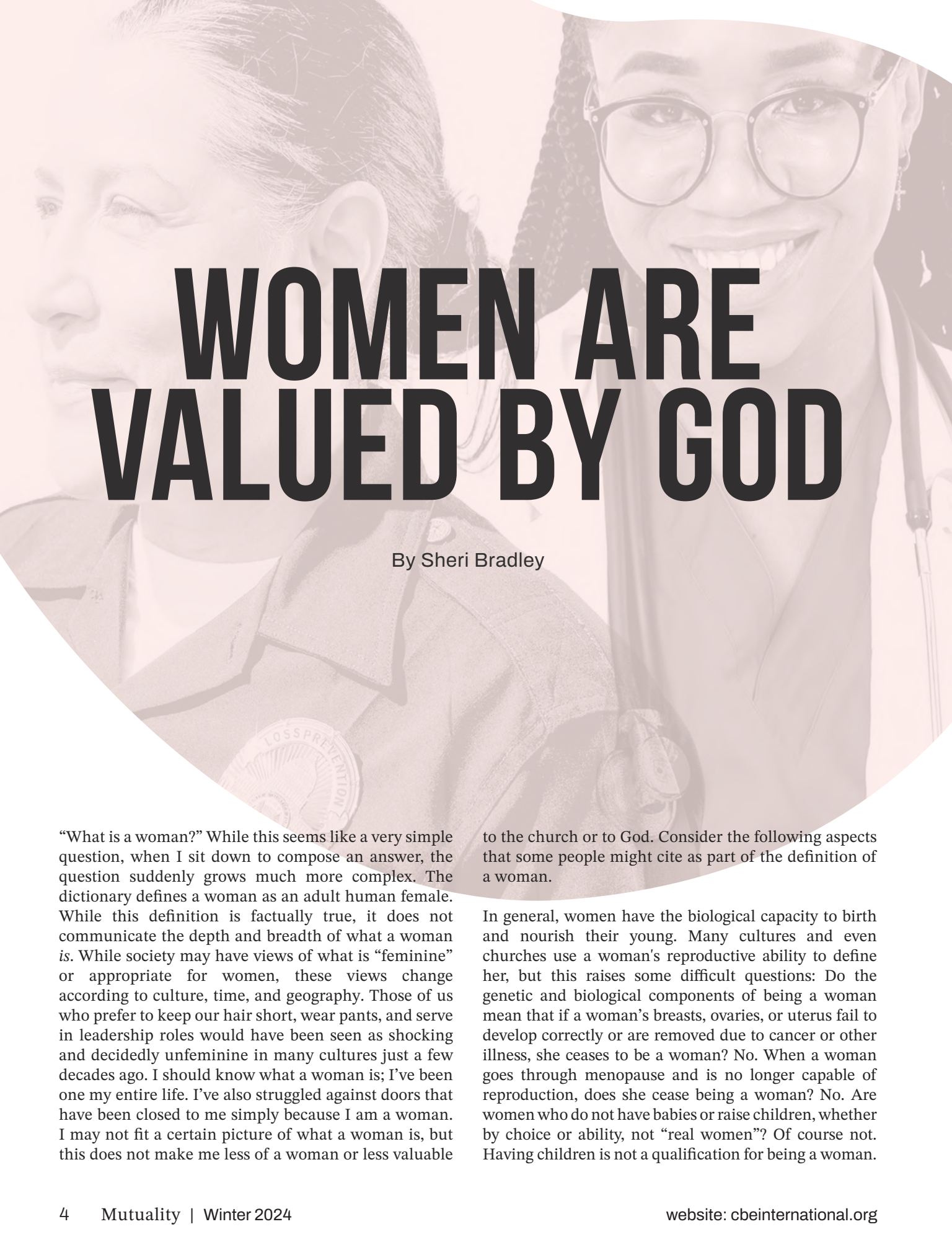




WOMEN ARE VALUED BY GOD

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,

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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

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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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