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“While some of Coleman’s research may initially surprise you, it will also be an aha moment that will move our culture forward.”

—**Monica Schmelter**, TV host for TCN’s *Bridges*, author, and speaker

“I recommend this read to women who are prayerful about digging deeper into Scripture to discover the life God designed them to live.”

—**Linda Goldfarb**, international speaker, board-certified Christian life coach, and author of the award-winning *LINKED: Quick Guide to Personalities* series

ON PURPOSE

*Understanding
God's Freedom for Women
Through Scripture*

Julie Zine Coleman



On Purpose: Understanding God's Freedom for Women Through Scripture
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Introduction

He cornered me in the snack bar after chapel. At the camp director's request, I had just led the singing that evening for the new group of campers and counselors at Boys Camp. I had been initially reluctant to lead in front of a group of men, having been taught that the Bible restricted women in that way. But I was assured it would be fine, because, after all, the camp leadership was *asking* me to do it.

But the speaker didn't see it that way. Beet red in the face, barely controlling his anger, he confronted me. Why would I ever think it appropriate to lead men? He then went on to lecture me on what Scripture teaches about women (like I hadn't heard it my entire life) and had me reduced to tears by the time he was done.

I tried to explain why I was leading, but he was having none of it. That was it for my new assignment. The camp did without a competent song leader for the rest of the two weeks.

It was the 1970s. This was one of several incidents that made me question the many restrictions placed on women in most conservative denominations at that time. Please understand, I knew the Scriptures cited for those limitations almost as well as John 3:16. However, I was wired to be a leader, which caused me to feel as though I was constantly crashing into a glass ceiling. I often wondered why God would have made me the way he did, if I had to worry every time I used my spiritual gifts. I lived in constant fear of crossing the line between appropriate and inappropriate.

Much has changed culturally since my college days. Women now hold key leadership positions in business, in politics, and enjoy respect by society in general. Equality has been reached on many levels. But not in the church. It has been said that the church always arrives thirty years late and out of breath. But in this case, traditional roles have been dictated by Scripture, which is timeless in its principles and far above any cultural determination. Right? But does Scripture really teach limitations? Or is the traditional position in reality an *interpretation* of God's Word, subject to human error or misunderstanding?

I had to wonder about that possibility in my early years, because every group drew their lines in the sand in different places. In some churches (like mine), women wore head coverings and kept silent. They couldn't speak in a church business meeting or serve on a committee with men. In other churches, women could pray out loud or give their testimony, but not preach. Of course, if you were a missionary, all bets were off. Many women in the field spent their lives teaching men and women alike, since there was no man to lead at their location.

Then there was the seeming inconsistency of God himself. If his will was for women never to lead men, why would he choose, for example, Deborah to be judge over Israel? Why would he use Priscilla to teach the great preacher Apollos, patiently correcting his misunderstandings and leading him to truth? Why did Jesus make Mary Magdalene the first witness to his resurrection, when a woman's testimony wasn't even admissible in a Jewish court? In view of all these examples, wasn't God violating his own rules?

There were also discrepancies in the application of the "rules." In my early adult years, I noticed that sometimes women *were* allowed to "teach" men. No one seemed concerned when men sang hymns full of theology written by Fanny Crosby or read books by Elisabeth Elliot or Catherine Marshall. A friend of mine attended a conservative Bible college where Elisabeth Elliot was invited to speak for a chapel. In order to make this acceptable, the authorities removed the podium and replaced it with a music stand.

It all seemed so arbitrary.

My own understanding of God's Word on the matter has morphed slowly over the years. I married a wonderful man who loves and knows his Bible better than anyone I know. Over the years, Steve inspired me to study those limiting passages in earnest. What did they really mean? To my surprise, when I did, what I found in my research was very different from what I had always been taught.

Steve has always interpreted those passages differently than our denomination did, and from the beginning saw no need to limit his wife in any way. Contrary to what *I* believed about marriage on our wedding day, we have always functioned as a team, a true partnership rather than a hierarchy. As the Lord opened up ministry opportunities for me over the years, Steve has been my biggest cheerleader. Never once was he threatened by my strong personality. Never once did he remind me to "keep my place," as I had previously been told. He has remained consistent in selflessly looking out for my best interests.

Interpretation is limited by an interpreter's perspective. Anyone studying Scripture has factors that can keep them from a correct understanding. There are the basic beliefs that we have been taught from an early age, be they right or wrong. Those things become the foundation and filter for any additional knowledge we may gain. Our tightly held assumptions are the lens through which we see the world. Our experiences chime in as well. Past hurts or successes will influence how we receive information. In part, those things have made us into who we are today.

So, while Scripture is God's Word, divinely inspired, accurate and powerful, human interpretation is not. Interpreters are always affected by their core beliefs.

We used to joke in seminary: "I love it when Scripture backs me up." But seriously, *we were joking*. When we approach Scripture with something to prove, we tend to see things that aren't even there. We can take verses out of context in order to justify what we already believe. The chance of bad interpretation is exponentially larger when we've already decided what we think before studying the text.

So how do we avoid that pitfall? Keep ourselves from putting words into God's mouth? Refrain from interjecting what we think into what the Bible says?

It's not easy. I ran into that problem when writing my first book, *Unexpected Love*. Many of the stories I covered were already so familiar to me. This was especially true of Martha and Mary. I'd always heard: Martha was bad. She should not have been working in the kitchen with Jesus teaching in the living room. Mary was good. She sat at Jesus's feet and hung on His every word. But something had always bothered me about that interpretation. Hospitality was commanded in Mosaic law. Martha was merely obeying Scripture. So why then would Jesus criticize Martha for whipping up a dinner?

Before I began studying the Martha passage, I spent time in prayer, asking God to help me put aside what I'd always heard. As I dug in, I carefully noted each detail Luke provided. I researched the original Greek text. I noticed repeated phrases and important words. I spent a lot of time looking at the context of the story, and how it fit into the whole. My quest was to see, really see, what was *there* in black-and-white.

Commentaries were a help in finding other things to research that could assist me in my understanding. So were books explaining first-century Jewish history, customs, and culture. I tried not to rely heavily on extrabiblical sources, though, since much of their content is also affected by human interpretation. As learned as those authors might be, they can still contradict each other. My primary dependence was on the Holy Spirit to teach and guide me as I searched for the meaning of the story.

In the end, the Lord did give me new insight into that puzzling interaction between Jesus and Martha. It came through systematic study of the text, searching for the principal point the author intended to make. For the most part, that careful process helped me put the noise of my biases and previous beliefs aside, so I could hear the Holy Spirit guide me to something fresh.

My passion for the subject of this book comes from a concern that we have gotten it wrong. I ache for future generations whose cul-

ture has moved on, giving them a freedom in secular society that the church will not allow. I have seen women told to stay in abusive marriages while their church leadership tiptoes around the abusers, refusing to hold them accountable. I have seen too many people leave Christian fellowship because of their disillusionment with how women are treated by the body. Worst of all—I have seen women walk away from God, because they believe he thinks of them as second-class citizens in his kingdom.

In this book, I want to take you on a journey through the passages that are traditionally thought to limit women. We are going to look, really look, at what is written there for us. We will (as much as is humanly possible) put aside what we have previously heard or thought and start each passage with a clean slate.

It doesn't matter what I think. What matters is what the Word of God says. You have a personal responsibility to figure this out with the help of the Holy Spirit. This issue isn't only about half the church. How we interpret these passages affects everyone. Because if we are limiting women unnecessarily, we are handicapping God's church, keeping it from functioning in the way he designed it. We would be endeavoring to walk on only one leg, when we were given two.

Before we get started, I need to add one last thing. I will be sharing some of my past experiences as well as others' that negatively portray brothers or sisters in Christ. Those stories are to present the issues and draw the reader in to what we are about to study. They stand as examples in how applying a bad interpretation can produce terrible results.

In no way do I mean to judge or disrespect those depicted. I believe with all my heart that their strong convictions and resulting actions came from their understanding of certain texts. They were trying to remain true to what they believed Scripture teaches. I get it.

I am not angry for those incidents from my past. I am thankful for an upbringing that emphasized the importance of the Bible and taking personal responsibility to study it for myself. I was well-loved in my church and camp. A love for God and desire to obey him was

modeled for me frequently. I love the people of God. As messy as that can get at times.

Now more than ever, we need to get to the bottom of these passages, because the debate rages on. The only way we can have peace about what to think is to study these passages for ourselves. I hope this book inspires you to look for the timeless principles in Scripture that are true for any culture, because the truth always sets us free. What does God have to say about women and marriage, their inherent value, and how they are to use their gifts? Get ready to dig in. You might well be surprised.

Chapter 1

Was Woman Created with an Inherently Different Nature Than Man's?

Then God said, "Let Us make mankind in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the livestock and over all the earth, and over every crawling thing that crawls on the earth." So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Then God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; and to every animal of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to everything that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food"; and it was so. And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

And so the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their heavenly lights. By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because on it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made earth and heaven. Now no shrub of the field was yet on the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to cultivate the ground. But a mist used to rise from the earth and water the whole surface of the ground. Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living person. The LORD God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God caused every tree to grow that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden; and from there it divided and became four rivers. The name of the first is Pishon; it flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. The gold of that land is good; the bdellium and the onyx stone are there as well. The name of the second river is Gihon; it flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris; it flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and tend it. The LORD God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may freely eat; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat from it you will certainly die."

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." And out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the livestock, and to the birds of the sky, and to every animal of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the

flesh at that place. And the LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

“At last this is bone of my bones,
And flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called ‘woman,’
Because she was taken out of man.”

For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, but they were not ashamed.

—Genesis 1:26–2:25



Focus on Genesis 1–2

I was preparing for a coming women’s retreat with an area church when I received a troubling call from their pastor. Mind you, I was not a new speaker for them and had previously received nothing but positive feedback. But the pastor was troubled about my newly published book, *Unexpected Love: God’s Heart Revealed through Jesus’ Conversations with Women*. The coming retreat would be drawn from the content of that book as per their request. But now he worried that my material would contradict certain positions in their doctrinal statement.

Wait . . . what?

I inquired: had he read the book? He hadn’t. But he had read the four-page introduction. I racked my brain trying to think of what was in there that could possibly be upsetting. I finally asked.

He told me, “You wrote that Jesus came to set women free.”

I was puzzled. “You don’t think that Jesus came to set women free?” I asked.

“Well, it depends on what you mean by free,” he explained. He then reminded me that God had created women to be under men’s authority from the very beginning in Genesis 1–2. So, in that sense, he reasoned, women would never be “free.” Man’s headship was God’s designed, natural order.

It was one of those conversations I would replay over and over in my head for some time. *Does* the creation account indicate that God designed women to be subservient? Was there a hierarchy in the relationship between men and women from the beginning? Were women created with an inherently different nature than men?

Genesis is a great place to start looking for God’s true intent for women, because it is only there we get a brief glimpse of what the

world was like without sin. We see the first humans near the very end of the creation account. All of earth's flora and fauna have been brought into being. Now comes the crowning moment, when God creates a being far different than anything else. "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:27).

What Does It Mean to Be Created in the Image of God?

Images can be pretty realistic. When I was a little girl, my friend Chrissie and I went to the town carnival with her dad. For the first time, we were allowed to go through the fun house all by ourselves. We felt very grown-up as we handed our tickets to the ticket taker, and hurried past the enormous man in a gorilla costume stationed at the door. As we began to navigate the maze in the first room, Chrissie suddenly grabbed my arm in fear. "That gorilla is following us," she whispered. We took off running.

No matter how quickly we rushed through each new room, we could not widen the gap between us and the gorilla. It was terrifying. The worst panic came as we entered the room of mirrors. We could see the exit doorway's reflection, but every time we tried to go through it, we only banged into glass. The image was so real it kept us fooled for excruciatingly long moments. Finally, by feeling our way along the mirrored walls, we found the real exit and made our escape.

The gorilla gave up the chase as we rushed outside, back to the safety of Chrissie's dad. I was never so happy to see an adult in my life.

As we discovered with those mirrors, an image can be convincing, but it is merely a likeness of the real thing. Both man and woman were created in the image of God. Both would reflect the reality of God to the rest of his creation.

The original audience of the Genesis account would not have had trouble understanding this "image" terminology at all. They were familiar with the ancient practice of conquering rulers leaving statues of themselves in acquired far-reaching lands. Those images stood as

constant reminders of who was in charge, a representative of that ruler's power in their absence.¹

While the rest of God's creation evidenced his existence and power, humans alone were created in his *image*. They would reflect the Creator to the rest of creation, functioning as a representative of the real thing. Their very existence would, in ways other than the creation around them, show the nature of God.

Then the Lord told the man and woman *how* they were to represent him: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen. 1:28). God's representatives were to have dominion over the rest of creation. Both of them.

They simultaneously received this charge from the Lord. They were to rule together. And God saw that it was very good. Then on the seventh day, he rested.

Does the Fact That Woman Was Created to Be Man's "Helper" Mean She Was Subordinate to Him?

In Genesis 2, the narrator provides a closer look into the same events of chapter 1, furnishing greater detail about humankind. God builds man from the dust of the ground and breathes life into him. He fashions a perfect place for man to live, a garden with water, trees, and plants to provide for his physical needs. He sets man in the garden to cultivate it. All is his to enjoy.

But there is one caveat: in the midst of plenty, God places the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. From that tree, man was never to eat. With his instruction, God adds a stern warning: "On the day that you eat from it you will certainly die" (Gen. 2:17).²

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1. Richard Hess, "Equality With and Without Innocence," *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, and Gordon D. Fee (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 81.
 2. Was the tree placed in the garden as some kind of temptation? James 1:13 tells us, "No one is to say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God

But God is not quite finished. In order for man to multiply and fill the earth, there must be a counterpart. Had the man understood what was missing? It's interesting that before creating the woman, God first gave man the huge task of naming every living creature.³ Because as he does, a realization seems to dawn on him: while each animal, from the birds of the sky to the beasts of the field, has its suitable mate, he does not.

The man has discovered himself to be unique in God's creation. He needs a *helper*.

In the English language, a *helper* is an assistant. It is someone to come along and do another's bidding, managing the smaller tasks that will enable the more important person to complete a job.

My children loved to assist me in making Christmas cookies when they were little. They wanted to help in every stage of baking: mixing the dough, rolling it out, cutting out shapes, and after the baking was done, decorating their creations.

When they were finished "helping" me, flour covered the entire kitchen table and much of the floor. The cookies were inconsistent: the super thin ones burned, and those too thick did not bake all the way through. And the royal icing? A nightmare. I would find traces of hardened icing for days. The capacity four young children had to make a mess while helping was unbelievable. And in the end, as proud as they were of their finished products, the cookies were substandard at best. Sometimes "help" is not all it's cracked up to be.

Is that what the original word *helper* (Hebrew: *ezer*) meant? Was the woman created to be a mere assistant for the more important man? Was their relationship designed to be the lesser serving the greater?

cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone." So then why was it there? It seems likely that it stood as a reminder to man that while he reflected God's image, he was not God. It was a continual reminder that he served a power far greater than himself. He was a part of God's creation, not a deity. The tree provided a physical, visual contrast between God and man.

3. Did he do this to create in Adam an interest in a partner? It was during the naming of the animals that the man realized he was alone. He saw his need. It was only then that God created woman.

When we aren't sure of the full meaning of a word in the original ancient language, it's good practice to investigate other places that word is used in Scripture. There are plenty of other examples of helper (*ezer*) available to us.

God is often described as an *ezer*:

- “There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides the heavens to your *help*, and the clouds in His majesty” (Deut. 33:26, emphasis mine).
- God promised his people: “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will also *help* you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.’ . . . Those who contend with you will be as nothing and will perish” (Isa. 41:10–11, emphasis mine).

There are many more instances of God's help in the Old Testament. Each time, he is coming to the rescue of those who are weak and in need.

Great armies are called *ezers* as well:

- In Isaiah, God rebukes Israel for trusting in a neighboring army for assistance instead of him: “Woe to those who go down to Egypt for *help* and rely on horses, and trust in chariots because there are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but they do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the LORD!” (Isa. 31:1, emphasis mine).
- During the reign of King Amaziah, the nation was in dire straits. There was no help to be found: “For the LORD saw the misery of Israel, which was very bitter; for there was neither bond nor free spared, nor was there any *helper* for Israel” (2 Kings 14:26, emphasis mine).

There are other instances of Israel seeking the *help* of a strong nation, enlisting military aid against an enemy they could not defeat on their own (see 1 Kings 20:16; Isa. 30:5).

There is no indication in the Old Testament that an *ezer* involves subservience. Would God be considered subservient to those he has come to save? No more than an army capable of coming alongside Israel to rescue them from their enemies would be thought of as weak.

So while the English word *helper* can have connotations of an underling or weaker assistant, the original Hebrew word *ezer* does not.⁴

There is no indication from which we should infer the woman was originally designed to be subordinate to man's authority as a subservient assistant, at least from what is in the text thus far. She would stand by his side to co-rule the earth with him, just as they were charged to do in Genesis 1:28.

Did the Fact That the Man Gave a Name to the Woman Mean He Was to Rule over Her?

After meeting her for the first time, the man identifies his female counterpart as “woman.”⁵ He later begins to call her “Eve” in Genesis 3:20, “because she was the mother of all the living.” Could the fact that he felt free to give her a name show his dominion over her? After all, he had just finished naming the animals, over which he was given dominion.

In other places in the Bible, naming someone does not necessarily indicate authority over them. For example, later in Genesis, Abraham's concubine, Hagar, has an encounter with God after fleeing

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4. It has been suggested that the Hebrew word directly following *ezer*, *kenegdo*, could be translated as “under.” The root word, *neged*, is used 150 times in the Old Testament. The only context in which it is translated as “under” in the NASB is 2 Sam. 12:12, where God promises judgment: “Indeed you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and under the sun” (NASB1995). Obviously, God is not placing himself under the authority of the sun. The phrase is meant to communicate that God's judgment will be given in broad daylight. *Kenegdo* in every other instance is translated as “over against” or “in front of” or “in the presence of.” There is no indication that *ezer kenegdo* would indicate Eve or the help she would provide as under Adam's authority. The best literal translation is “helper corresponding to.”
 5. The Hebrew word *adam* has not yet been used as a proper name (and is not until Gen. 4:25; until then, *adam* indicates general humankind). The noun *adam* is the masculine form of the word *adamah*, which literally means *ground* or *earth*.

her mistress Sarah's mistreatment. The Lord tells Hagar that she will give birth to a son and gives her a reassuring glimpse of his future long life. In response, Hagar "called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, 'You are a God who sees'" (Gen. 16:13 NASB1995). *El Roi*.

Did giving him a name indicate Hagar had dominion over God? Of course not.

The man sure didn't seem to think the woman was a companion to be dominated: "At last this is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). This statement doesn't indicate a sense of weakness or belief that she was in any way less than him. There is nothing to note beyond an expression of mutual equality. If we want to know why he named her *woman*, we only have to look at the text: "She shall be called 'woman,' because she was taken out of man" (Gen. 2:23). The name itself, while noting a diversity in sex, actually reflects the unity in their essence.

God's final creation was someone just like him, made in the image of God, meant to share the responsibility in subduing the earth. The narrator confirms this by interjecting: "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). The division God created when he took a part out of man would be restored when the two become one again.

One. It would be a harmonious relationship from the start.

Does the Order in Which Man and Woman Were Created Indicate Anything About God's Intentions for Their Relationship?

There's one more issue that we need to address. Did the fact that man was created first indicate he was the most important or meant to be the dominant one? After all, in the Old Testament, the position of firstborn son was highly prized. He received the largest portion of the inheritance and became the ruling patriarch of the family when the father died. So wasn't the man then more privileged or valuable in God's eyes as his "firstborn"?

A look at the rest of Genesis (remember, context!) does not support this idea. While firstborn sons often had a place of preference in Jewish family lineages, this is not always consistent in the biblical narrative. God certainly did not bless or elevate the firstborns over their brothers in any of the patriarchs' families. The family line (which would eventually produce Jesus Christ) went through Seth in the next generation, who was the third child of Adam and Eve. Later on, Abraham's second son Isaac and his descendants received the everlasting covenant with God, promised someday to become his chosen nation. Isaac's son Jacob was chosen over his older brother Esau. God placed Jacob's son Joseph in a position to rule over his brothers, and he was the eleventh out of twelve. It would be hard to prove from the rest of Genesis that God gave preference or greater value to a firstborn (or first-created) human.

Also, man and woman were not the only ones created on the sixth day. The cattle, creeping things, and beasts of the earth were created first. So, assuming creation order was an indication of superiority would make the animals the most important. Which obviously was not the case, since they were not created in the image of God. Humanity was the crowning glory over *all creation*.

As we leave this sixth day of creation, we can look back to see a perfect setting, inhabited by perfect people who perfectly reflected the image of God. There is nothing in their relationship or circumstances to keep them from living as one in perfect harmony.

But the tranquility wouldn't last for long. With the advent of sin, all of that perfection quickly dissolved. Life as they first knew it would be forever altered. In the next chapter, we will look at what changed after the fall. The introduction of sin was most definitely a game changer.

Good News for Today

While people have used the creation account in Genesis 1–2 as proof that woman was different from man in how she reflected God's image or in her position in their relationship, evidence of that is simply *not*

in the text. Teachers who promote that idea rarely quote Genesis 1:27–28. They stick to chapter 2. It is a case of taking the one chapter out of the context of the whole book. Never a good idea.

If we see chapter 2 in light of what was told to us in chapter 1, we know there was no hierarchy. Both were created in the image of God. Both man and woman were given the same responsibilities. The woman was described by the man as “bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh.” Both were formed from the dust of the ground. And God taking a part from Adam’s side guaranteed she was just like him, outside of their sex differences.

Even without the context of Genesis 1:27–28, it would take a good deal of conjecture (or predetermined assumptions) to read hierarchy into chapter 2. But chapter 2 does not stand alone. It is part of a whole—the whole creation account and the whole book of Genesis.

Man and woman are identified in Genesis 2:21–24 as being of the same essence. Cut from the same cloth, so to speak. As Gilbert Bilezikian observes:

God had recourse to a strange cloning operation that demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt the essential identity between man and woman. Had Eve been made out of the ground, there might have existed ambiguity about the integrity of her human nature. After all, animals had also been taken from the ground. . . . However, since she was taken from Adam, no confusion about her full participation in his humanity was possible. She was made from the same material as his own body. From one being, God made two persons.⁶

After interpreting the meaning of a passage, it is important to determine the principle that it teaches. Preachers call this the *Big Idea*. It is a timeless truth extracted from a passage that is not connected to any particular culture or time period: a principle that can

6. Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman’s Place in the Church and Family*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 23.

be applied to someone who lives in a developing country as well as those in a metropolitan city.

What is the principle that summarizes Genesis 1 and 2? Man and woman were made from the same essence, in the image of God, charged to multiply and subdue the earth. The only limitation mentioned was the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

But within that framework of essence and image, there are endless possibilities of divergence. The uniqueness within all of humanity is a wonderful expression of God's boundless creativity. This should prompt us to rethink any culturally driven stereotypes about males and females. We can't discount God's varied expression and squeeze his creation into a box we were never meant to construct.

Many of our preconceived ideas of what makes a man a man and a woman a woman come from culture, rather than the Word of God. I have friends who abandoned some of those cultural expectations; they structured their marriage and family based on their God-given gifts. She is a math prodigy and has a great job in government security. He is a nurturer and stays home with their small children to give them full-time care.

For sure it raises some eyebrows. But they are partners, a team, working together to fill family needs through the strengths God gave them.

My husband used to get a little irritated when I would go out of town for a few days and people at church would joke, "I guess you are getting to know Mrs. Swanson this weekend!" He is proficient in the kitchen and has no problem preparing a good meal. It was a bit insulting to assume he was domestically helpless because he was a man.

People need to be allowed to be who they were created to be. As the old proverb states, "As a twig is bent, so grows the tree."⁷ To insist on stereotypical roles is akin to forcing a left-handed child to write with her right hand (as past generations have done).

7. Alexander Pope, the eighteenth-century poet, is credited with coining the phrase.

Males and females share the same nature. Created in the image of God. Capable of exercising dominion over the earth. To limit women or men to culturally expected roles is to fail to recognize what God may have created them to be. In my experience, the church tends to hold on to culture that has moved on and fails to separate our spiritual understanding from a culturally inspired mentality. Rather than being at the forefront of positive change, we end up following those ever-changing norms with our feet dragging.

We can't allow societal expectations to dictate what we think about men and women. We must define the nature of man and woman from what the biblical text tells us. We need to embrace the strengths and weaknesses that make up each individual.

We must always work to pull principles out of Scripture that can work in any society. Because when we mistakenly attach the Bible to a bygone culture, God's Word becomes extraneous to contemporary lives. God is relevant to any time period and any culture. He is bigger than societal norms or time-driven ideals.

In the following chapters, you will find that what some would define as biblical manhood or womanhood does not stand up to how God interacted with people in Scripture, both male and female. He dealt with each person uniquely. He gave them different strengths and weaknesses. He met them where they were and moved them forward according to his plan.

God is not limited by our cultural preferences. Nor are men and women (created as unique individuals, of the same essence). Anything other than that principle is not from the text of Genesis 1 and 2.