but they matter. We can all embrace creative ways of mothering that do not necessarily involve having biological children, because all forms of mothering are important—and they all mirror the way in which our heavenly Father mothers us.

GOD MOTHERS US IN THE WAY HE COMFORTS US, PROTECTS US, AND PROVIDES FOR US.



Steph Penny is a blogger, author, and songwriter passionate about exploring too-hard-basket topics off faith. Steph writes about childlessness, singledom, chronic illness, and Christian living. Steph also works as a psychologist, loves chocolate and books, and lives with her husband and furbaby, a rescue cat named Boba.

CHALLENGING LINES IN THE SAND

Women Are Also Called
to Protect and Provide

By Brianna Cortez



During my first missionary trip in college, I, along with a group of missionary students, was commissioned to clean a chapel. The young men busied themselves by taking on the more dangerous task—climbing a ten-foot ladder to replace the chapel’s light bulbs—while the women sat in the pews organizing the decorations. My male classmates wrestled with the ladder, not sure how to properly handle it, let alone climb up it. Seeing that they were struggling, I offered to help. I explained that I had just spent the last few summers working on ladders in a warehouse. Not only did I have experience, but I had been trained in ladder safety. Despite this, the young men reassured me they were fine and told me to “go and help the women.” There were a few close calls on the ladder that day that could have resulted in serious injury. I wonder what it would have been like had they accepted the experience and protection of a fellow sister in Christ. Sadly, I soon found that my classmates and professors had many ideas about what it meant to be a woman of God. Not many of those ideas accurately represented what God had called me to be as a woman, and later I would find they did not accurately represent women in the Bible either.

Throughout the Bible, women defy this idea by protecting, providing for, and even leading men in their care.

Regardless of gifting or calling, complementarians have argued that it is a man's primary role to lead, protect, and provide for others, especially for women, in the home and the church.¹ Hard complementarians believe that women are not primarily called to represent Christ in this way, and this is one reason they give for not allowing women to be pastors.² However, there is a massive flaw in this understanding of women and men: Throughout the Bible, women defy this idea by protecting, providing for, and even leading men in their care. The Bible not only honors them for it, but encourages it! This notion that Christian men are primarily called to lead, protect, and provide while Christian women are primarily called to nurture and follow is an idea that does not exist in Scripture or is, at best, unclear. Much has been said regarding women leading men in the Bible, but this article explores two actions that are often overlooked: women protecting and providing for men.

“Primary Protector”

Complementarians define the masculine nature to protect as “a natural, God-given responsibility to step forward and put himself between the assailant and the woman.”³ While calling men to protect women is not bad in itself, the problem becomes when we presume that protecting others is primarily a masculine ideal rather than a Christian ideal. It makes it seem like women who protect men are acting outside of God's design and that men who accept their care and protection are missing the mark. However, a willingness to put one's life on the line to protect others is the nature of Jesus Christ⁴ who gave up his life for our sake.⁵ It is his sacrificial example that we are all called to follow (Phil. 2:5–8). Jesus and Paul tell all Christians to sacrifice themselves out of love for one another (John 15:12–13, Eph. 5:1–2, 1 John 3:18–19). We should not be surprised when the Bible honors women for risking their lives to protect men.

Women Honored for Protecting Men

Rahab: In the book of Joshua, we are introduced to Rahab, a Canaanite woman and perhaps a prostitute—

an unlikely heroine to consider when looking at godly women throughout Scripture. Why would we look to Rahab to understand what it means to be a woman of faith?⁶ It is Rahab's fear of the Lord that led her to deceive her own king by saving the male Israelite spies (Josh. 2:3). She courageously put her own life on the line to negotiate to save her entire family, including her male relatives.⁷ Her family's lives were spared thanks to her actions, and they lived out their days with the Israelites (Josh. 6:25). Some might believe that Rahab, as a woman, should have asked her father or brother to negotiate with the spies on behalf of their family. But Rahab is not shamed for protecting the male spies or for bartering on her family's behalf to save their lives. She is commended as an example of faith for fearing the Lord, being listed in the “Hall of Faith” in Hebrews 11:31, and is honorably included in Jesus Christ's lineage (Matt. 1:5).⁸ There are many other examples in the Old Testament that show a pattern of women protecting men: Michal protected David from her father (1 Samuel 19:11–13), Zipporah protected Moses from God's wrath (Exodus 4:24–26), Esther protected Israel from destruction (Esther 4:16), to name a few.

Phoebe and Priscilla: We also find women throughout the New Testament that protected men placed in their care. Phoebe, the deacon of Cenchreae, is named by Paul as a *prostatis*, or patron, of many including Paul himself (Romans 16:1–2). Sadly, this word has been diminished by Bible translators who have rendered her leadership as “help.” The term (*prostatis*) in a first-century Roman context was used “for someone of power and status serving as a guardian and protector of a person or group.”⁹ It is likely that Phoebe was a wealthy woman of high social status who used her resources and position to protect and provide for others. Rather than being ashamed that he was provided for and protected by a woman, Paul commends Phoebe for her actions and entrusts her with delivering his letter to the Romans.

Priscilla also risked her life for Paul alongside her husband Aquila (Romans 16:3–4). The word Paul uses, *trachēlon hypotithem*, literally means “to put down the neck.”¹⁰ She put her life on the line so that Paul might live and continue his ministry. Paul gives honor where it is due. He seems not to have any concern for “preserving his masculinity” when honoring the women who have saved his life. Rather, Paul lifts up Phoebe and Priscilla as examples for everyone to follow.

“Primary Provider”

Hard complementarians define mature masculinity as “the benevolent responsibility before God to be the

primary provider of the family.”¹¹ Once again, it is important to note that no Bible verse outright states men are called to be the primary providers (financial or otherwise) for their families, yet complementarians claim these are God-ordained roles. Although they acknowledge that women also have historically always provided for their families, they argue that this should not be a woman’s primary responsibility.¹² Some go so far as to say that a man’s personhood is compromised if he becomes solely reliant on a woman’s income.¹³ But despite being written in a patriarchal setting, the Bible honors women for providing for their families with no consideration for whether they are the primary provider or secondary or equal breadwinner. Both women and men are encouraged to provide for their families. Paul says that “anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8).¹⁴ After all, providing for, serving, and giving to others is at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus, and it’s what Paul expected of all church leaders, including women.¹⁵

Women Honored for Providing for Men and Their Families

The Proverbs 31 Woman: The Proverbs 31 woman has been held up for centuries as the ideal of biblical womanhood. She is revered as the woman who “surpasses all noble women” (Prov. 31:29).¹⁶ Ironically, almost the entire chapter is about how she provides for her household

Neither Jesus nor Paul say that women cannot be the primary providers of their households, nor do they instruct men to be the primary providers.

and for everyone in her care through her business endeavors. She works eagerly with her hands (Proverbs 31:13); brings food from afar (14); gets up at dawn to provide for her family and for her servants (15); considers purchasing a field; buys it and uses her own income to plant a vineyard (16); girds her loins with strength (17); trades profitably with merchants (18); works through the night (31:18); cares for the poor and needy (20); clothes her family during winter (21); makes linen to sell to merchants (22, 24); clothes herself with strength and dignity (25); speaks with wisdom and faithful instruction (26); watches over the affairs of her household (27); and is honored for all that she does (31). If we read closely, the Proverbs 31 woman challenges the hard complementarian ideal of biblical womanhood in many ways: She is physically strong, business savvy, a faithful instructor of God’s word, and a provider for everyone in her household.¹⁷ She is honored for using her talent, time, and circumstances to provide for the people in her care. If providing for her family is not one of her primary tasks, why would the Bible honor the Proverbs 31 woman for spending most of her time providing for her family?¹⁸

Mary Magdalene, Johanna, and Susanna: If men are “emasculated” when women are their primary financial providers, what do we do with Jesus? As far as we know, women were the primary financial providers for Jesus’s ministry: Mary Magdalene, Johanna, Susanna, and many other women (Luke 8:2–3).¹⁹ These women’s lives were transformed by Jesus, and in turn they provided for him out of their means. While it is likely that many men also provided financially for Jesus, Luke specifically names these women as having supported Jesus’s ministry. Paul also honored the women who financially supported him (Rom. 16:3). Neither Jesus nor Paul say that women cannot be the primary providers of their households, nor do they instruct men to be the primary providers. Paul and Jesus should be our examples, including their ability to accept and honor women who were their financial providers.

Other Women Providing for Their Households: The New Testament shows a diverse array of household arrangements. Priscilla and Aquila were both tentmakers (Acts 18:2–3).²⁰ They are listed as traveling and ministering together, although Priscilla was likely more involved in ministry, as she is often listed first. Lydia was a wealthy businesswoman who led her entire household to Christ, and she was likely the primary financial provider of her household (Acts 16:13–15). Throughout Paul’s letters, we find many women who are leading and providing for the churches in their homes, like Euodia, Syntyche, Chloe, and Nympha,²¹ to name a few. When we look closely at the New Testament and see women serving as disciples, deacons, church leaders, apostles, prophets, missionaries,

and possibly even elders in the early church, it becomes clear that what was once seen as “the exception” is, in fact, now the standard. Women in the New Testament were prominent leaders, guardians, and providers in the home and church.

Challenging Lines in the Sand

If the complementarian ideal is the standard for womanhood and manhood, we would expect the Bible to consistently honor women and men who match that mold and criticize those who step out of those roles. However, the reality is that God uses women from all walks of life in their own gifting, means, and circumstances according to his purpose. This sometimes entails nurturing and submitting, but it also includes leading, protecting, and providing for others, even men. As we wrestle with the question of what defines us as women, it is clear that many complementarian lines in the sand are challenged by what the Bible portrays as worthy and good. As we see that women are honored by God for protecting, providing for, and leading men throughout the Bible, it is time to admit that previous patriarchal understandings of what women could be were wrong.

Notes

1. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Crossway, 2012), 43. See also: *Men and Women Equal Yet Different* by Alexander Strauch and *Men and Women in the Church* by Kevin DeYoung.
2. “Hard complementarians” believe strict hierarchical gender roles should exist in the home, church, and society, whereas “soft complementarians” allow for some forms of female leadership in some contexts provided a man is ultimately still “in authority.”
3. Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 43. See also: *Men and Women in the Church* by Kevin DeYoung and *What’s the Difference* by John Piper.
4. Some argue that Jesus’s maleness should inform our understanding of gender (theological anthropology). But does Jesus’s maleness imply that women cannot fully imitate Jesus? For an answer to this question, see *Women and the Gender of God* by Amy Peeler. For an introduction to the topic, see: *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* by Marc Cortez.
5. There are many problems with using Ephesians 5:21–33 to instill gender roles that cannot be addressed here.
6. Of course, not all the things Rahab did in her life were honorable as with all the heroes of faith.
7. “Lit. ‘the house of my father,’ which refers to Rahab’s extended family, including the relations described in v. 13. The house of the father forms the basic sociological unit of West Semitic society (including Canaan and Israel) in the Bronze and Iron Ages. Traditionally, this family unit is led by the eldest male. Here, in a unique manner, Rahab negotiates on behalf of her extended family.” Zondervan, *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2016), 363.
8. It is interesting that Hebrews 11 acknowledges the faith of both Sarah and Rahab, women who led very different lives. Likewise, Jael and Mary are also honored in Scripture as the most “blessed among women.” This is not to say that we can take all the women in the Bible to form some ideal; however, if we do have questions

about being a woman that the Bible does not outright answer, we should consider what women did and were honored for. (I.e. Can women be deacons? Pheobe was a deacon.)

9. Nijay Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church*, (InterVarsity, 2023), 119.
10. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Nida, *Greek Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (Fortress Press, 1999), 21.8.
11. Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 42. See also Kevin DeYoung’s *Men and Women in the Church and Men and Women Equal Yet Different* by Alexander Stauch.
12. Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 43.
13. Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 42.
14. This passage is gender-neutral (it could be directed towards the widows who were not supporting their families and/or the entire church). For more on this see: “7 Places Where Gender-Inclusive Bible Translation Really Matters: Part 1” by Jeff Miller, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/7-places-where-gender-inclusive-bible-translation-really-matters-part-1/>.
15. Many interpretive issues about 1 Timothy 5 cannot be addressed here. See “Spoiling the Beautiful Difference” by Andrew Bartlett and Terran Williams, <https://terranwilliams.com/a-biblical-critique-of-beautiful-difference/>.
16. The paraphrasing throughout this paragraph is based on the New International Version, except for *she girds her loins with strength* which is based on the KJV.
17. It should be noted that the Hebrew terms used to describe the Proverbs 31 woman are also quite masculine. See “Finding ‘The Proverbs 31 Woman,’” <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/finding-proverbs-31-woman/>.
18. Some scholars have pointed out that Proverbs 31 is likely the personification of wisdom. Cynthia Westfall argues that it can be both an example for women and the personification of wisdom. See “Women in Ministry in the Biblical Narrative: An Overview with Cynthia Long Westfall,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wd6JYXfSc8>.
19. Most translations do not depict the feminine in this passage, “many others,” versus “many other women.” See *Discovering Biblical Equality* (InterVarsity Press, 2021), 481.
20. Lit. “They were tentmakers.”
21. Philippians 4:2–3, 1 Corinthians 1:11, and Colossians 4:15.

God uses women from all walks
of life in their own gifting,
means, and circumstances
according to his purpose.



Brianna Cortez works for CBE International as the Educational Engagement Associate. She holds an MA in Intercultural Studies from Lincoln Christian University and has worked for churches, schools, and nonprofits in the United States and abroad. She is passionate about understanding how God calls women and men to imitate Christ and helping organizations create inclusive, Christ-centered, and sustainable ministries. Brianna currently lives with her husband, Cristian, in Wisconsin and enjoys reading lots of books.



Clothed in Christ: Our Highest Identity

My husband and I recently joined Christians in France for a week of worship, Bible study, and small group discussion. As the week ended, our Bible study leader asked if there was a topic we should consider. Immediately, a woman shouted, “Women leaders in the church” and the room erupted in cheering. Quickly, I reached into my bag and handed out CBE bookmarks and later gave the woman a copy of CBE’s *Still Side by Side* in French. Eagerly, she read the endorsements and pointed to my name and asked, “What’s this name doing on the book?” She wondered how an Arab came to lead a Christian organization advancing women’s biblical equality. Assumptions based on ethnicity and gender can blind us to the gifts God gives people. History and Scripture provide examples of why you can never read a name or look at someone and know what they’re capable of, for God is “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,” (Eph. 3:20).

Historian Tom Holland shows how Christians upended one of the most abusive, powerful empires in history: Rome.¹ Elevating power as the highest virtue, Rome killed millions and demeaned many more as inferiors—slaves and women. The weak—those deemed useless to Rome—were tossed over city walls as defenseless prey to wild animals. Those who resisted were crucified along a thousand roads, reinforcing Rome’s dominion. Who could have imagined that a crucified Jew and his followers would triumph over Rome? Yet the Roman cross—a symbol of power over the weak—became God’s path to a new creation which Paul called “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,” (1 Cor. 1:23).

Viewing all humans as created in God’s image (Gen. 1:27), Christians like Macrina (AD 327–379) rescued infants abandoned as rubbish.² Even more, Paul’s heartbeat was Gal. 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Clothed in Christ, we have a new identity with new possibilities for our purpose and calling, one that surpasses cultural bias based on ethnicity, class, and gender. The majority of leaders Paul cites in Romans 16 were women, slaves, and non-Jews. Reframing authority in terms of belonging and kinship, Paul returned to Philemon his slave Onesimus whom Paul called his beloved son, his very heart, one useful to Paul. No longer a slave to Philemon but a dear brother (v. 10–15), Onesimus is freed and serves as Bishop of Ephesus, which soon becomes a thriving center of Christian faith.

Challenging cultural assumptions of value and purpose, Paul takes his lead from Christ who revealed his identity first to a woman outside Israel. Astonishing the disciples, the Samaritan woman becomes an evangelist

to a hated people (John 4:4–44). Jesus also welcomed the Syrophenician woman whom the disciples tried to *shoo away*—reflecting Jewish assumptions that her people were “dogs” (Matt. 15:23). Yet she showed that dogs can have greater faith than the privileged, the male disciples who represent Israel’s twelve tribes. These and other biblical accounts foreshadow the birth of the church at Pentecost as the Spirit empowered “Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome both Jews and converts to Judaism; Cretans and Arabs...” (Acts 2:9–13). A fulfillment of Joel 2:28, the Spirit equipped the church with supernatural gifts not limited by gender, race, or social class.

Women become teachers, church planters, deacons and leaders, with character qualities that reflect the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–26). The chart below shows the character qualities required in leaders that include women.

Elders/ Overseers: (1 Tim. 3:2–11)	Temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money...	Priscilla was a teacher and church planter. She functioned as a pastor. Acts 18:24–26, 1 Cor. 16:19–20, Rom. 16:3–5, 2 Tim. 1:2, 4:19.
Deacons: (1 Tim. 3:8–11)	Serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money...	Phoebe was a deacon and leader in the church. She carried Paul’s letter to the church in Rome and likely explained its contents. Rom. 16:1–3.
Widows and Older Women: (1 Tim. 3:11, 5–16, Titus 2:3)	Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things...	Widows and Older Women: freed from marital duties used their time and resources to minister to and serve the church. 1 Tim. 3:5–16.
Fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–26)	Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...	Required of all leaders.

Clothed in Christ, leaders are known by their gifting *and* their character—qualities that transcend cultural expectations based on embodiment.

Notes

1. Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (Basic Books, 2019).
2. Michael Bird, “Tom Holland’s Dominion,” *Euangelion*, July 2020, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/euangelion/2020/07/tom-hollands-dominion/>.

Annual Report

CBE exists to promote the biblical message (Gal. 3:28) that God calls women and men of all cultures, races, and classes to share authority equally in service and leadership in the home, church, and world. CBE's mission is to eliminate the power imbalance between men and women resulting from theological patriarchy.

CBE, God reaches global communities with the liberating message of Scripture that women and men are created for mutuality in the home, church, and the world. CBE educates and advocates to ensure women worldwide know that God loves them and calls them equally to use their God-given gifts. When women learn that they are equally valued and called by a loving God to lead and serve in God's work, their lives are changed, and their faith is restored. When they are given a voice, they often speak prophetically and passionately, declaring the gospel that they were previously unable to fully express.

CBE's website hosts an ever-growing online library of over four-thousand free resources to educate and equip Christians on women's biblical equality. Since 2020, we have averaged more than 1.5 million page views on our website per year, with approximately one million unique website visitors per year and over one million unique page views for CBE's journal, magazine, and blog. CBE's website can be translated into eighteen languages. CBE's key resources are available in over thirty-five languages.

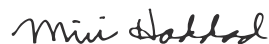
CBE uses a vast array of resources to uniquely engage an extensive global network of ministry partners—thought-leaders, humanitarians, scholars, denominational leaders, and pioneers from more than one-hundred denominations and 214 countries and territories. This network disseminates CBE's award-winning biblical resources to many cultures, denominations, ages, educational levels, and vocations worldwide. Together we skillfully advocate for mutuality between women and men which flourishes marriages and churches and lowers abuses worldwide.

CBE's 2023 International Conference in Brazil was a powerful example as our message ignited conversations and momentum for women's biblical equality in the home, church, and in South America. We recognize the call of God far more clearly after watching Brazilians devour two days of conference lectures and two books in their mother tongue. Conference lectures are available on CBE's website, and YouTube and SoundCloud channels.

Partnering and collaborating with other people and organizations is essential in CBE's work. In March 2024, I joined the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women panel on, "Theological Commitments Towards Gender Equity: Practical Case Studies from Christian Organizations." At the Evangelical Theological Society annual meetings, my paper was read and then published in a new book, *Need to Know: Empowering Female Leadership and Why It's Essential for the Future of the Church*, published by 100 Movements Publishing and available on CBE's online bookstore. CBE participates in theological discussions worldwide to show that when Scripture is properly interpreted, it teaches that women and men were created to serve and lead as mutual partners.

CBE's outreach worldwide is made possible by a devoted, talented team of volunteers, writers, scholars, staff, interns, donors, and humanitarians who are the hands and feet of Jesus leading chapters, serving on prayer teams, creating resources, and publishing new books and better Bible translations. They work in obscurity not seeking personal recognition or platforms but are prayerfully conscious that this world, though not our home, is nonetheless a precious opportunity to show that leadership is modeled after Christ's sacrifice and service.

Thank you for standing with CBE's international work. We're so very grateful for your partnership.



Dr. Mimi Haddad, President

See CBE's annual report for April 1, 2023 to March 31, 2024 at cbe.today/annualreports.

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Romans 16:1–7

CBE's 2025 International Conference
Seminario Internacional Teológico Bautista

Buenos Aires, Argentina

September 4–6, 2025



Praise and Prayer

Praise

- We praise God for the success of CBE's 2024 International Conference in Denver, Colorado. Many attendees came from around the US and internationally to learn from scholars, experts, and practitioners.
- We praise God for the completion of *Mutual by Design*'s translation into Spanish, which is now available for readers to purchase through CBE's online bookstore.
- We praise God for a new eLearning course focused on 1 Timothy, which will be a great tool for those new to egalitarianism, students, pastors, and lay people.
- We praise God for our donors, subscribers, and members, who support CBE so diligently through their work.

Prayer

- We ask for God's wisdom to guide our planning of CBE's 2025 International Conference in Argentina.
- We ask for God's guidance in reaching new communities and audiences worldwide through outside events, CBE publications, and CBE's online presence.
- We ask God for financial support from foundations and individuals for CBE's initiatives, like our Katherine Bushnell film, the Alvera Mickelsen Memorial Scholarship, our Christian radio project, CBE's podcast, and book projects, including translation projects, so more resources can become available in other languages.



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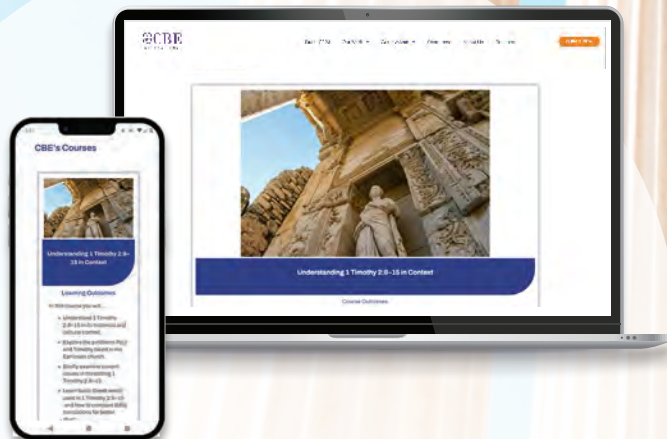
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CBE INTERNATIONAL (Christians for Biblical Equality)

CBE International (CBE) is a nonprofit organization of Christian women and men who believe that the Bible, properly translated and interpreted, teaches the fundamental equality of women and men of all racial and ethnic groups, all economic classes, and all ages, based on the teachings of Scriptures such as Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (NIV 2011).

MISSION STATEMENT CBE exists to promote the biblical message that God calls women and men of all cultures, races, and classes to share authority equally in service and leadership in the home, church, and world. CBE’s mission is to eliminate the power imbalance between men and women resulting from theological patriarchy.

STATEMENT OF FAITH

- We *believe* in one God, creator and sustainer of the universe, eternally existing as three persons equal in power and glory.
- We *believe* in the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus Christ.
- We *believe* that eternal salvation and restored relationships are only possible through faith in Jesus Christ who died for us, rose from the dead, and is coming again. This salvation is offered to all people.
- We *believe* the Holy Spirit equips us for service and sanctifies us from sin.
- We *believe* the Bible is the inspired word of God, is reliable, and is the final authority for faith and practice.
- We *believe* that women and men are equally created in God’s image and given equal authority and stewardship of God’s creation.
- We *believe* that women and men are equally responsible for and distorted by sin, resulting in shattered relationships with God, self, and others.
- Therefore, we *lament* that the sins of sexism and racism have been used to historically oppress and silence women throughout the life of the church.
- We *resolve* to value and listen to the voices and lived experiences of women throughout the world who have been impacted by the sins of sexism and racism.



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- Scripture is our authoritative guide for faith, life, and practice.
- Patriarchy (male dominance) is not a biblical ideal but a result of sin that manifests itself personally, relationally, and structurally.
- Patriarchy is an abuse of power, taking from women and girls what God has given them: their dignity, freedom, and leadership, and often their very lives.
- While the Bible reflects a patriarchal culture, the Bible does not teach patriarchy as God’s standard for human relationships.
- Christ’s redemptive work frees all people from patriarchy, calling women and men to share authority equally in service and leadership.
- God’s design for relationships includes faithful marriage between a woman and a man, celibate singleness, and mutual submission in Christian community.
- The unrestricted use of women’s gifts is integral to the work of the Holy Spirit and essential for the advancement of the gospel worldwide.
- Followers of Christ are to advance human flourishing by opposing injustice and patriarchal teachings and practices that demean, diminish, marginalize, dominate, abuse, enslave, or exploit women, or restrict women’s access to leadership in the home, church, and world.

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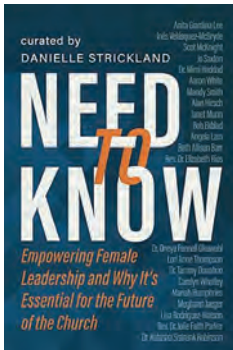
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Amy E. Marga

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