

“Amidst the current confusion over gender issues and the related debates regarding complementarianism, what gets lost is the stunning beauty of God’s created design for men and women. Through the lens of Scripture, Josh Blount skillfully captures that beauty by portraying a biblical vision for men and women lived out in appropriate complementarian roles in the home and the church for the flourishing of all people and the glory of God. If you are confused about gender issues, or if you have lingering questions regarding complementarianism theologically and practically, Josh’s book will provide the clarity you seek. This book is a ‘go to’ resource for every Sovereign Grace pastor and church member.”

Mark Prater (Executive Director, Sovereign Grace Churches)

“‘Complementarianism’ may seem like a complicated word, but behind its many syllables lies a simple and biblical concept. With grace and wisdom, Josh Blount casts a biblical vision of God’s intentions for men and women in the family and the church and provides much-needed guidance for how to bear fruit, find joy, and experience peace by living in accord with God’s good design. We look forward to using this book to equip our students!”

Steve Whitacre (President, Trinity College; Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville) and Nicole Whitacre (Wife, Mother, Author, Teacher)

"I want to encourage every member of a Sovereign Grace Church to read *Complementarianism*. Here's why. The subject is that important, and this book is that good. Josh Blount's writing is biblical, pastoral, and practical, and the reader can anticipate a lasting impact on their life and relationships. This book is a celebration of God's good and beautiful design for men and women. So, join the party!"

C. J. Mahaney (Senior Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville)

"This book is a lovely distillation of God's design for the sexes, marriage, family, and the church. It is as understandable as it is eloquent. Josh Blount is to be commended for his biblical faithfulness; anyone wanting a sound guide to complementarity will find it here."

Owen Strachan (Director, One Gospel; Author, Reenchanted Humanity and The War on Men)

"In an age when not many Christian leaders and authors are willing to publically proclaim the unchanging truths of Scripture that speak against the world's lies, Josh Blount has courageously stood up by writing this timely and much needed book to explain and defend complementarianism. Josh writes with clarity, wisdom, boldness, and grace. *Complementarianism* is an outstanding resource."

Abelardo Muñoz (Pastor, Iglesia Cristiana Gracia Soberana, Ciudad Juarez, Mexico)

Complementarianism

THE SOVEREIGN GRACE PERSPECTIVES SERIES

Complementarianism

The Glory of God's Created Design

Josh Blount



Complementarianism: The Glory of God's Created Design

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Introduction

The early church father Gregory of Nyssa tells a story about a fourth-century public dispute. The church was debating issues of Trinitarian and Christological theology, and a council had gathered in the city of Constantinople that would produce the creed of the same name.

But the controversy spread from the councils of the church leaders into everyday conversations throughout the city. All Constantinople was abuzz with debates and trigger words and opinions ready to be argued. Gregory humorously complains that even attempting to do ordinary daily interactions—buying a loaf of bread, exchanging money, going to the bath—took you straight into the controversy:

If you ask someone about exchanging a small coin, he will philosophize about begotten and unbegotten. And if you ask about the price of a loaf of bread, “The Father is greater,” he answers, “and the Son is inferior.” And if you

say, “Is the bath ready?” he will propose, “From nothing the Son has his being.”¹

When you read that, you might find yourself wishing for a bygone day when the world was interested in the deity of the Son. Not exactly the stuff of current headlines (though on the other hand, you might have eventually just wanted to buy your loaf of bread without a debate).

But try this as a thought experiment: substitute “the price of a latte” for the loaf of bread, turn the coin interaction into a social media exchange, and imagine these as the competing points: “God made men and women” . . . “trans women are women.” Would the controversy be any less heated, or any less pervasive?

I don’t know whether Gregory was exaggerating about how widespread the debate about Christology was in the fourth-century public square. But I do know that it’s not exaggerating to say that arguments about gender are inescapable in modern Western society. The simplest of interactions in a coffee shop or your workplace now can take you into vehement disputes, and what was once an innocent grammatical choice now signals an entire worldview (for instance, how many of us could even have defined “pronoun” twenty years ago?).

We are increasingly a global family of churches in Sovereign Grace, a reality for which we give thanks. That means that some non-American readers within our church family don’t face the kind of controversies I’ve just described in the same way we currently do in the United States. If you’re one

1. The original Greek citation may be found in Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio de Deitate Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, 46:557b.

of those brothers or sisters reading this book, thank you for living the gospel faithfully in your culture. But we're not only a global family of churches; we're also a *confessional* family of churches, a denomination united by a common Statement of Faith² and by our Seven Shared Values³. Both of those documents gladly and joyfully bind us to the doctrine that is the heart of this book: complementarianism, the belief that men and women are created by God equal in value, yet different in role. As an American pastor, the gender controversies I've described above are the context in which I study, teach, and write about this doctrine. This book is shaped partly in response to those challenges, all of which we could summarize under the heading of the "LGBTQ revolution." Western culture can no longer even agree on whether "male and female" represent a real distinction among human beings, much less on whether there are different roles for men and women. That's a direct challenge to our complementarianism.

For my brothers and sisters in other contexts, I want you to know at the outset that this book, even though it's shaped by those challenges, isn't primarily about American culture. Our beliefs about men, women, marriage, and the church are rooted in Scripture and consistent with the beliefs of the church of Christ in every age and every place. The times and places change—and even some of our particular practices may change—but the Word of God does not change. This book is about those deeper Scriptural and theological convictions that remain unmoved no matter the time or place in which they are expressed.

2. <https://sovereigngrace.com/about/statement-of-faith/>

3. <https://sovereigngrace.com/about/7-shared-values/>

Unfortunately, American culture is good at exporting some of its worst ideas. And that means the LGBTQ revolution won't remain only an American or Western cultural challenge. In a digitally-connected age, the West's gender confusion is a global problem.

In this book, then, we will try to engage that problem and the deeper biblical issues involved, so that we don't only hold on to what's true because it's true, but so that we celebrate it because it is beautiful and good. All cultures in all places have to decide something about gender and marriage and family and child-rearing—otherwise no children will be born to be its future citizens. Only the church, the household of God and an embassy of the age to come, can simultaneously say, “Male and female God created them” and “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb!” Our complementarian convictions live between those two moments: creation and new creation, the beginning of human history and the end of human history. Let's explore them together.

The Big Picture

*The history of the human race began with
a wedding; it also ends with a wedding.*

Herman Bavinck

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Dry land and seas, stars and moon and sun, ocean creatures and flying things, fruit trees and flowers, grasses and great oaks.

And then he created a man. Followed by a woman. And they were married.

At the end of all things, there will be a new heavens and a new earth. A created world no longer groaning under the weight of judgment and decay, sin and suffering. The river of life will be there, a source of blessing and beauty; the tree of life, a source of healing and happiness. All will be lit by the radiant light of the glory of God.

And there will be a Man, and his Bride. And they will be joined in marriage.

Between those two weddings is the whole story of God, man, and salvation in Christ. Whether you are male or female, single or married, young or old, our complementarian convictions are woven into every phase of that story.

What I've just sketched for you is simply a biblical theology of marriage, given by God at creation as a human institution, but given even at that moment for multiple purposes: not only to provide for joy and union and procreation between a husband and wife, but also to point forward to the bond between Christ and his Bride, the church. Biblically, this is Genesis 1–2 tied to Revelation 19 by way of Ephesians 5:22–33. That biblical highway links created first things (protology, in theological language) with new creation last things (eschatology), and joins together the human marital covenant with the New Covenant inaugurated in Christ. That's a lot of territory. But it shows why our complementarian convictions matter so deeply.

In the chapters ahead we're going to look closely at each of those key texts, along with other relevant Scriptures. In this chapter, my goal is not to look closely at each in turn, but to give a theological description of the two horizons of creation and new creation and the wedding scene that is at the heart of each. If we have these two anchor points fixed deeply in our minds, the glory and beauty of our complementarianism will shine more brightly, and the costs and implications of altering those convictions will also be clear. So let's look briefly at the created horizon, and the first wedding in all of human history.

CREATION: THE GIFT OF MARRIAGE

Genesis 1–2 is filled with speech, but it is a one-sided conversation. God speaks, and things happen. The creative Word of the Lord brings all things into existence. The narrative of Genesis 1 is punctuated with “And God said . . . and God said . . .” This speech of God carries over into Genesis 2, as God addresses the man Adam for the first time in 2:16–17. But up to that point there has still been no speech except God’s speech.

Then in Genesis 2:23, for the first time in human history, a man speaks. And it’s a love poem:

This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.

The ESV is right to mark this off as something like poetic verse, and Herman Bavinck is right to see in this a moment of formal, momentous speech—in fact, a wedding scene:

As soon as he saw her, he recognized her; his recognition was a knowledge born of love. He saw in her no alien being, but a being just like himself; she possessed the same nature that he had; she displayed the same image of God that had been bestowed upon him; and yet she was different from him, with her own sex, character, and vocation. Like a whoop of joy, like a wedding song, the words came forth from his lips: This is now finally flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone!⁴

4. Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian’s Liberty Press, 2012), 4–5.

The implications of this are massive. Human marriage is the first institution given by God to humans. As such, it belongs to the very fabric of our existence as image-bearers. Its shape and structure are ordained by God, not created by human beings. Yes, aspects of marriage change across time and culture, and yes, sin distorts our understanding of this created gift in a number of ways. Yet for all this difference and distortion, marriage belongs to the goodness of the created order.

That last phrase is important: the created order. We'll examine the text of Genesis 1–2 more closely in a later chapter, but we need to describe this thing theologians call the order of creation. First, the "creation" part. Marriage, human identity as male and female, and all the subsequent roles and commands that flow from that identity are a part of a larger doctrine (anthropology, or the doctrine of man), which is itself a subset of a much more basic doctrine: the doctrine of creation. Apart from God, all of reality is *created* reality. It doesn't exist by its own initiative or power. Even more significantly, nothing in creation creates its own nature or purpose. All things derive their nature and their purpose from what God has made them to be. The glory of butterflies and of birds, of lightning and of lightning bugs, is not the same kind of glory—and that's a good thing, for it displays the diverse wisdom of God. Everything that is, is what it is because God has said so.

But when it comes to human identity, we're trained by our culture (especially in the West) to hear that kind of idea as oppressive, confining, restraining. "You mean I can't be whatever I want to be?" No, we can't, because we are creatures of the good and wise God, which carries with it an absolutely foundational corollary: we are not the Creator.

Hear how Bavinck describes the alternatives that confront us as creatures:

A creature really has a choice between only two options: either it chooses to be its own creator and thereby ceases to be a creature, or it must be and remain a creature from beginning to end, and therefore owes its existence and the specific nature of its existence only to God.⁵

Consider that carefully: you and I owe our existence, and the specific nature of our existence, to God and God alone. We are created beings. That includes our identity as men and women, the ways that those two created identities impact how we live in every season of life, and the ways that they prepare us for the potential of marriage.

That last sentence points us to the second part of our phrase: “created *order*.” In God’s creation, he doesn’t only create all the parts (each thing or being in creation) but also the relationships that exist between them. Some things are created for other things, in part or in whole. Some things can only be understood with reference to their complement. Think of night and day, and how difficult it would be to define one without the other—not to mention the complex interplay between them, and all the ways that affects the growing cycles of plants and the rhythms of the animal world. The individual parts aren’t just created and set loose at random. God builds an order into his world that includes relationships among created things, and this order of creation testifies to the wisdom of God.

5. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 376.

His world is diverse, but harmonious.

Here's the key point for us: human beings are a part of that created order. Not generic, gender-neutral "people," but individuals created as male or female, with all the implicit and embodied purpose and potential that God has woven into that creation.

In other words, we are creatures who owe our existence and the specific nature of our existence to God. Our maleness and femaleness fits into the larger order God has established in his world, for his purposes and for his glory.

This book wouldn't be complete if we didn't confront the entrance of sin into this picture, especially its implications for our identities and roles as men and women. Not to mention the whole issue of our identity as men and women outside of marriage, whether single, widowed, or divorced. Is marriage the central part of our identity? Before dealing with those questions, and before entering into the tainted history of our fallen race, it will help us to move from creation to new creation. Bracketing the whole history of salvation with its beginning and ending helps us keep our bearings as we navigate some of the complex challenges and questions in the middle of the story. So now let's turn to the end of all things.

NEW CREATION: THE *TELOS* OF MARRIAGE

The word *telos* might be new for you, but it conveys something important. It is a word that captures the idea of both an end and a goal, a final destination and the purpose that will be achieved when we reach that final destination. In Romans 10:4, Christ is the "*telos* of the law for righteousness to everyone

who believes.” He ends the law as a means of righteousness, and he is also the one to whom the law pointed. That’s *telos*—an end and a goal.

Now to our full phrase: there is a *telos* to marriage, and it is found in the new creation. Look at Revelation 19:6–9:

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

“Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God

the Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and exult

and give him the glory,

for the marriage of the Lamb has come,

and his Bride has made herself ready;

it was granted her to clothe herself

with fine linen, bright and pure”—

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”

And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”

Here we discover the end to which all of history has been heading. Just as human history began with the wedding between Adam and his bride, so too human history will end with the wedding between the last Adam and his Bride, the church. And

what a beautiful *telos* it is. The world does not end with a bang nor a whimper, but instead with a glorious consummation.

Marriage was instituted so that the glory of the King would come to light in the multitude of his subjects. Once it has attained this goal, marriage itself will pass away. The shadow will make way for the substance, the symbol for the reality. The history of the human race began with a wedding; it also ends with a wedding, the wedding of Christ and his church, of the heavenly Lord with his earthly bride.⁶

The whole drama of salvation history is contained between these two weddings, these two horizons of creation and new creation. Our marriages, our identity as men and women, and all things given to us in God's created order are about more than us. Creation reveals and prepares for new creation. That means all the components of our identity now as male and female are joined into the sweep of this massive biblical storyline. What it means to be husband and wife, how we define masculinity and femininity, how the church orders herself as the household of God—all these things are part of the way in which we live between the horizons of creation and new creation.

6. Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 161.

Complementarianism 101

We've located our complementarian convictions on the appropriate biblical stage: the drama of salvation that spans the two horizons of creation and new creation. Now it's time to talk about some basic terms. What exactly do we mean by complementarianism? Think of this chapter as the coffee shop conversation version of complementarianism. (Can you communicate what you believe about men and women over a single cup of coffee?) To do that we'll need to cover a bit of history, and look at four significant terms: complementarianism, egalitarianism, identity, and roles. Let's begin with the history.

COMPLEMENTARIANISM: WHAT IS IT AND WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

We say in Sovereign Grace that we are complementarian, but that term didn't start with us. On the other hand, it's not a term you'll find used throughout church history. Does that

mean we've grasped on to a new theological idea as part of our identity?

The label “complementarian” can be traced to a specific debate in the history of American evangelicalism that took place in the 1980s and 1990s, although the debate still rages today. While the two sides of the debate—complementarians and egalitarians—formally took shape in the 1980s, the roots of the controversy lie slightly further back in the 1960s with changes that took place in American society which in turn set off a series of debates within the American church. We'll briefly lay out the complementarian-egalitarian conflict, then step back to put things in historical perspective. Then at the end we can define our key terms.

A landmark moment for the complementarian movement was the 1991 publication of a massive book with a blue cover (sometimes referred to affectionately as “The Blue Book”) edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem. Its title is *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*.⁷ In it Piper and Grudem defined the term “complementarianism” and enlisted a host of authors to lay out an expansive biblical, theological, historical, and philosophical case for their position.

The subtitle of the book captures the context in which Piper and Grudem (and the various authors of the chapters) were writing. For roughly a decade, evangelicalism had been affected by the rise of second- and third-wave feminism (terms we'll discuss in a moment) and as a result some evangelicals

7. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991).

were writing articles and books calling for a change in the church's historic position on the roles of men and women. Some of these advocates formed the Evangelical Women's Caucus (EWC), dedicated to promoting feminist goals within evangelicalism. In 1986 this group split between those who were in favor of expanding their mission to include lesbian advocacy and those who believed the issue of homosexuality could not be integrated into an evangelical agenda. The latter group formed the Council for Biblical Equality (CBE), which became the primary organization advocating for a blend of evangelical theology and feminist agendas.

In response to these developments, Piper, Grudem, and a handful of others founded a new organization, the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). CBMW published *The Danvers Statement* in 1988, a summary of the Bible's teaching about male and female roles within the church and the home which has been adopted by many churches and institutions over the past three decades. They later coined the term *complementarian* to represent their theological position, and three years later published *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.

From these developments two clear camps emerged in American evangelicalism: the egalitarians, represented by the Council for Biblical Equality, and the complementarians, represented by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. The egalitarian position argued that men and women are equal in both their value before God (something both sides affirmed) and equal and interchangeable in all roles in marriage and the church. By contrast, complementarians taught that men and women were equal in value but different in roles in

marriage and the church. Both sides produced books, articles, and essays advocating for their positions, and from the 1990s through the 2010s the lines of division were fairly clear.

With that background, to say that in Sovereign Grace complementarianism is one of our core theological values might seem like a potentially narrow position. Given that this isn't a historic debate like the nature of the Trinity, the person of Christ, or the five *Solas* of the Reformation, is it worth spending so much energy here? Answering that question requires briefly stepping back for a broader historical perspective.

IS THIS A NEW DOCTRINE?

It's true the term "complementarian" is not a historic orthodox label—but that's because what the term teaches has never been contested in the way it was in late twentieth century America. While there are exceptions to any historical survey, it's remarkable how broadly consistent orthodox teaching on men's and women's roles in marriage and the church has been throughout church history.⁸

8. The historian in me must note that "broadly consistent" teaching can coexist with distortions, errors, and slow change. The Roman Catholic philosopher Prudence Allen has done an incredible amount of research on the history of this debate, documenting in three volumes the ways that philosophers and theologians spoke about and developed their understanding of gender identity from Aristotle all the way to Pope John Paul II. She argues that the tradition can be divided into three main camps: gender neutrality (no meaningful differences between male and female), gender polarity (one gender is better than the other in some way),

Ephesians 5:22–33 and other texts about Christian conduct in marriage weren't viewed as oppressive or unjust. The pattern of male leadership in the church—pastors, priests, bishops, or other forms depending on the tradition—was taken as unremarkable and even assumed across the early church, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and the Protestant Reformation. So why did this become an issue for American (and, more broadly, Western) Christians?

The answer requires that we think carefully about the changes in Western society in the half-century or so leading up to the 1990s. Rather than being a departure or novelty in the tradition of the church, complementarianism was an attempt to define and hold to the Bible's teaching about men and women in rapidly changing cultural conditions. Complementarianism is a new label for an historic, orthodox teaching. But in recent centuries there were at least three factors that prepared for, and in many circles changed, the understanding of men's and women's identities that the church has consistently held.

The first identifiable factor from much earlier in history is the role of the trans-Atlantic evangelical awakenings. The

and gender complementarity. The first camp is the minority view, but both the gender polarity option (which recognizes meaningful gender differences but distorts the Bible's teaching, since male and female are simultaneously different and equally valuable) and the gender complementarity option affirm rather than deny the Bible's teaching on gender distinctions in marriage and the church. With nuances and exceptions, this affirmation is the majority view throughout church history. For a summary of Allen's research, see Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman, Volume 3: The Search for Communion of Persons, 1500–2015* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 1–27.

First Great Awakening in the mid-1700s (the era of George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards) was a remarkable outpouring of God for which we give thanks, but one that, like all such works of revival, had distortions and impurities mixed with it. What the historian Thomas Kidd calls the “radical evangelicals,” a minority segment of the awakening (and one opposed by Jonathan Edwards), were open to tearing down social conventions if they stood in the way of the (alleged) work of the Spirit.⁹ These included a willingness to recognize women’s roles in church leadership, and in a few instances to ordain women to ministry. Such positions were a minority in Great Awakening evangelicalism, and many of the figures and movements of the radical evangelicals descended into heterodoxy or abandoned Christianity for sects such as the Shakers or Quakers. The Second Great Awakening at the dawn of the 19th century showed some of the same trends, often in an accelerated fashion. Neither of these developments changed the broad pattern of gender roles in marriage and the church in American Christianity, but they prepared the way for later departures from the historic position by creating a few places in American Christianity where ordained or preaching women were justified by appealing to the “new” work of the Spirit.

The second development was the women’s movement, often recognized now as consisting of three “waves” of feminism. These three phases were roughly centered in the late 19th and early 20th century (first-wave feminism, largely focused on women’s suffrage), the 1960s (second-wave feminism, largely

9. Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

focused on gender equality in the workplace and society), and the 1990s (third-wave feminism, much more difficult to define but often linked with concerns for LGBT rights and broad social justice concerns). Sociologist Mark Chaves, who has documented the timing and reasons behind American denominations beginning to ordain women, notes that there were three peak moments of conflict over the issue of women's ordination in the US: the 1830s (the aftermath of the Second Great Awakening), 1880–1890 (first-wave feminism and the women's suffrage movement), and the 1970s (second wave feminism).¹⁰ As Western culture began to grapple with questions of gender roles in broader society, the church was slowly moved along in its wake, particularly in America. A subtle (at times not so subtle) pressure began to mold the church to follow the cultural pattern of increasing gender equality, especially regarding female pastors.

The last development, the broad turmoil of the 1960s, is actually not a distinct historical moment but an accelerant added to the cumulative effect of the women's movement. The '60s were a decade of massive social change, especially in the USA: the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the civil rights movement, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the women's liberation movement, the gay rights movement, the sexual revolution, the advent of the contraceptive pill, the Vietnam war, and more. With everything appearing to change in society, there was an added intensity to debates about gender roles and sexuality. The figures who eventually

10. See chapter four in his book, especially the chart on page 65. Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

formed the Council for Biblical Equality were responding to (and in many cases embracing) the changes brought about in the '60s.

That's a lot of history—and not all of these developments are bad things. But it's important to see that our current cultural moment did not simply appear spontaneously. Many factors have combined to change cultural understandings of gender identity and roles in fundamental ways. And the church has not been left untouched.

As has been true throughout history, controversies, outside circumstances, and changing cultural contexts compel the church to develop a clearer understanding of doctrine and more precise language to communicate the truth of Scripture and protect it from error. The language of complementarianism developed out of a very specific set of challenges brought about by pressures to conform the church to the increasing gender-neutrality (and now even gender-fluidity) of Western culture. Yes, the terms are new, but the doctrine is not. And, just as with every other theological controversy, the Bible's message is not “merely” true; it is good, and beautiful, and the only real source of human flourishing in this world.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: DEFINING TERMS

So that leads us finally to our terms. Knowing the background and the need for new terms to define and defend old truths, we can now say what we mean by these four key terms: complementarianism, egalitarianism, gender identity, and roles.

Complementarianism is the belief that men and women are equal, yet different. They are each equal in value before God,

each equally in the image of God, each equally important in the purposes of God. Yet they are also different: created with differing capacities and callings, and thus with different roles, especially in the sphere of marriage and church (and note well that those two spheres are related in a very significant way). Our Statement of Faith puts it this way:

Men and women are both made in the image of God and are equal before him in dignity and worth. Gender, designated by God through our biological sex, is therefore neither incidental to our identity nor fluid in its definition, but is essential to our identity as male and female. Although the fall distorts and damages God's design for gender and its expression, these remain part of the beauty of God's created order. Men and women reflect and represent God in distinct and complementary ways, and these differences are to be honored and celebrated in all dimensions of life. To deny or seek to remove these differences is to distort a fundamental way in which we glorify God as male and female.¹¹

Egalitarianism is the contrasting belief that men and women are equal in value and also fully equal and interchangeable in roles, especially in marriage and the church. As is often the case in theology, the twin terms "complementarian/egalitarian" function as opposites, ways of labeling two different responses to a set of basic theological and exegetical questions. The argument of this book is that complementarianism is more faithful

11. Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith, "Creation, Providence, and Man."

both to the Bible's specific teaching and its grand vision. It is therefore the best and most fulfilling way to live out the beauty of God's plan for men and women in a confused age.

The third term is "gender identity," which I will often describe with the one word label "identity." As soon as the idea of gender is brought into the discussion, our Christian instinct should be to ask, "What do *you* mean by that term?" That's because the answers are not all the same. Transgender and queer ideologies make a radical separation between biological sex and gender (even calling the former "sex assigned at birth," as though a doctor makes the pronouncement "it's a boy/girl" arbitrarily). Biblically speaking, that's absolutely wrong. God's gift of a body (which only comes in one of two types: male or female) cannot be separated from our sense of identity. Male or female embodiment is the basis for our understanding of who we are as men and women.

Yet having said that, mere biology alone can't tell us the meaning of our embodiment. While there may be a few radical evolutionary biologists who think that human sexuality can be explained solely by the instinctual animal desire to reproduce, almost everyone recognizes that there's something more than biology at work. So here's what I mean in this book: our gender identity (or our identity as men and women) is the *meaning* of our male-female embodiment. When I speak in this book of our identity, I'm after something more than mere biology can give. I'm after the meaning of our male and female embodiment in light of creation and new creation.

Which leads, finally, to the term "roles." The meaning of our embodiment, our masculine or feminine identity, is tied to the roles we are assigned in covenant relationship.

The roles God gives to men and women, in the covenant of marriage and in the household of faith, are different and complementary roles. In neither sphere are we independent of one another, but in neither sphere are we interchangeable with one another. We are mutually dependent, yet each with a specific set of roles that give expression to who God has made us as men or women.

Of course, the question you're asking now is, "But what are those roles? What is our identity as man or woman?" That's the right question to ask next. And it's a question that takes us back to the text of Scripture. We begin in Genesis 1–2.

In the Beginning

There is seemingly no end to the tasks parents teach their young children on the road to self-sufficiency, from tying their own shoes to pouring their own glass of milk (and learning to clean up their own spilled milk). One of those tasks, easily overlooked from the perspective of adulthood, is buttoning up their own shirt. The dexterity involved in stubby fingers fiddling with buttons is itself challenging. Then there's the matter of alignment: putting the buttons in the right holes. It's not easy, but it's vital. *And the first button is the most important.* Get that one wrong and the entire process goes awry.

In our complementarian theology, the doctrine of creation in Genesis 1–2 is the first button. Make a mistake here, and no amount of later adjustments will ever make our convictions line up with Scripture. That's not to say we need Genesis only—it's good to button up the rest of the shirt, too. But how we understand the nature of men and women in these foundational chapters, before the entrance of sin, is one of

the key anchor points that prepares us to rightly understand all that follows. We can begin with Genesis 1:26–27.

THE CROWN OF CREATION

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps 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. (Gen. 1:26–27)

“And God said . . . And there was . . .” Eleven times in Genesis 1 God speaks, and when God speaks, things happen. Day by day, sphere by sphere, the boundaries of reality are set in place as the Lord creates all things by the power of his Word. There’s a rhythm of intentional repetition throughout the chapter: God speaks, things happen, God sees (“it was good”), day ends. Evening and morning, day by day.

But then the pattern is interrupted. In 1:26 God begins deliberating with himself (and it’s not wrong to see here foreshadowings of the later Scriptural revelation of the triune nature of God). Even without knowing the full identity of Father, Son, and Spirit, the reader of Genesis 1 is confronted with a change in an already established rhythm. God now speaks to himself about what he will do before he does it. This creature will be different from all the rest of creation.

As our Statement of Faith puts it, “God created man, male and female, in his own image as the crown of creation and the object of his special care.”¹²

It’s not a surprise that those whom God is about to create, beings who are “the object of his special care,” are given a unique status (“in our image, after our likeness”) and a unique role (“Let them have dominion . . .”). Theologian Wayne Grudem summarizes it by writing that human beings are “like God and represent God.”¹³ Thus their place in the days of creation is significant. For all the glory of sun and moon and stars, the swarms of living creatures and the teeming depths of the oceans, man occupies a privileged position over all the rest of the world. Human beings are the crown of creation.

The text marks this occasion with something like a poem (a pattern we will see again in Genesis 2):

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)

Each line repeats the verb “create,” and the first two lines both use the phrase “image,” making sure we get the point that these are special creatures. But the last line introduces a new idea: “man” is not a generic, gender-neutral being. “Male and female he created them.” This hints at the complementary task God has given men and women, but don’t overlook the

12. Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith, “Creation, Providence, and Man.”

13. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 567.

significance of the fundamental equality revealed here. Unlike so many of the ancient founding myths of Israel's neighbors, it is not the king, the heroes, the warriors, or the men who have special status and relationship with the divine. In God's plan, Adam and Eve are both equally image-bearers, created in communion with God and each with a vital role to fulfill in his purposes. Equal, yet not interchangeable. And that brings us to the complementary task.

A COMPLEMENTARY TASK

Immediately after the statement, "male and female he created them," Genesis 1:28 records God's blessing and task for the first human beings:

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

It may seem obvious, but the command to be fruitful is one given to both the man and the woman. But it is not given in the same way. The task of giving life to future generations of image-bearers requires both male and female, and each in differing yet complementary ways. Genesis 2 will show that there is an order in the relationship between Adam and Eve that is theologically significant, but the fundamental equality and necessity of both men and women is on display in this initial, overarching task. They cannot be what God has called them to be without each other.

The task given to Adam and Eve, and their need for each other, is not limited to bearing children, however. There are five verbs: *be fruitful, multiply, fill, subdue*, and *rule* (have dominion). The first two are associated most clearly with the call to raise children, the latter two with the call to rule creation (under God's rule), and the third is the link between each of those pairs. The children who result from being fruitful and multiplying will fill the earth with worship of the true God, communing with him as they live under his rule. What characterizes life in the Garden of Eden (covenant obedience and worship) is to be spread to every corner of the new world.

Thus, even in this commission in Genesis 1, the interdependence of Adam and Eve is revealed. Adam needs Eve. Eve needs Adam. But their mutual need is based precisely on their difference. Adam needs Eve as a woman; Eve needs Adam as a man. They are equally image-bearers of God, but not interchangeable or identical image-bearers.

So what is this complementary-but-not-interchangeable difference between them? That takes us to Genesis 2.

A COVENANTAL CREATURE

We've seen that man is a creature of God in a unique place in the created order, and that male and female are both needed to fulfill God's call on them as his vice-rulers. But we can be more specific because the text itself becomes more specific. Genesis 1 provides the overview of all of creation, but Genesis 2 is a flashback, a more detailed look at a specific moment in the creation narrative: the creation of Adam, his commissioning by God, and then the creation of Eve.

In Genesis 2 the sequence of creation goes as follows: God creates the earth (2:4); it is fruitful yet unworked, and not yet under the dominion of God's vice-ruler, man (2:5); so then God creates Adam (2:7). The uniqueness of Adam, shown in the first chapter by God's speech within himself (1:26), is here shown by the unique way in which Adam was created. God shapes him from the dust and then breathes life into him (2:7).

With all this, we would expect the story then to immediately proceed to the creation of Eve, but it doesn't. Instead, Genesis 2:8–14 describes the creation of a garden. This garden is a place of beauty and fruitfulness, a place of worship and right order—in other words, a paradise. And there God puts the solitary man with a solemn commission:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Gen. 2:15–17)

The commission is in verse 15: to work and to keep the Garden. And it is joined with a gift and a prohibition in verses 16–17. Every tree is given to Adam for his sustenance, except one. That tree is guarded by a life-or-death command: eat from this tree, and you die. What's going on here?

In light of later biblical revelation, it's best to follow a well-established theological reading of this scene and conclude that this is the making of a covenant between God and Adam. As the seventeenth century Reformed theologian Petrus van

Mastricht put it, “Thus it seemed good to God, from the very beginning of the world, to govern his own by covenants.”¹⁴

The language of the commission is especially significant. Paired together, these are the same verbs (“work/serve” and “keep”) that later mark the task of priests with the holy sanctuary of the Lord (Num. 3:7). Like other covenant occasions in Scripture (for instance, Moses and Israel at Sinai), God specifies what breaking the covenant looks like—in this case, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He also specifies that the consequences for breaking this covenant are death.

Why does this matter for our understanding of men’s and women’s identity and roles? Because it establishes that from the very beginning, human beings were made to be covenantal creatures. In other words, we were made to exist in relationship with God, under terms God establishes for our good. This is a unique part of our identity. Neither the earth in all its teeming fullness, nor the unfallen angels in their glorious power, are made for covenant relationship with God in the same way that we are. Without covenants we cannot understand who we are. But remember, at this stage only Adam receives this covenantal command.

Which leads, in the midst of this solemn and dramatic scene, to a jarring note, the first instance of something wrong in the created world.

14. Petrus Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, Vol. 3: *The Works of God and the Fall of Man*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2019), 375.

“NOT GOOD”

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” (Gen. 2:18)

It’s jarring. It’s inconsistent. It breaks the pattern. In Genesis 1, everything is good—indeed, very good. And now, using the same word, Genesis 2:18 says, “Not good . . .” What thing in the good world God has made is “not good”? Adam, without Eve. After receiving his covenant commission in the garden, Adam needs to know that he cannot complete this commission without a helper. And so God steps in to remedy this “not good” by creating Eve to be a “helper fit for him.”

The phrase “helper” (Hebrew, *ezer*) is significant. As many have noted, it can be used of God’s role in relationship to his people (e.g., Pss. 121:1–2, 146:5—although we shouldn’t make the mistake of assuming that the ways in which God helps are parallel to the way in which Eve helps). “Fit for him” translates the Hebrew phrase *kenegdo*: “corresponding to, complementary to.” God is crafting a partner for Adam that corresponds to his need.

Again, as with Adam’s creation account in Genesis 2:7, the uniqueness of Eve is here demonstrated in the way she is created from Adam, by God’s hand. And furthermore, this creation is delayed through a lengthy naming ceremony. God shows Adam all the kinds of created beings that are not fit to be his helper, so that at last he would realize that only God could supply this lack. And God does! He creates Eve and brings her to Adam. Bavinck eloquently reflects on this moment:

The first human being, furthermore, was created immediately as a man, neither neuter nor androgynous, but with a specific sex. This came to expression in the fact that although he had been placed in the garden and had abundant provision of everything he needed for living, he nevertheless felt lonely . . . Immediately at creation God implanted within the man's soul the yearning for loving someone who would be like him. That yearning was not satisfied by the animals, whose essence he perceived, whose kinds he distinguished, and whose names he invented. They were strong and great, noble and magnificent, but they did not share his likeness. The creation of the woman was preceded by the sense of need, which the first man discovered in his own heart amid all his abundance; even having been created in God's image could not satisfy that need. So the woman is the answer to the question that flowed from the man's heart and across his lips. She is the answer to his prayer, the gift God so richly and lovingly bestowed upon him.¹⁵

It's a joyous moment, one of massive biblical-theological significance. As we said in chapter one with Bavinck ("a whoop of joy, like a wedding song!"), we're not wrong in seeing here a wedding, celebrated with the first bit of love poetry in human history:

15. Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 2012), 2–3.

Then the man said,
“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.” (Gen. 2:23)

Note well the significant summary that occurs next in Genesis 2:24: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

This is the high point of the opening chapters of Genesis, the prologue to all subsequent human history: two covenantal beings, both created in God’s image and under his authority, made for fellowship with him and with each other. Together they have a commission from God, yet with distinct roles in their covenant task. Adam is the covenant head, while Eve is the covenant helper and companion. They are joined in their complementary ways in a one-flesh relationship that we learn to call marriage. It is a beautiful picture, with implications for all who follow them.

Although the picture of Genesis 1–2 is foundational and instructional, it doesn’t answer all our questions. Does this mean marriage is a superior state for all human beings? What would that mean for singles, the widowed, the divorced? And can we give more content and application to the gender-specific, covenantal roles (head and helper) given to Adam and Eve? Can we define masculinity and femininity from the identity and roles of Adam and Eve in the garden? What *does* it mean to be a man or a woman? Hold on to those questions for a moment.

Egalitarians will argue that, at this stage in the story of Scripture, there are no gender-specific roles or tasks, only full

equality. Adam and Eve are fundamentally and functionally equal. Distinct gender roles, they argue, only enter the storyline in Genesis 3 with the Fall. There's one glaring problem with this argument, however: in the very specific task of "be fruitful," Adam and Eve are definitely not interchangeable. Is procreation an isolated instance of complementarity in a broader sea of sameness? Everything in the text points in the other direction: the distinctions between Adam and Eve in Genesis 1 and 2, the order of creation (Adam first, then Eve), the specific mandate God gives Adam prior to Eve's creation, the role God gives Eve, Adam's naming of Eve (an action that clearly implies authority). All these things, which we've been looking at in this chapter, arrive before Genesis 3. Even with only Genesis 1–2 to guide us, we should expect that men's and women's identity and roles will be different and complementary, even as both share fully in the dignity of being made in the image of God.

So back to our question: what then are these foundational identities and subsequent roles for men and women? And how does this impact issues such as singleness and sexuality? Although Genesis 1–2 has raised, and partially answered, these important questions, we're not quite in the place to fully define what it means to be a man or a woman. That requires revisiting the second wedding (Rev. 19) that we briefly considered in chapter one. Yes, human history begins with a wedding, and all subsequent marriages take their pattern from this moment and are judged by this moment. All our questions about gender identity and roles start here. But there's even more going on here than the establishment of human marriage, and that "more" takes us forward in redemptive history to the entrance of sin.

What Went Wrong?

The last chapter ended on a high point, with Adam and Eve in the garden, in the presence of God, joined in the first marriage in all of human history. But we know the story does not remain there. By the end of Genesis 3, sin, judgment, and death have all tragically intruded into God's good creation. That raises important questions for us: what effects does sin have on our identity and roles as men and women? What aspects of our masculine and feminine identities appear normal, but are actually a result of the Fall? Or, conversely, what parts of the Bible's vision seem strange and unnatural to us in our sinful state but are actually part of God's good design? The Fall turned the moral world upside down, and everything was affected—both then and now. So, what does sin do?

SIN PERVERTS THE CREATED ORDER

Even as Genesis 2 ends, a serpent waits in the wings, “more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God

had made” (Gen. 3:1). That statement is more than merely a stage direction, “Enter Serpent stage right.” As the narrative progresses, the Fall takes place in exactly the reverse of the created order God established. Instead of Adam ruling over creation under God’s authority and in covenant union with his wife Eve, now a beast of the field speaks lies and twisted words to Eve while Adam her covenant head stands passively by, watching in silence. Adam’s commission was to work and to keep the garden, the holy place where God made his presence known. Instead of living out those verbs of priestly worship, he is reduced to a single prepositional phrase—he was “with her”—while the covenant is broken and sin enters God’s good world. But when God comes to call his image-bearers to account, the man’s failure is spotlighted when it is to Adam that he speaks first.

There’s the principle: sin perverts the created order. But unfortunately, it’s more than an abstract principle. It’s the reason why, apart from God’s grace, our identities as men and women so quickly, consistently, and “naturally” (as sinners) diverge from God’s good plan. It’s the cause of broken marriages, abusive fathers, passive husbands, nagging wives, cowardly pastors, and arrogant leaders. All the specific ways our masculinity and femininity go astray, corrupted and corrupting, have their bitter roots in this original perversion.

But God does not remain silent. God comes seeking Adam and Eve:

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God

among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (Gen. 3:8–13)

Even in these brief interchanges, we see specific aspects of sin’s corruption. Most foundationally, Adam and Eve are alienated from God. They hide from the presence that was once their supreme joy. This is so important that we will return to it at length at the end of the chapter.

But notice also that their sin has now alienated them from one another. Adam blames Eve (and he implicitly blames God by saying, “the woman *whom you gave . . .*”). Eve blames the serpent. This is no longer the world pronounced “very good” in Genesis 1:31. That same pattern continues throughout human history. As the goodness of God’s order is perverted, we become estranged from one another. In Paul’s phrase, “hated by others and hating one another” (Titus 3:3).

And so God’s blessed created order—God ruling his image bearers, man and woman flourishing in both intimacy and complementarity—is ravaged. Blame cannot be shifted. All are guilty. But then God acts, both to judge and to uphold the true order of creation. Which brings us to the second devastating consequence of sin.

SIN CORRUPTS OUR GENDER IDENTITY AND ROLES

In Genesis 3:14–19, God pronounces judgment first on the serpent, then on the woman and man in their respective created tasks. For our purposes, we'll focus on the judgments of Eve and Adam.

To the woman he said,

“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children.
Your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.” (Gen. 3:16)

The first sentence pronounces a judgment upon the act of childbearing: it will now be painful and dangerous. What then does it mean for God to say “your desire shall be for your husband?” This verse comes up regularly in debates between complementarians and egalitarians. In general, I believe the best exegetical and theological understanding sees the “desire” of Eve for Adam to be a sinful desire (see the parallel with Gen. 4:7), a desire to rule over him and not submit to him.

Adam “ruling over” Eve is thus both a call (husbands should exercise appropriate headship) but also a description (Adam’s headship will now be spoiled by sin in some way).¹⁶ Thus the curse on one partner inevitably is a judgment on both.

16. This is similar to the interpretation by Susan Foh in her influential article. See Susan T. Foh, “What Is the Woman’s Desire?,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 3 (1975), 376–83.

Commenting on this scene, Bavinck writes:

God punished the first human beings in terms of their respective sins. The woman had abused her calling to be a helper suited to her husband, by tempting him and leading him to fall. So she is punished in terms of this her calling. She is punished as *mother*, since that which was to have been a wife's greatest delight would become her greatest pain. From this time forward, she cannot fulfill her calling apart from leading a life of continual physical and spiritual pain.¹⁷

Likewise, God's judgment on Adam affects his specific role as a man.

And to Adam he said,
"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,'
cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return." (Gen. 3:17–19)

17. Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 13.

Bavinck observes:

On account of man, the ground is cursed, so that by itself it brings forth only thorns and thistles . . . When humanity breaks its bond with God, its harmony with the world is broken. Thus the man must go forth to subdue the earth along the path of continual wrestling; he must engage in contending against the frightening powers of nature, the raging elements, the mauling animals, the inhospitable terrain, against wind and weather, cold and heat, rock and dirt. He must work with head and hand, full of pain and trouble, each day, his entire life.¹⁸

We are seeing in this judgment text what sin did to Adam and Eve. These results of the Fall are gender-specific. For Eve, the curse involves pain in childbearing and a disordered relationship with Adam. For Adam, the curse brings painful toil until the day he dies. Both judgments strike at the specific ways Adam and Eve were to fulfill the covenant tasks they had been given to “work and keep” the ground and “be fruitful and multiply.” The two judgments can’t be understood in isolation from each other. Part of Eve’s judgment is a result of Adam’s sinfulness (“he will rule over you,” which implies the possibility of sinful “ruling” instead of the loving leadership envisioned in Genesis 1–2). Marital harmony has been replaced by marital discord, and both Adam and Eve suffer because of it.

Likewise Adam, no matter how hard he works, can no longer fulfill his role as covenant head, leading his wife and children in their full task of subduing and taking dominion

18. Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 13.

of creation. Yes, he still must work the ground, but he cannot lead them together to glory and imperishable life. That awaits a New Covenant head. For now, covenant obedience has been replaced with covenant unfaithfulness, and everyone suffers.

We see in this judgment text not only what sin did, but what sin still does. Since this moment, every man and every woman commit not just “gender-neutral” sins, but specific kinds of rebellion as men and women. In other words, there are also gender-specific sins—ways that we now abuse our gender identity and roles, using our God-given gifts to rebel against him and harm others rather than submitting to him and loving others.

Of course, with any general description of our sinfulness, the best we can do is speak in approximations. Sin has too many disguises, aliases, and escape routes for me to make a single broad statement that covers everyone’s sin perfectly. But there are general patterns to the way the Fall affects our gender identity and roles. Men, given by God a role of covenant headship within marriage, often abuse that authority or abdicate from that role. And while our culture currently sees abuse as the defining sin of masculinity, the Bible’s vision is much broader and more realistic. It is evil when men use their God-given strength and authority to serve selfish and sinful purposes *and* it is evil when men abdicate their role, and by refusing to act allow sin and evil to harm those they should protect, strengthen, and encourage. The Fall has corrupted (but not created) masculinity.

The same holds true for women. Women, given by God a role of covenantal help within marriage, are tempted to resist, resent, or withdraw from that role. They can undermine

their husband's God-given place in the marriage, chafe in bitterness under it, or passively withdraw, equating submission with silence. Just as with the husband's sins, any of these sins undermine marital unity and are rooted in a lack of faith in the goodness of God's created order for marriage. The Fall has corrupted both masculinity and femininity. As Bavinck puts it, "Slavery and tyranny are the sins to which the mutual relationship of man and woman have been consigned and exposed since the violation of God's ordinances."¹⁹

And those same gender-specific patterns of sin disrupt more than the home. The corporate life of the people of God, under both Old and New Covenants, is disordered by these same patterns. Isaiah 3 is a sobering passage in which God promises judgment upon his own people for their failure to keep the covenant—and the specific shape of the judgment is both caused by and follows from the sins of men and women as men and women:

And I will make boys their princes,
and infants shall rule over them.
And the people will oppress one another,
every one his fellow
and every one his neighbor;
the youth will be insolent to the elder,
and the despised to the honorable. (Isa. 3:4–5)

Because Israel has broken covenant with God, their leaders failing to lead them in submissive worship, God will judge

19. Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 2012), 13.

them with even worse leadership: immaturity will rule, and oppression will be the result. The judgment is not only confined to men.

My people—infants are their oppressors,
and women rule over them.
O my people, your guides mislead you
and they have swallowed up the course of your paths.
(Isa. 3:12)

The LORD said:
Because the daughters of Zion are haughty
and walk with outstretched necks,
glancing wantonly with their eyes,
mincing along as they go,
tinkling with their feet,
therefore the Lord will strick with a scab
the heads of the daughters of Zion,
and the Lord will lay bare their secret parts.
(Isa. 3:16–17)

Instead of perfume there will be rotteness;
and instead of a belt, a rope;
and instead of well-set hair, baldness;
and instead of a rich robe, a skirt of sackcloth;
and branding instead of beauty.
Your men shall fall by the sword
and your mighty men in battle.
And her gate shall lament and mourn;
empty, she shall sit on the ground. (Isa. 3:24–26)

Disordered leadership. Immodesty and promiscuity instead of righteousness and faithfulness. Men sinning in their identity and roles as men, and women sinning in their identity and roles as women. Above it all is a righteous and faithful God who will keep his covenant promises to judge covenant-breakers.

It's a sobering picture, isn't it? But, to paraphrase an early church father, the unknown is the unhealed. If we are ignorant (often willfully ignorant) of how we sin specifically as men and women, we won't repent specifically and receive grace specifically. God's Word wounds us that it might heal us.

And yet even here we aren't at the deepest effect of sin. It is not only the created order, not only our individual and corporate identities that are despoiled by sin. Most deeply, we are exiled from the presence of God himself.

SIN BREAKS OUR COVENANT WITH GOD

Sin's covenant-breaking power becomes explicit at the end of Genesis 3:

Therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. (Gen. 3:23–24)

The result of sin is banishment from the presence of God, for Adam and Eve and for us. This is why, ultimately, sin brings death. God is life himself: "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light" (Ps. 36:9). And therefore to be

excluded from his welcoming presence is to be abandoned to death at every level: physical, spiritual, eternal. “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear” (Isa. 59:2).

The Bible uses multiple images to describe the devastation of sin, but one key theme for our purposes is actually taken from marriage itself. Sin is spiritual adultery. Idolatry (going after other gods, whether they are carvings of wood and stone or delusions of money and power) is covenant breaking. The ultimate covenant bond between God and his people is pictured over and over in terms of a broken marital covenant. The verbs describing human marriage in Genesis 2:24 (“leave” and “hold fast/cleave”) repeatedly describe what Israel does to their covenant Lord. They leave him and tragically hold fast to false gods. The prophets use shocking language to describe the horror of Zion’s harlotry. Like a whore, the people of God run after other gods.

And as Israel did, so we do. Instead of keeping covenant, we break covenant, with each other and ultimately with God. Again, it’s a sobering picture, isn’t it? But the darkness and shame of that picture prepare us for God’s solution.

GOD’S REDEMPITIVE REMEDY: THE ONE WHO KEPT THE COVENANT

It is the prophets who most shock us with the heinousness of spiritual adultery. And it’s also the prophets who are given a vision of God’s covenant mercy to his unfaithful wife.

In the beginning of Isaiah, words of judgment move seamlessly into a promise of salvation:

In that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. Then the LORD will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain. (Isa. 4:2–6)

We're left with something like spiritual whiplash as we read this movement from devastating judgment to beautiful salvation. How will this take place? Both the sons of Israel and the daughters of Zion (masculine and feminine pictures of the people of God) are guilty in their sin and utterly without hope. How can holiness and salvation come from their midst?

The obvious answer is that it can't. Israel is unfaithful, and Zion has been deserted in her sins. So God promises to Isaiah, and through Isaiah to us, that another Israel is coming. And he will be a faithful son—sent not simply to remove the corruption of gender identities and roles, but to cleanse us from all our sin.

God reveals this salvation to Isaiah especially in four prophetic visions in which a coming Servant of the Lord is addressed by the Lord and speaks back to the Lord (Isa. 42:1–4, 49:1–6, 50:4–9, 52:13–53:12). Strikingly, the Servant is Israel (Isa. 49:3) but is sent to bring back Israel (Isa. 49:5).

The task given to the Servant, who is Israel but also saves Israel, is made clear in Isaiah 53. He bears the guilt of Israel, being crushed by God in the place of the people of God, and by his death he makes many to be accounted righteous (Isa. 53:6–7, 10–11). It's one of the clearest statements in all of Scripture about what the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished by his death in our place. But it's easy to miss what happens next in the text. Immediately after this, Isaiah 54 opens with singing—and not merely generic singing, but the singing of a once-barren, abandoned wife who is now in a fruitful marriage covenant.

“Sing, O barren one, who did not bear;
break forth into singing and cry aloud,
you who have not been in labor!

For the children of the desolate one will be more
than the children of her who is married,” says
the LORD.

“Enlarge the place of your tent,
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out;
do not hold back; lengthen your cords
and strengthen your stakes.

For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left,
and your offspring will possess the nations
and will people the desolate cities.

“Fear not, for you will not be ashamed;
 be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced;
for you will forget the shame of your youth,
 and the reproach of your widowhood you will
 remember no more.
For your Maker is your husband,
 the LORD of hosts is his name;
and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,
 the God of the whole earth he is called.
For the LORD has called you
 like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit,
like a wife of youth when she is cast off,
 says your God.
For a brief moment I deserted you,
 but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing anger for a moment
 I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,”
 says the LORD, your Redeemer. (Isa. 54:1–8)

It’s a beautiful picture, and central to it is verse 5: “For your Maker is your husband.” In God’s covenant relationship with his people, their spiritual adultery has been forgiven not by pretending it did not happen, but by something better: atonement. The Servant has died, bearing the wrath of God in the place of the people of God. The result is that the covenant is now restored. The people of God are no longer under wrath, justly forsaken by God because they have forsaken him. They are restored. The people of God are fruitful and loved. And the entire picture is framed in terms of marriage.

Isaiah predicts that day, though Isaiah did not live to see that day. But we have.

A GLORIOUS BRIDE WORTHY OF HER GLORIOUS HUSBAND

Isaiah 53–54 pictures a restoration of covenant fellowship by means of atonement. Isaiah pictures what the New Testament reveals. Christ is the husband of his people, who lays down his life for his bride, atoning for her sins and washing her with his Word that he might present her to himself in radiant glory. He has done this. It is finished. And though we do not now see the church in all her radiant beauty, that day is coming. We know it now by faith, and we shall know it one day by sight. That is why the apostle John, when he is granted a vision of that final day, *hears* a thunderingly joyous invitation to a wedding feast and *sees* a Bride:

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

“Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and exult

and give him the glory,

for the marriage of the Lamb has come,

and his Bride has made herself ready;

it was granted her to clothe herself

with fine linen, bright and pure”—

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God." (Rev. 19:6–9)

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (Rev. 21:2)

This is the full story of the people of God: from a broken covenant in the Garden, to a restored New Covenant in a new heavens and a new earth. This picture is beginning to answer some of our questions about singleness and our identity in Christ. In light of this end time vision, even human marriage (for all its significance) pales in comparison. The wedding feast of Christ and his bride is the ultimate marital covenant, so to be single (or widowed, or divorced) in Christ is to participate in that ultimate reality. That is why Bavinck's quote is worth repeating:

Marriage was instituted so that the glory of the King would come to light in the multitude of his subjects. Once it has attained this goal, marriage itself will pass away. The shadow will make way for the substance, the symbol for the reality. The history of the human race began with a wedding; it also ends with a wedding, the wedding of Christ and his church, of the heavenly Lord with his earthly bride.²⁰

But now, what about our marriages, and our identities as men and women?

20. Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 161.

This Mystery is Profound

So far we have followed the Bible's portrayal of marriage from creation to new creation, beginning with the gift of marriage in the Garden of Eden. We've seen what sin did and what sin does, distorting our gender identity and roles and separating us from our covenant Lord. We ended the last chapter with the way God himself, through his Son, makes a New Covenant with his people. The Lord Jesus Christ will have a bride for himself, because he has laid down his life for us, and one day he will present us to himself without a spot or wrinkle or blemish.

But we haven't addressed our marriages, and what all this means for our own identity as men and women. That's the task of this chapter. Thankfully, there is one central text that covers all of that for us. That text is Ephesians 5:22–33. But I will warn you: to the modern ear, this text sounds offensive. And it is, if we believe the purpose of marriage (or even the purpose of life itself) is independence and freedom and self-fulfillment. But seen in its true light, the text is not offensive

but beautiful. It calls each of us, husbands and wives, men and women, to a vision of our gender identity and roles that shapes our lives and displays the glory of Christ.

Here is the text in full:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Eph. 5:22–33)

In this central text about husbands and wives, the apostle Paul assigns a key responsibility to each spouse: wives are to submit to their husbands, and husbands are to love their wives. Both

sides receive a command, but not the same command. Why the difference? That question takes us to both the substance of and the reason for the commands.

WHY SHOULD WIVES SUBMIT TO THEIR HUSBANDS?

Since the commands to husband and wife are gender-specific, it's not at all hard to imagine a reader asking, "Why should wives submit to their husbands? Why not husbands to wives? Why doesn't God call each spouse to submit to the other mutually?" At least one way out of the offensive nature of this command is to say that God does call wives and husbands to mutually submit to each other. Usually this interpretation appeals to verse 21, which in Greek is directly connected to verse 22 and all that follows. It's often argued that what Paul really means could be translated this way: "... submitting to one another, out of reverence for Christ, wives to their own husbands [and by implication, husbands mutually submitting to their wives]."

The scholars interpreting this way note that the command "submit" is not actually in the Greek of verse 22, but simply assumed from verse 21 where the submission commanded is submission "to one another." Thus, it is argued, Paul is calling for a mutuality between husband and wife that contains no gender-specific roles, but instead humility, deference to one another, and full equality between husband and wife. This is what could be called the "mutual submission" reading of Ephesians 5:21–33.

That's probably more Greek than you wanted to hear, but the backstory matters because the "mutual submission" reading is wrong both exegetically and theologically. Here are four reasons why.

First, this reading completely misunderstands the larger argument of the text. The "submission" Paul calls for in verse 21 does not apply equally to everyone. Rather, Paul goes on to apply this principle in three different sets of relationships, spelling out how appropriate submission should be embraced by particular people. In verse 22ff. it's "wives to husbands;" in Ephesians 6:1ff., it's "children to parents;" in 6:5ff., it's "servants to masters." And none of these authority relationships are ever reversed.

Second, although it's true that "submit" is implied in verse 22, it's repeated explicitly to wives in verse 24: "Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their own husbands." So it's not as though Paul is afraid to use the verb "submit" in reference to wives.

Third, and related, when Paul turns to give husbands explicit commands in verse 25ff., he uses a different verb. The commands aren't identical. If "mutuality" is the master principle, then the instructions in each half should be the same. But they're not. The husband is to love his wife, nourishing and cherishing her as he does his own body. Nowhere does Paul say that the husband should submit to his wife.

Finally, the most important argument has to do with the theological reasons Paul gives. Over and over in both sections Paul bases his commands on something about Christ and his church. And those two parties, though gloriously united in covenant fellowship, are not interchangeable.

So the answer to our question—why should wives submit to their husbands?—is explicitly given in the text: because the church submits to Christ. And the wife's role in marriage is a portrayal of that beautiful, glorious role of the church with her covenant head.

Now, you might be asking, “What does submission mean? What do wives do when they submit to their husbands?” Here's my answer: a wife's submission to her husband is her glad acceptance of his covenant headship in Christ.

But we could actually bypass a definition of submission by simply saying what the Ephesians 5:24 does: “Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.” It sounds like a cop-out, but that answer actually does avoid a lot of missteps that could happen in a marriage. Submission (and headship) is fundamentally about a posture and an identity shaped by the story of the gospel: how Christ treats his bride, and how his bride responds to him. It's not first and foremost a decision tree or a way of settling disagreements (though it does have much relevance for decision making and conflict). By submitting to her husband, a wife demonstrates the beauty of covenant love in a womanly way. Note also that submission is active. The command is not “be passive and let your husband do everything,” but it's rather a call to an action that demonstrates the posture of the church towards her head, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the point to make a very necessary qualification: submission to a husband's authority is not absolute or unconditional. As important (and authoritative) as the Christ-church model is, it's also true that the husband is not Christ and the woman is not the church. This is especially important in

situations where a believing wife is married to an unbelieving spouse. There are times where a godly woman must say to her husband, “I cannot disobey my Lord and Savior—I must obey God rather than man” (see Acts 5:29). Notice that even in Ephesians 5, Paul says the husband is head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, but then he gives a second title to Christ that the husband does not share: Savior (Eph. 5:23). Husbands, note well that difference between us and Christ!

In a healthy marriage, a wife’s submission to her husband reflects not his worthiness but her dignity and obedience. Out of reverence to Christ, she gladly affirms and supports her husband’s role as covenant head. She submits to her husband (note that it is *her* husband, not every man) because the church submits to Christ. Now, what about husbands?

WHY SHOULD HUSBANDS LOVE THEIR WIVES?

The command to husbands begins in verse 25, and it contains a different verb: “love.” That pairing of “submit” and “love” is telling and prevents a number of errors. Husbands are not told to command their wives, save their wives, or rule their wives, but *love* their wives. Why? Because Christ loves his bride!

In the text, Paul cannot mention Christ’s love for the church without elaboration. For three beautiful verses he explains what it is that Christ has done for all of his people, men and women. He loves his church. He gave himself up on the cross for his church. He sanctifies her, cleanses her, prepares her for himself, nourishes her and cherishes her. It’s a beautiful picture of the gospel, and here Paul brings it directly to bear on a husband’s posture and identity. To be a godly husband

is to reflect this initiative-taking, self-sacrificial love of Christ in covenant with his bride.

We can therefore derive from this wonderful text a working definition of our roles as husbands: a husband's love of his wife is his glad acceptance of the call to sacrifice for her and care for her in Christ. It means shouldering burdens, welcoming scars, and taking responsibility. It also means caring well, listening attentively, and—given the spiritual leadership implied here—being the first to ask forgiveness. But, as with submission, we could bypass a definition by simply asking ourselves as husbands: “Am I treating my wife the way Christ treats his bride?” And that question will strike a mortal blow to our pride, our self-centeredness, and our retreat from responsibility. How could a selfish or absent husband reflect the love of a sacrificial and present Savior?

Much of the disagreement about this passage centers on what “submit” means, but what's often overlooked in that discussion is how extensive and challenging Paul's words to husbands are. There is no license here for a man to conclude that God has “taken sides” with him over against his wife. That very thought reflects a distorted understanding of our roles.

For both men and women, the call to godly submission and godly love is a call to die to self and honor Christ in gender-specific (not gender-neutral) ways. This is why “mutual submission” is inadequate. Yes, husbands and wives should each consider the others' interests more significant than their own (Phil. 2:3–4). But that's a gender-neutral kind of discipleship and obedience. If that were all Paul had in mind here, why choose an underlying image that is inherently binary—Christ and the church? The reason the exhortations aren't identical

and interchangeable is because we are not identical and interchangeable in our covenant bond with Christ.

This leads to a deeper question: why does Paul tie this covenantal drama to our roles as husbands and wives?

WHY WIVES AND HUSBANDS?

We could ask this “why” question in two different ways: why husbands and wives (instead of, for instance, parents and children)? But even more deeply, why do husbands and wives exist at all? In other words, why is there even a thing called marriage or two kinds of human beings called “male and female” who can be joined in marriage in the first place? That’s what the end of our passage reveals.

To see the picture, we have to follow the flow of the argument beginning in verse 28. Husbands should love their wives as they love themselves, because no one ever hates his flesh. A man knows when he’s hungry, when he’s sleepy, when he’s happy, when he’s sad. No one has to train a man to be attentive to his own needs. But Paul says we’re to have that kind of attentiveness to our wife’s needs because our wife is a part of us, like our own body (v. 28). “But Paul,” we ask, “how do we know that a marriage bond makes two people one body (and in more ways than just sexual union)?” His answer: because we are members of Christ’s body (v. 30). And then comes the surprise:

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Eph. 5:31–32)

Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, the text (as we've seen) that grounds the abiding institution of marriage in the creation account. It's not a stretch to say that Paul doesn't just quote a text on marriage, but *the* text on marriage in the Old Testament. And then he adds that staggering statement: Genesis 2:24 is a mystery that is about Christ and his bride.

"Mystery" in Ephesians is not a puzzle to be solved or a "who-dun-it." It is a term used six times to show how something in the Old Testament predicted realities about Christ, his church, and the age of salvation that were clearly there in Scripture but couldn't be seen in their full glory until after the work of Christ. Only after Easter and the ascension of Christ to God's right hand could we see that God has been working through all history to unite all things under Christ. The universe is about him and for him! In the light of his resurrection and reign we now see that clearly. That's a mystery (Eph. 1:9–10).

And in the same way marriage itself is a mystery that reveals Christ. Why did God create humans in two sexes, capable of a rich covenant bond that brings unity, life, and fellowship? Because that kind of human bond—marriage—reveals the nature and glory of Christ's love for his bride. Our marriages exist to reveal Christ's marriage. To use an unusual but precise word, our marriages are penultimate. Christ's bond with his church is ultimate. Human marriages exist to reveal Christ and his bride.

Yes, marriages are also about procreation and the gift of children and fellowship and joy along the way. God can do multiple things through one gift. But all of those things could have been accomplished through different kinds of human

relationships. Friends bring joy and fellowship. Polygamy might actually produce more offspring. But that's not God's pattern for human marriage because it's not his pattern for the New Covenant. Christ has only one bride, so human marriage has only one shape: a man and a woman, joined in a marital covenant to reveal the nature of Christ's covenant with us.

Brothers and sisters, your marriage is about more than your marriage. The stage on which we live our lives as we obey Scripture's commands is a far bigger, far more glorious stage than mere human fulfillment. We are living out a drama that is as big as all of human history, and even of the age to come.

This mystery is indeed profound. It is about Christ and his church. And it is beautiful.

Gender Identity in Three Dimensions

As we noted at the outset of this book, to properly understand our complementarian convictions requires deep biblical foundations. We've moved from a biblical theology of marriage to our own marriages and our own roles as husbands and wives. In the chapters ahead, we're going to move from marriage to the church, looking at texts like 1 Timothy 2:12 and the biblical requirement that only men should serve as elders in the church. Think of this chapter as a transition point between those two spheres—the home and the church—by way of some key questions: what are men and women for? And what do they do?

Recall that in chapter two we defined gender identity as the meaning of our male or female embodiment, and gender roles as the callings God gives us in covenant relationships based on our gender identity. As we looked at Ephesians 5:22–33 we saw a specific shape to those roles in the covenant of marriage: wives submit to their own husbands, and husbands love and

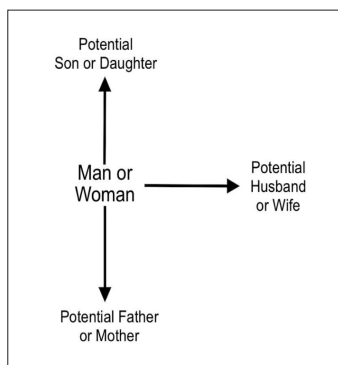
sacrifice for their own wives.

Building on these foundations, we're now going to develop a vision of the meaning of our masculine and feminine embodiment. The biblical picture we've explored places our gender identity in a profoundly meaningful context, one that informs every aspect of our lives. To capture this vision, we're going to explore the meaning of our gendered embodiment in three dimensions. And as a preview, the reason we delayed those persistent questions about the unmarried until this point is because we need both creation and new creation to both celebrate and relativize human marriage.

Here's the vision in a set of statements.

What are men and women created for? *Fruitful covenant relationships*. What does that mean specifically? *To be a man is to be created to be a potential son, husband, and father. To be a woman is to be created to be a potential daughter, wife, and mother.*

We can put it all in a diagram:



Once we've explored each of these parts, we'll be in a position to close the chapter by answering our second question: what do men and women do in those covenant relationships?

POTENTIAL VERSUS HYPOTHETICAL

The first thing we have to consider is the meaning of “potential” (potential father, potential mother, etc). Maybe the best way to do that is to contrast it with “hypothetical.” Let me use myself as an illustration.

Hypothetically speaking, there are a lot of things I am not right now but that I could be if I wanted. Hypothetically, I could leave pastoral ministry and become a chef. There’s nothing intrinsically limiting me from becoming a culinary artist—except the fact that I can’t cook. My family would all unite to disagree with this hypothetical example, but you, dear reader, are blissfully ignorant of the smoke alarms I’ve set off and the recipes I’ve butchered, so you’re merely nodding in agreement. Hypothetically speaking, I could be a chef.

Or, dropping the chef idea for lack of Michelin stars, I could leave pastoral ministry and become a wildlife photographer. I’ve been doing this as an amateur since I was in college, and I’m moderately good at it. I’ve studied it enough that, if I were to take that career step, I know how to be a wealthy and successful wildlife photographer. Step 1: become fabulously and independently wealthy. Beg, borrow, or steal until you’re rolling in money from another source. Then, Step 2: use that money to go take pictures of animals all around the world. If you get the order wrong, you’ll never be a wealthy, successful wildlife photographer. Since I haven’t figured out how to do Step 1 yet, I’m still not a wealthy, successful wildlife photographer. But hypothetically, I could be.

Years down the road, if I made those changes and if you were to meet me and my family, and if you were to ask my

kids how I've changed over the years, they would probably say, "Not much has changed! Now he's cooking scrambled eggs for a living, but new gig, same old dad."

Now imagine that same scenario if the change was not from pastor to chef or photographer, but the change from a man to a woman—in other words, if I believed that I had the potential to be a man *or* a woman. If I attempted that "change," my kids would not say, "Same old dad!"

Previous generations would have found that illustration laughable or incomprehensible, but unfortunately now it's a reality. And it's actually painful to write because I've heard the agonized questions that result from this confusion: "Our daughter says she's now our son, so what do we say to her kids and our grandkids?"

When I say a man is a potential father, I don't mean he could (hypothetically) be a dad, or be something else entirely. I mean that God has created a man with the capacity for one set of covenant relationships (son, husband, father) and not with the capacity for the corresponding set of relationships (daughter, wife, mother). Every boy is a potential father, but not a potential mother. In this sense, the idea of "potential" implies the whole picture of the created order we sketched in the first few chapters. There are many things about our identity that God does give us the freedom to change, to alter, and to explore in various ways. Chef and photographer and pastor are all legitimate vocations. Hypothetically, any of them are possible for me as a man. But my creation by God as a man is something much deeper than a job—it's part of my fundamental identity, inextricably bound to my physical existence. It thus signals (and limits) precisely how I find my

identity in covenant relationships: a son, husband, and father, not a daughter, wife, and mother.

But that raises more questions. What about singles? What about those who are divorced or widowed? And isn't this just about marriage and having babies? Is that all our identity is?

The way we address all those questions is to recognize that each of these three dimensions, represented by the arrows in the diagram, are about our identities in the human covenant of marriage and simultaneously our identity in covenant with God. Salvation and new creation are ultimate reality; marriage and family are penultimate reality. The two mirror each other, but one will finally fade, and one will endure forever. That means that the biblical vision for our gender applies to everyone regardless of their status in life. Let's look at each arrow with that in mind.

POTENTIAL SON OR DAUGHTER

At the human level, it's obvious that this potential has already been decided for every reader. You were born to your parents as a son or a daughter. This may seem like an obvious point, but reflect on its significance for a moment. I have read much radical gender theory that argues (sometimes rages) against the so-called "gender binary" (the idea that there are only two options: male or female).²¹ But I've never read a gender

21. This is probably the place to address the question, "What about intersex people?" If you haven't heard that term, it's a shorthand for what should more precisely be called disorders of sexual development (DSD). There are a number of existing, though very rare, conditions in which genetic disorders affect the normal pat-

theorist who wasn't the offspring of a mom and a dad. Such people don't exist. We can rail against reality, but we cannot change it. All human beings enter the world as the result of a previous relationship between a man and a woman. Yes, sin can distort and alter that basic pattern but it cannot erase the underlying truth. Bavinck puts it well:

From conception onwards, a human being is a product of fellowship; every person is born from, and in, fellowship; persons are cared for and nurtured in the context of fellowship, and continue in some kind of fellowship throughout life, all the way to one's final breath. A human being is a convivial creature and remains so, all the hermits and bachelors notwithstanding.²²

tern of sexual development. This isn't a medical text, and I don't have the expertise to describe these fully or how they should be treated. But a basic theological point must be made: genetic disorders don't call into question God's basic creational design. The fact that sometimes our sexual embodiment is affected by disorders doesn't call into question the basic pattern of male and female, just as the fact that some people are born with more or less limbs doesn't mean we can't say what normal human mobility and movement patterns look like. Biblically speaking, the groaning of creation (Rom. 8:22) extends all the way to the level of our genetic code. Those who suffer with these kinds of genetic disorders have intrinsic dignity as people made in the image of God, and need compassion and wise medical care. Moreover, like all of us, they can find ultimate identity and wholeness in Christ.

22. Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 2012), 111–12.

This basic, easily overlooked aspect of our identity points to some of the deepest truths about us: we're made for fellowship and covenant relationships. The very way we entered the world points to this.

But of course the ultimate covenant relationship is not a marital covenant and the family it brings forth, but the New Covenant and the family of God in Christ. In that sense we can speak of our potential as sons or daughters of the living God. In Isaiah, God speaks words of assurance to his children: he loves them and will seek them no matter how far they have wandered.

Fear not, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you.
I will say to the north, Give up,
and to the south, Do not withhold;
bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the end of the earth,
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made. (Isa. 43:5–7)

Part of the glory of our creation as God's image-bearers is that no category or class of human beings—male or female, ethnic background, social status, age or maturity—can be intrinsically excluded from the family of God. Nowhere do we hear Christ say, "Oh, you're one of *those* people? You're not savable." This is why the New Testament is insistent in so many different places that salvation is for all mankind: every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev. 7:9); men and

women from all ethnic backgrounds and divisions (Gal. 3:28); indeed, people from the whole world (1 John 2:2).

Belonging to God's family through the work of Christ in the power of the Spirit—this is what humans were ultimately made for.

It is this glorious reality that explains why singleness is not second-class citizenship in God's sight. Human marriage and family are really important. No human being enters the world without parents, and in God's design most humans will continue that work of raising the next generation through marriage and parenting. But for all its importance, the human family is penultimate. This is what I mean by both celebrating and relativizing marriage. Marriage covenants are sealed with the words, "til death do us part," but Christ's covenant with his people contains no such provision. In fact, it explicitly includes the opposite: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). To be single in Christ is to lack the sign (human marriage) but to possess the reality that the sign points to (covenant union with Christ). If you have Christ, ultimately you have everything that matters most and that lasts forever!

And isn't it a wonder that, as God spoke through Isaiah, he knows his children intimately and specifically as sons and daughters? Years ago I had the privilege of speaking with pastors at another church about a baptism and counseling question that would have been unfathomable to previous generations. This church had been faithfully witnessing to someone in the neighborhood who appeared to be a very elderly woman—only to find, after closer relationships developed, that this "woman" was a transgender man who had been

taking hormone altering drugs for decades. But, by the glorious grace of our Lord and through this church's patient witness, this person was responding to the gospel and even asking to be baptized. When I talked with the pastors, the question was, "How do we introduce this person to the church at baptism?" Only a few who were close would ever have known that "she" was actually a "he." So what to say at the moment of baptism? As we talked, the answer became obvious: when that public event takes place, who is God welcoming into his family? A long-lost prodigal *son*, known by God from before the foundation of the world and now greeted with these words as he emerges from the waters: "Welcome home, my son!"

We start our earthly lives as sons or daughters. We start our spiritual lives as sons or daughters of the living God, our Father in heaven. We are created for fellowship, from our very first moments of natural and spiritual life. What a wonder!

POTENTIAL HUSBAND OR WIFE

When we move to the horizontal arrow, the "potential" aspect is easier to grasp. Biblical marriage has only two parties—husband and wife—and our male or female embodiment shows us which of those two identities we are created for. No, not every person is called to marriage (more on that in a moment when we consider the spiritual covenant level). But first, when it comes to these human covenant relationships, we should think more broadly than merely "Boys can get married and be husbands; girls can get married and be wives."

In light of the biblical theology of marriage in creation and new creation that we've examined already, "husband"

and “wife” aren’t empty terms, mere placeholders that can be defined (or redefined) in whatever way we want. Because of the covenantal drama of salvation revealed in Scripture, Christ and his bride are the ultimate pattern for human covenant relationships. And that means that “potential husband” or “potential wife” are callings that tell us about the roles we’re designed for in the most important aspect of our identity: our potential for covenant relationships. Well before marriage age, a young man should see the trajectory of his life—his choices, his developing character, his moral instincts—all in terms of Christ and Christ’s love for his bride. Understood rightly, everything he does, all the way from his pursuit of Christ, his battle for sexual purity, and his discipleship in the church down to his job choices, his career path, and his workout plan, are all about becoming the kind of man who can faithfully reflect Christ in his life and relationships, including in a marriage.

A young woman likewise should see her feminine identity shaped by the role of the glorified church, Christ’s bride. She is to pursue becoming the kind of woman who can faithfully fulfill that set of covenant roles in every choice she makes.

Within this framework, the absence of marriage possibilities—perhaps through death, divorce, or aging—does not mean that a man or woman is now free to redefine covenant roles. A mature, widowed man can still be a spiritual father (a covenant role we’ll explore soon), and likewise a single woman can still be a spiritual mother. Gender identity still calls us to a set of covenant roles in every season of life.

At the heart of our masculine and feminine identity is a potential for covenant union with another partner, like us yet not like us. That covenant complementarity of man and

woman, husband and wife, reveals to us the covenant bond of Christ and his church. And, at both levels, that covenant is a fruitful covenant.

POTENTIAL FATHER OR MOTHER

The third arrow points to the way God has designed covenants to be about more than themselves. Covenant fellowship leads intrinsically to covenant fruitfulness. That potential is built into the nature of what makes a covenant relationship unique.

Of course, it's fairly obvious what we're talking about at the human marital level. I don't have to explain the birds and the bees to you—marriages make babies. But think carefully about that reality. We live in a Wild West of birth control pills and reproductive technologies, a world that obscures the fact that sex is created with an intrinsic capacity for procreation. That means marriages naturally include children in a way that's fundamentally unique—in fact, in a way that defines what this covenant relationship is.

Imagine your instinctive response if you heard that a sports team, a book club, or a sorority had decided it would be good to adopt a few children and raise them collectively. If you have any moral compass and understanding of human nature, you should say vehemently: not a good idea! But why? Because no other human institution is designed by God to naturally include children without changing that institution into something else. God gives us the freedom to create many kinds of voluntary associations—sports teams and reading groups and craft guilds—but he has not built into any of those institutions the potential for fruitfulness that marriage necessarily includes.

Yes, when a young married couple welcomes a child into the world, everything changes (such as bed times and vacations and the ability to go on dates that don't include diapers). But at another level, nothing changes. In fact, the marriage is becoming more of what it was meant to be all along as it welcomes a child. In God's wonderful wisdom, "covenant math" is the only place where "one plus one equals one flesh," and "one flesh" can include multiple children without ceasing to be one flesh.

It's not an accident that when a society redefines marriage to make children an optional extra, a lifestyle choice that's good for some but not for all, same-sex marriage becomes a plausible idea. If marriage is only about mutual commitment and love, why is there any intrinsic limit to who the parties could be, or even how many parties might be included?

God in his wisdom has made human covenant unions intrinsically fruitful. To be a husband is to be a potential father. To be a wife is to be a potential mother. Yes, there are many wisdom choices about birth control and family planning that cannot be answered by this book. That's why God gives us the blessing of community in the local church, so we can think through together how to please God. But what we cannot do is concede with the broader culture that marriages are good, but only on our terms—and if those terms include mutual commitment to each other and a pet, but not a child . . . well, that's our choice and ours only. If we do that, we're not faithful to God's creational intent for marriage, and so we will have stepped off the path of blessing.

Does that mean then that the highest purpose in life is to bear children? Again: what about singles, those who are

childless, those who are widowed? Haven't we created more problems for ourselves here? Only if we forget that creation mirrors and points to new creation. Remember, human marriage is penultimate. Christ's marital covenant is ultimate. The human family is deeply important, but it doesn't last forever—the family of God does.

That means that, in a sense, the human family is relativized. For those of us with spouses and children, our highest dreams for our family should be bigger than our family. We exist for God and his people, not the other way around. And so we build our families into the family of God. For those who lack the gift of biological children for any reason, you are not in any way inferior or insignificant. You can pursue a real, eternally significant parental relationship in the spiritual family of God's people. To be a spiritual father or mother is a role of such lasting covenant fruitfulness that we're going to devote a whole chapter to it (chapter eight). Here let's simply observe that the pattern we learn from the natural family points us to the pattern in the family of God. Biblical covenants are fruitful. And our embodiment as male or female—our masculine or feminine identity—teaches us how we find our place in those fruitful covenant relationships.

What are men and women for? We are made for fruitful covenant relationships as potential sons and daughters, husbands and wives, and fathers and mothers. Our embodiment tells us where we fit in God's creation and new creation pattern of covenant union and communion. The divine drama of salvation gives specific shape to what those roles look like.

Now we're in a position to give an answer to our second question: what do men and women do in those covenant relationships?

BUILD AND PROTECT, COMPLETE AND GLORIFY

If you're tracking with the argument of this book, you should be prepared for different answers to what men and women do in covenant relationships. The reason why the (implicit or explicit) gender neutrality of our age is wrong and destructive is because in neither creation or new creation are covenant partners identical and interchangeable. The church and Christ are not identical partners in salvation! We should expect our covenant fruitfulness to be expressed not through fundamental equality, but through harmony: unity in difference, fruitfulness in complementarity.

While there is no single biblical text that answers our second question explicitly, Scripture's foundational teaching concerning men and women suggests the answer. Here's my summary of what faithfulness looks like in our specific covenantal roles:

Men **build** and **protect** covenant communities.

Women **complete** and **glorify** covenant communities.

Fruitful covenants create communities. That means covenant fruitfulness doesn't generate a bunch of free-floating individuals who are unconnected and unattached. Covenants create communities, and men and women have distinct and complementary roles in those communities: build and protect, complete and glorify. Let's look at each set.

Men, our call is to be the first to start and the last to leave the communities our covenants create. We learn this pattern from Christ and from our heavenly Father. Christ takes the initiative to pursue his bride. In the wonderful words of the hymn:

The church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ, her Lord;
she is his new creation,
by water and the word.

From heav'n he came and sought her
to be his holy bride;
with his own blood he bought her,
and for her life he died.²³

This is why an engagement period should start with the man asking his bride for her hand—take initiative from the very first moments of your covenant relationship. And men, what you initiate you are then called to build up. And building takes *work*. Whether in the family or the church, a man's role of building requires effort, intentionality, perseverance, all the things we associate with the task of building something.

And given that investment of blood, toil, sweat, and tears, it's natural that those who build are also those who protect. Here too, Christ our Lord and God our Father set the pattern. In the context of Israel's Red Sea deliverance, we read that "The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is his name" (Ex. 15:3). But what does the Lord, the divine warrior, do? Not wage indiscriminate or mindless slaughter, nor lash out with blind reactivity. Our king wages war against evil for the glory of his name and the good of his people. While we men must be ever vigilant against our capacity for being unlike God in his just

23. "The Church's One Foundation," an 1866 hymn by Samuel John Stone.

protection of his people, we must also be aware that apathy towards the beloved is not a sign of Christ-likeness. Men protect and build. Godly men will take sacrificial initiative to see God's purposes move forward in their homes and churches. They will be on the lookout for influences that threaten the spiritual and physical well-being of those they're called to serve. They will gladly shoulder the burden to lead, moving their homes and communities forward toward God-honoring goals. And in all this, they will seek to persevere, fixed on Christ's glory and others' good and undeterred by opposition or inconvenience.

Women then complete and glorify. I admit that these two verbs are harder to define. But let's give a hypothetical example first, and then use that to better consider the pattern of the glorified church with her covenant example.

Imagine a mission effort to an unreached people group that, for some inexplicable reason, only sees men saved and responding to the gospel. Those men form a church that, at least for a season, has no women members. What would that covenant community look like? I don't know exactly but I think it would be a barren and unappealing place. It's not quite as simple as saying the men would start a lot of things but not finish them. Equally likely is that they build things and finish them but, left to their own, they wouldn't be worth finishing. A purely masculine covenant community might have the skeleton, but would lack everything that makes the skeleton graceful and comely. The life of the community might be protected from error and harm, but would that protected life be appealing or attractive or worth protecting?

If this seems like I am trivializing the role of women to covenant cosmeticians, then consider the role of the glorified church in relation to her head. We know from Scripture that Christ is a glorious Savior. He is the radiance of the glory of God (Heb. 1:3). But how does he display his glory in salvation? By creating a bride worthy of his glory. And not in a generic, abstract way, but through saving real people and making them collectively into a people for his Father's own possession and a bride for himself. That means that in a profound way, on the last day we will see the glory of Christ when we see the glorified bride and the deeds she has done by grace to show the glory of her husband (see Rev. 19:8). She mirrors his glory for all the cosmos and spiritual realms and redeemed saints to see, making the glory of Christ as Savior real and visible. She is the completion and glorification of the covenant work of salvation.

And women, your call in your covenant communities is to mirror that glory of the bride, who is herself "the glory of the glory."²⁴ Notice how these definitions imply and require one another. Completing requires building, and protecting assumes the thing built and completed is glorious and worth protecting. Speaking metaphorically, behind the walls that men build and protect, women make the gardens fruitful and the hearths beautiful. Speaking concretely, it is the wives and mothers who give the home its heart, and spiritual mothers who make the church a place of wisdom and beauty and grace. They pursue the internal beauty of godliness (1 Pet. 3:4),

24. The phrase comes from Rebekah Merkle, *Eve in Exile: The Restoration of Femininity* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2016), 119.

modeling and nurturing this in others. They faithfully cultivate a godly culture in the home and church and seek to transfer this from one generation to the next. Their homes point others to the kingdom of God as they nurture and shape future lives and destinies. Like the bride of Christ to which she points, a woman of godly strength and beauty mirrors the glory of the one who redeemed her.

We've covered a lot of ground in this chapter, but hopefully the biblical vision for our masculinity and femininity has become clear. We were made for covenant relationships, with God and with each other. As men and women in covenant communities, we are neither interchangeable nor independent. And as we live out our lives in this complementary covenant unity, we do so with eternal significance—mirroring the one covenant that outlasts death, and the one family that endures forever. This is ultimately the meaning of our masculinity and femininity.

What About the Church?

In our definition of complementarianism, we spoke of marriage and church as the key spheres in which our gender differences operate. We've looked at those differences in marriage through Ephesians 5:22–33. But what about the church? How do gender roles look different for men and women here? Answering that question will take two chapters. In this chapter, we'll look at the most foundational text that argues why men, and only men, can be elders in the church. In the next chapter, we'll move from that more narrow issue to the broader question of why and how our gender matters in the household of God (i.e., the church).

A CLEAR (AND CONTROVERSIAL) PAULINE COMMAND

This section heading could apply to many commands written by the apostle Paul. And it's telling that the commands that seem most controversial change throughout the ages. That says more about us than the apostle.

But Paul's words to his protégé in 1 Timothy 2:8–15 fit the criteria: they are clear, and they step on (modern Western) toes. Here's the text in full:

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works. Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control. (1 Tim. 2:8–15)

What does this text command? While it's tempting to single out verse 12, such a focus might make us miss the broader context in which Paul speaks to both men and women here. So we'll look briefly at the entire text before diving into the part about women teaching.

Manly Prayer

Paul first speaks to the men. He wants them to lead in prayer, marked by holiness and without contentiousness. He specifies that this is to be “in every place”—which could mean “in every part of their lives,” or “in every place that the people of God gather.” Both would be good practices. And notice that

Paul adds the qualifying statement: “lifting holy hands.” The picture seems to be of hands raised in prayer—but note, they are holy hands that contrast with the alternative: “without anger or quarreling.”

It is striking that throughout human history men often raise their hands for precisely those wrong purposes. Anger. Quarreling. Strife. Violence. Some readers have probably seen and experienced men raising their hands to strike blows at those they should protect. One of the harms of a gender-neutral vision of human beings is that it can’t account for the gender-specific sins of men: the perversion of authority and strength into tyranny and violence. That couldn’t be further from the picture of godly manliness that Paul sketches here. In every place, the men are to gather with raised hands not stained with sin, and to lead, not in violence, but in prayer.

You may be wondering at this point why Paul doesn’t tell women to pray. But notice that Paul doesn’t command women not to pray. The New Testament reveals that every Christian is to pray, and in 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul makes clear that there is an appropriate way for women to pray in the gathering of the church. The command here to men does not imply a parallel prohibition to women.

But don’t overlook this also: when men do this, it is a very good thing. There are a number of other ways men can be occupied in the gathering of the saints—quarrels about words and the kinds of things Paul forbids throughout this letter—and there are a host of ways men can be disengaged from the gathering of the saints. At a bare minimum, Paul is teaching the opposite: when we gather, men should be engaged in explicitly spiritual and godly activity. Men should pray.

Feminine Adornment

What does Paul then say to women? The command is for women to dress modestly, not luxuriously, and to find their status not in what they wear but what they do.

Wait. Is this about clothes? Isn't that stereotyping!?

But look carefully, and you'll find Paul is addressing much more than clothes. The ultimate contrast is between clothes that are immodest or display a lack of self-control on the one hand, and good works on the other hand. Women are to clothe themselves with godliness—which makes clear that a woman's value is not rooted in her appearance.

This is precisely the same thing the apostle Peter writes in 1 Peter 3. We might even call this standard apostolic teaching on the subject of feminine modesty and good works:

Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. (1 Pet. 3:3–4)

If this seems completely odd and outdated to us, perhaps the problem is with us.

In wrestling with this point there are two errors we must avoid. First, we might be tempted to look for something that's so culturally specific that we can dismiss the whole passage (especially the next part about teaching in the church). "Ah, see, it's really only addressed to Greco-Roman culture in Ephesus, so nothing here applies to us moderns." But it's a deep error to dismiss Scripture's abiding principles with sweeping cultural generalizations. Call this the "explain it away" error.

But there's another error, the "overly literal" error: "It's God's Word, so women can't braid their hair or wear jewelry or costly attire." That runs into some problems, too. What price tag qualifies as "costly attire"? Is only thrift store shopping allowed? (What about Amazon, if it's a Prime Day sale?) Furthermore, the Bible is not against feminine beauty or even clothing to adorn that beauty. See the Song of Songs, the "let your garments always be white" of Ecclesiastes 9:8, or the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 who clothes herself in fine linen and purple (Prov. 31:22).

So what are we to make of this? Tom Schreiner provides a helpful summary: "We can draw two principles from these verses: Paul is prohibiting not only extravagant and ostentatious adornment but also clothing that is seductive and enticing. These words are still relevant in our culture, for materialism and sexually seductive attire plague us as well."²⁵

Almost everyone would recognize there are some things that you shouldn't wear to church. Furthermore, there are some things that culture would say are acceptable that would be wrong to wear to the gathering of the people of God. Once we admit that in principle, we see what Paul is doing here. Women, there is a way for you to dress that may be culturally acceptable—whether signaling sexual availability or your status and superiority to other women—but for a Christian, and especially a Christian gathered with God's people, such

25. Thomas R. Schreiner, "An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9–15: A Dialogue with Scholarship," in Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds., *Women in the Church (Third Edition): An Interpretation and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9–15* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 183.

things are inappropriate. Instead, what should mark you is godliness and a pattern of good works.

Be that kind of woman, Paul is saying. When you gather, don't let culture and sinful desires dictate how you rank yourselves. Be women of godliness.

Here's the important point to make at this stage: there are gender specific patterns to our life together as men and women that are relevant to the church in every age. He does not say, "Let people pray . . . and let people adorn themselves . . ." Why? Because there is an order to creation itself, including male and female, that we respect and honor as we gather. And that leads to the most controversial section.

CREATED ORDER

It's normally not good writing to have multiple main points that then have multiple subpoints, but I'm going to break that rule here. The controversial nature of this text means we need to slow down. Paul is calling for a created order to our gatherings as men and women, and he gives commands in light of that. That phrase "created order" has two meanings: we create order in our gatherings when we do certain things and not other things. And the logic and pattern we follow as we do certain things and don't do other things is the pattern of the creation order itself.

That will make more sense, Lord willing, when we reach the end of the text. So let's look at four questions about these five verses.

What does the text command?

There is an imperative in the text. An imperative tells us we must do something. What it commands is that a woman is to learn quietly in all submissiveness in the gathering of the household of God.

Does that mean women should be seen and not heard at church? No. In 1 Corinthians 12–14 Paul indicates that there is a time when, in proper submission, women participate by praying and prophesying in the public gathering (compare especially 1 Cor. 14:26 with 1 Cor. 11:5, 14:34–35).

Furthermore, in Jesus' ministry he interacts directly with women and they speak to him and learn from him. So this is not a categorical prohibition on women speaking in any spiritual setting. What precisely Paul means becomes clearer in the next verse.

What does it prohibit?

The text prohibits (a negative command) a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man.

Much ink has been spilled over this verse. But it's not because it's inherently hard to understand. Yes, the syntax of the verse is somewhat unusual, and there are some less common vocabulary words. But those aren't the problem. Instead, in an age where we are trained to believe in the absolute equality of all people in every way, we find it offensive that Paul says there is something that a woman is not to do because of her gender. We feel this especially because teaching and exercising authority are not sinful things in and of themselves—they are good things.

Paul is teaching us something fundamental about the leadership of the church, which is a reflection of leadership in the home. The preaching and teaching of God's Word, which is central to the life and worship of the church, is the responsibility of those men gifted and called to be its pastors. In just a few verses Paul will lay out qualifications for those men. It also falls to these men, the pastors/elders, to "exercise authority" over the church: leading the church, governing its affairs, caring spiritually for its members. While the New Testament echoes this instruction in other places, in both precept and example, it is this text that establishes this principle most clearly.

So why not women?

Why?

Paul grounds this fundamental command, not in temporary circumstances or cultural phenomena, but in the order of creation: the order in which Adam and Eve entered the world, and also the order in which temptation and sin entered the world.

1 Timothy 2:14 reminds us that Adam was formed first, then Eve. Male and female are both made in the image of God; both equal in worth, equal in value, equally reflecting the character and work of their Creator. But they are not made in the same way. Adam is formed from the ground, and he's given a task—but a task he cannot do by himself. Eve is formed from Adam's rib, and she's given to him by God to complete him. That order is significant, pointing to the covenant leadership role and responsibilities given to Adam.

But then Paul talks about the entrance of sin. Eve was deceived, not Adam. Now remember this is the same man who wrote Romans 5: through Adam's sin death entered the world (Rom. 5:2). Paul is not releasing Adam from guilt. But he is saying the order of temptation was significant, and it's relevant here to the question of who teaches and exercises authority in the ordered gathering of the people of God.

Why is the order of temptation relevant? There are two possible interpretations here. One view says that women are more likely to be deceived because they are more caring and empathetic. These are good traits but they can be hijacked by malevolent outside forces. That could be what Paul is saying, but if so, we need to add that it doesn't mean men never make bad decisions or become deceived. Witness all the wreckage from false teachers that Paul has to deal with in the Pastoral Epistles.

I think a better option is that the order in which temptation comes is itself significant. Think about what happened in Genesis 2 and 3. In Genesis 2, Adam is given authority over the animal realm, but he can't fulfill his mission without Eve. So God completes him by giving him a helper like himself. Adam, with his bride, rules nature and the animal realm. And what happens in Genesis 3? A beast subverts Eve, who then leads her husband, who in turn passively accepts all of that and breaks covenant with God. Then God speaks, first to the man, then the woman, then the serpent as he appears in judgment. Sin subverted the created order and brought death. So Paul commands the people of God, when they gather, not to subvert that created order but to honor it, with men acting appropriately as men and women acting appropriately as

women. This means that, similar to the way they are to lead in the home, only men should teach and exercise authority over the gathered church.

Why does the creation order matter?

If we're following the logic to this point, we might still ask, "But why does this creation order matter so much?" That brings us to 1 Timothy 2:15: "yet she shall be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control." While commentators suggest a myriad of interpretations, I'll mention only two primary ones. The first views this as a messianic reference, with the text referring to Mary, while the second says that salvation comes through the creation order. For the first possibility some interpreters note that the phrase "through childbearing" could be read as referring to a singular childbirth, the bearing-of-child that happens when Mary gives birth to Jesus, thus reversing the consequences of Eve's fall into deception. It's possible, but it seems unlikely since nothing else in the text points to that specific of an interpretation.

It's better to take the latter interpretation: the text is saying that salvation comes through the creation order. In other words, salvation does not come in a way that overturns, replaces, or bypasses the original goodness of God's creative work, including the patterns of marriage, family, and child-rearing. It is not saying that women are only saved when they bear children. That clearly goes against the entirety of Scripture's teaching about salvation by faith alone, through Christ alone. But here, in a context where Paul is speaking

about rightly ordering our roles in the household of God, he reminds us that it's in these ordinary patterns of life that salvation is received and lived. The final phrase in the verse—"if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control"—reinforces this. Salvation is not a matter of "having a baby," but of trusting Christ in faithful discipleship.

Perhaps you still have the *why* question. Why would God think this created order is so important that he would save through the created order (not abolishing it or replacing it), and call us to live out our salvation in this created order? Because this created order is designed to reveal the glory of God and of Christ. In other words, married life and rightly ordered church life are bearing witness to the glory of Christ in his sacrificial love for his bride, and to the glory of God the Father who loves the fatherless and makes the orphan his own. The created order is like a precisely ground mirror, designed for the purpose of reflecting a glory greater than itself. Altering the mirror distorts the reflection.

Our relationships as husbands and wives are a mirror. We are equal in worth and dignity, but complementary in role, joined in a love that takes two, unites them as one, and then expands to become a family. That kind of fruitful covenant love, when rightly ordered, reflects the glory of Christ. When the mirror of marital love is functioning according to God's plan—when a husband loves his wife as himself, nourishes her and cherishes her and sacrifices for her, and when a wife submits to her own husband, completing him in covenant union and communion, and when together they bring up children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord—that household is ordered well, and it reflects the glory of Christ.

The church is another mirror, one that contains, amplifies, and transcends the mirror of marriage. When the mirror of the church is functioning accord to God's plan—when men who are fathers and husbands at home lead in prayer, in seeking God, and in putting aside quarreling and unholiness; when women who are mothers and wives at home complete the household of God, being devoted to faith and love and good works; when called, qualified men preach the Word and exercise authority for the good of the household of God—that well-ordered household of God reflects the glory of God.

And when the mirrors are undistorted, what a glory we see! We see the glory of God our Father, who tells the fatherless that he will be their father: "I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth" (Isa. 43:6). We see reflected the kind of love that the Father has shown to make us children of God—for this is who we are (1 John 3:1).

We see the glory of Christ our Savior, the husband of his bride, who came from heaven and sought her, laying down his life for her, nourishing her as his own body, bearing her sins and raising her to life. We see a day still future, witnessed in the Spirit by the apostle John, who saw a bride made radiant for her husband descending from the heavens in glory, and a voice that said, "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9).

The order of our life together in the household of God matters. It reflects the good, wise, life-giving created order of God. But the created order itself reflects the coming new creation order. Our life together is about so much more than ourselves.

The phrase “I do not permit a woman to teach,” taken in isolation, sounds restrictive. But it’s not meant to be taken in isolation. Paul’s teaching about the roles of men and women in the church is part of the consistent picture of the created order and its relationship to the new creation order, taught by all of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation.

Throughout this chapter I’ve used an unusual phrase to describe the church: “the household of God.” The next chapter will discuss what that means, and why it is relevant for our identity as Christian men and women.

The Household of the Living God

There's an assumption submerged underneath all that we've been saying about men and women in the church—actually, several assumptions. First, the church is not just a description of a local church, whether a church in Sovereign Grace or in any other denomination. The church isn't parallel with the parent-teacher association or the local football team or any other group created of the members, by the members, and for the members. The church is God's creation, a group made up of all the elect in Jesus Christ before it finds expression in actual local churches. The glory of every faithful local church is that they are one local manifestation of the people of God in every place and every generation. *The* church is bigger than *our* church.

The second assumption flows from this idea: the church, this society of the people of God, has a shape and an order. We saw in the last chapter that it is based on the creation order, but that might still leave questions. What does it actually mean to be men and women ordered together in the church? That's our focus in this chapter.

THE CHURCH AS GOD'S HOUSEHOLD

Among the many metaphors and pictures that Scripture uses to describe the church, a significant picture occurs in 1 Timothy 3:14–16: the church is the household of God.

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

The same picture appears in Hebrews 10:21 and in 1 Peter 2:5 and 4:17. The church is God's dwelling place, his house, and (an overlapping and related meaning) his family, his household, his "family unit."²⁶ As the seventeenth century Reformed theologian Petrus van Mastricht wrote, the church is called the household of God because God calls his people into fellowship with himself in all his triune fullness.

Into this household's [the Trinity's] fellowship (2 Cor. 13:14, 1 John 1:3), and as if into its society, in time he

26. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1 (United Bible Societies, 1989), s.v. "οἶκος οἰκία."

received the church, which for this reason is called the house of God (1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Tim. 2:20), in which God is said to dwell, and to have his own fire and hearth, as it were (Isa. 31:9), and likewise the city and kingdom of God (Matt. 6:10, 13), from which the members of the church are denominated throughout the Scriptures as sons and daughters (2 Cor. 6:18), and likewise servants (Rom. 1:1), friends (John 15:15), members of the household, citizens (Eph. 2:19), and subjects.²⁷

So then, the church is God's household. God's household is not disordered or chaotic. And because the church is God's household, the people who make up that ordered society live together as a family.

LIVING AS GOD'S FAMILY

Paul's first letter to Timothy contains far more about our identity as men and women in the family of God than who should function as elders or pastors of the church. His overriding concern is that the church, as God's household, must conduct itself as a family—and that means that men and women relate together in love, care, purity, and order.

This focus comes especially into view in chapter five, where Paul returns to the theme of how Timothy should live as a man in the family of God.

27. Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology, Vol. 2: Faith in the Triune God*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 550.

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity. Honor widows who are truly widows. (1 Tim. 5:1–3)

From verse 4 through verse 16 the text describes in detail how to identify and care for those widows. It's a passage that could be easily overlooked, and its connection with 5:1–3 could also be missed. Why does Paul give such detailed, gender-specific instructions to Timothy about how he should conduct himself in the household of God, and why spend so much time on widows? Because in the family of God, order matters. And within that order, our gender matters—especially for those who are most vulnerable and in need (the widows).

Notice how far this description is from the kind of implicit gender-neutrality we often pursue in the modern West, where the focus is on our full equality, often to the point of interchangeability (“We make no distinctions between men and women here”). But Scripture's vision is far more realistic: our gender does matter in the household of God, and if we ignore it we miss a primary way to care for one another and a primary way we find our place among the people of God.

Before we look at another Scripture, let me tell you a story. An older man in my church, through a season of extended suffering and struggle, was left by his wife and adult daughters. While not sinless in the situation, he was not solely to blame, and more importantly, he responded with humility and repentance toward his own sins. But he was still left alone, divorced and alienated from his children and denied the hope of seeing his grandchildren.

But, in God's wonderful providence, a year or two later a new group of young students arrived at our church, and a number of young ladies about the age of this man's daughters began to sit beside him on Sundays, caring for him, praying for him, and encouraging him. The grandson of a family who has welcomed him into their home has "adopted" this man as an honorary family member and often makes a beeline to sit in his lap on Sundays. Those generational, familial relationships have brought healing to this man's soul. One day, with tears in his eyes, this man told me, "I feel like I lost my family, but God gave me back a church family!" My fellow pastors and I sometimes joke that the toddler hugging his knees and the spiritual daughter remembering his birthday have gotten more done than all of our pastoral efforts combined.

Do you see the point? A gender-neutral, "we're all equal here" vision of the church can't give us that kind of beautiful picture. Our gendered, generational identities as men and women in the household of God matter.

The same pattern holds in Titus 2. Our identity as men and women shows us the particular shape that our relationships take in the household of God.

But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word

of God may not be reviled. Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. (Titus 2:1–6)

The specific instructions to each group of people are important, but even more basic is the fact that Paul describes an order in the family of God that is based on our gender identity and our maturity. One final text makes the point:

I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.
I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.
I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.
I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.
I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.
I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one. (1 John 2:12–14)

John's language is slightly different than Paul's, tending to use the broader term "little children" to speak of all men and women in Christ. But it's significant that he writes to these "little children" in Christ as a spiritual father. As John says in his third letter, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 John 4). And, as a spiritual father, John writes to his children and includes specific instruction to his sons and fellow spiritual fathers.

The point is clear: throughout the New Testament, men and women live in the household of God as a family. Our identity as men and women shapes how we relate. We are not just generic disciples but brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, fathers and mothers. Let's consider each of these dimensions.

BROTHERS AND SISTERS

One of the clearest texts on our status as brothers and sisters in Christ comes in the instructions to Timothy that we've already considered: "Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity" (1 Tim. 5:1–2). Paul makes a clear link between our "sibling relationships" in Christ and our purity—which includes all aspects of purity, both in the emotional and physical realms. While definitely not the last word to be said, it is certainly a vital first word. Just as in a family there are sexual lines that must not be crossed in sibling relationships, so in the household of God sexual purity and moral purity must be pursued at all times between those who are brothers and sisters in Christ.

But that's only the beginning of the implications. Another very important implication is that men and women are fundamentally equal in their standing before God through Jesus Christ—there are no family favorites. This is where the family language of the New Testament illuminates so many aspects of our life together, especially with its repeated speech to "brothers." The Greek term is *adelphoi*, and as the ESV rightly notes, when the phrase is used in the plural to describe all those who are in Christ it could validly be translated as "brothers and

sisters.” This is our equal identity in the household of God: *adelphoi* in Christ, with God as our heavenly Father. Christ is the firstborn of both creation and redemption (Col. 1:15–18), the elder brother into whose image we are all being conformed (Rom. 8:29–30). Because we are united to him, we receive his inheritance and all the manifold blessings that come with being joined to the one who himself unites all things (Eph. 1:3–18). He gladly and willingly took on this role for us as the Mediator, sharing in our flesh and blood so that he could call us his brothers and sisters as he leads us in worship to the Father (Heb. 2:11–18).

This is the context in which to understand Galatians 3:28 (“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”), an oft-misused text that is construed to mean that there are no distinct gender roles for those who are in Christ. The point, coming in a letter devoted to preserving the basis on which every person is justified—not by works of the law but through faith in Christ—is not that men and women are functionally interchangeable, but that in our status before God we all participate equally in his family through Christ.

A wonderful and vital part of this equality is displayed regularly in our corporate life as we take the Lord’s Supper together. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul rebukes the church at Corinth for its abuse of the Lord’s Supper, which apparently included distinctions being made within the body that divided the church at the table (1 Cor. 11:18–22). Paul makes it clear that this is wrong. So after describing what should take place at the communion table (vv. 23–26), and warning of the consequences of abusing the table (vv. 27–32), Paul then uses family language again to

describe the unity that we should experience when we gather:

So then, my brothers [*adelphoi*], when you come together to eat, wait for one another—if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. (1 Cor. 11:33)

The next time you gather with your church, especially at the Lord's Supper, look around you. The men and women who share this meal with you are your family in Christ. These relationships will endure for all time! Married couples who come to the table do so not first and foremost as husband and wife, but as brother and sister in Christ. Our marriage covenants will end at death, but that will only be the beginning of our eternal covenant relationships in the family of God. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

But there are two other dimensions to our relationships in the church that are closely related.

SONS AND DAUGHTERS

This point may be less obvious, but with reflection it points to a vital part of our life as the family of God. The New Testament writers not only order the household of God based on our identity as men and women, but also on our maturity in Christ. In other words, there's a generational component to a well-ordered household of God: older men and women and younger men and women. And, not surprisingly, the two groups need to hear different and maturity-specific instructions.

Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (1 Pet. 5:5)

Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. (Titus 2:2–6)

Pride is a human problem—but pride is especially a youthful problem. Men and women of all ages need to be self-controlled, but young men especially need to be reminded of this virtue.

And notice that the texts don’t specify an age range after which you’re automatically included in the “mature” category. Unlike the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), you can’t simply “age into” the category of mature in the faith after the requisite number of years. That’s why the writer of Hebrews rebukes his congregation for failing to grow up into the maturity they should have achieved (see Heb. 5:11–14).

We’ll talk about what it means to be mature, and therefore spiritual fathers and mothers, in a moment. But consider first this role as spiritual sons and daughters: you and I didn’t arrive at the faith auto-generated, self-created into our spiritual identity by an act of the will.

Think for a moment about how we grow in our faith after conversion. Someone with more experience, more battle-tested wisdom, and more faith takes us under their wing. They mentor us. They ask questions, and sometimes say hard things. They show their love in word and deed and truth. The specifics vary but the pattern remains: we are all sons and daughters in the faith. Our faith didn't kindle through spiritual spontaneous combustion, and we don't grow in the faith through holy isolation.

In a profound sense, we are all spiritual sons and daughters of the church herself. I don't mean that in a Roman Catholic, sacramental sense, where believers need the institutional church to dispense grace through the sacraments, without which we cannot encounter Christ. The Reformation was absolutely right to reject that vision of both salvation and church life as distorting the gospel and placing human mediators between us and our Savior.

But there is a deeper sense in which the church is our mother. Paul says so explicitly in Galatians 4 as he works out an extended contrast between two Jerusalems, the earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem: "But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother" (Gal. 4:26). The church, as the bride of Christ, has spiritual children through the proclamation of the gospel through the ages. The New Covenant church was and is the recipient of that divinely originated, apostolically delivered gospel from the first moment of her New Covenant existence at Pentecost. As that gospel is cherished and preached and believed on and died for through the ages, the church bears spiritual offspring. That's also why, when I spoke of the people through whom we grow in the

faith, some of you might be thinking of people long since dead. Sometimes we are spiritual sons and daughters of those whose life on earth is over, who disciple us through their written words centuries after they have entered their heavenly rest. That's a gift, and part of our identity as sons and daughters in the household of God.

So as you think about what it means to belong to the family of God, don't miss this generational aspect and the opportunity it presents for us to grow through the witness and wisdom of those who have gone before us. I think that should include growing to some degree through the written words of Christians from other generations. Pick an historical hero—a John Bunyan or a Charles Spurgeon, a J. I. Packer or an Augustine of Hippo—and learn from their life and works.

But it can't only include spiritual fathers and mothers who have already entered their rest. We also need the ones that are there every Sunday to encourage us in the faith and call us to faithfulness. Lean into that blessing through your local church. Seek out men and women whose lives in Christ you admire, and ask them to help you grow up into maturity.

This is why the qualifications for elders include so much focus on character and on home life. Pastors, their wives, and their families are certainly not perfect and also need room to grow into maturity themselves. But they should also be the kind of Christians that a new believer could say, "I want to become like that." (If you're a pastor reading this, here's my application of this principle to your life: seek out spiritual fathers and mothers even as you invest in your own sons and daughters in the faith. This is one of the blessings of team ministry and denominational, relational partnership in the gospel.)

The connection between our identity as sons and daughters leads naturally to the last category: fathers and mothers.

FATHERS AND MOTHERS

The New Testament assumes that mature believers will invest themselves in spiritual offspring. We've alluded to some of the relevant texts already, but this is the place to state it clearly. Listen to how Paul writes about this to the Corinthians:

I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. (1 Cor. 4:14–17)

The apostle John makes the same statement about the recipients of his letters:

For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. (3 John 3–4)

It's not just spiritual fatherhood that's described—spiritual mothers also receive attention. Paul, in his lengthy and affectionate greetings in Romans 16, singles out Rufus's mother, otherwise unknown to us, with this high praise: "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to

me as well" (Rom. 16:13). Paul draws Timothy's attention to the godly legacy he received from his mother and grandmother, a case where the marital family also became the spiritual family for this young man in the faith: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well" (2 Tim. 1:5). Note also how in 2 Tim. 3:15 Paul can say that Timothy was acquainted with Scripture "from childhood."

Can we develop from texts like these a definition of what it means to be a spiritual father or mother? Here's my attempt: a spiritual father or mother wants spiritual children to share in the riches of Christ, commits himself or herself to their spiritual fortunes and growth, and feels an ongoing responsibility for their welfare in Christ.

If the definition is the same for both spiritual fatherhood and motherhood, why does our gender identity matter here? Because our roles as men and women shape and give specific form to how we relate to spiritual sons and daughters. While not every part of our discipleship and maturity in Christ is gender-specific, some major parts of it are. A spiritual father looks at a young man who wants to grow in Christ and knows that there are some masculine-specific battles he will face, virtues he will need to cultivate, and identities he will need to embrace. And that spiritual father's experience of each of those areas will be part of the way in which his hard-won wisdom gets passed on to a spiritual son.

A spiritual mother looks at her daughter in Christ and knows that she will hear many competing definitions of what gives worth and value to a woman from the world around her: her physical beauty, her sexual appeal to men, her productive

career in the workplace, her role in her kids' educational or athletic success. That spiritual mother will know that part of the wisdom she needs to pass on to a daughter in the faith is how to live as a godly woman who fears the Lord and finds true beauty in his eyes. Those are gender-specific areas of discipleship, and we need spiritual fathers and mothers to grow up into all of those roles.

As a pastor and church member, I'm so grateful to be part of a church with many older saints. I've seen up close the power of spiritual fathers and mothers in the faith, and the stabilizing, encouraging, example-setting way they mold and shape an entire church. While the last chapter made clear that, in God's design, spiritual authority over the church is given to those called and ordained men who minister the Word, it's also important to note that authority and influence are not the same thing. Both are a valuable part of how God builds his church. Those senior saints who are spiritual mothers to our church do not have (and do not want) spiritual authority to preach the Word of God—but their lives of godliness and faithfulness give them great spiritual influence.

I sometimes imagine a hypothetical conflict between unfaithful use of spiritual authority and that seasoned, settled, godly influence. When I arrived at our church years ago as a twenty-something single man with no pastoral experience, what if I had tried to use the pulpit to steer the church away from sound doctrine and biblical authority? I think at least one of the (many) rocks I would have crashed upon would have been the influence of the spiritual mothers in our church. "I don't think that's what the Bible actually says," coming from the mouth of someone whose life of faithfulness as a wife and

mother has shone for decades would have carried far more weight than false teaching cloaked in a veneer of plausibility. These layers of spiritual authority and spiritual influence, given to us in differing ways appropriate to our identity as men and women, are part of how God builds up his family.

So here's the takeaway: part of our desire should be to grow up into the kind of men and women who can be such influential spiritual fathers and mothers, who can pass on the gospel and its implications to other people in the family of God. It's good when a little girl plays with a doll and says, "I can't wait to grow up so I can be a mommy!" And it's good when a new convert looks at the mature members of his church who worship with him on a Sunday and says, "I can't wait until I can grow up in Christ so I can have sons and daughters in the faith."

Does that mean you have to be married and have kids to have that kind of wisdom? Absolutely not. What you need to be is a man or woman who loves the Lord, keeps his commandments, and grows in the grace and knowledge of Christ. These are not three separate things, but three different biblical ways of saying, "grow up in Christ." To my single brothers and sisters in Christ, make this the aim of your life. To the young men and young women reading this, point your life towards that kind of future: growing in Christ as a man or woman. And then pass on what you've learned as a Christian man or as a Christian woman to others in the household of God.

The church is the household of the living God. And in that household we live as a family: brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, fathers and mothers.

So What Now?

*The history of the human race began with a wedding;
it also ends with a wedding, the wedding of Christ and his
church, of the heavenly Lord with his earthly bride.*

Herman Bavinck

We began our study of complementarian theology with this Herman Bavinck quote. We have seen how in the beginning God created man “male and female,” equal yet different and complementary. We have explored how marriage is a major biblical-theological theme that links creation and new creation, creating the categories that help us understand how and why human beings are created for covenant relationships. We considered how those covenant relationships are structured along marriage and family lines, both in the earthly family and the heavenly family of God.

But we also began this book, way back in the introduction, with an acknowledgement that our complementarian convictions aren’t popular. In a way, our culture is both like and

unlike Gregory of Nyssa's breadseller who couldn't stop debating theology. The people around us in our neighborhoods, towns, and cities aren't neutral when it comes to manhood and womanhood. As I write these words, it's mid-June and even rural West Virginia doesn't escape the presence of rainbow flags and Pride Month reminders.

For many reading this book, the topic of gender identity and roles, and its inevitable collision with the LGBTQ agenda, is more than just a theoretical debate—it's a family divide. Faces of people much loved come to mind. Adult children. Siblings. Grandkids. A spouse. For some of us, just reading texts like those we've looked at here—Ephesians 5:22–33, 1 Timothy 2:12—divides us not just from the broader culture, but from people with whom we used to share our lives, our homes, our very selves. That is hard. Very hard. Is it worth it?

How do we live out these complementarian convictions in that kind of world, with that kind of cost? Wouldn't it be easier to bury these beliefs deep in a footnote in our Statement of Faith, or a back page of our church's website? Take those kind of books (maybe this book) off the living room shelf and stick them in a box in the closet where no one will notice that you're one of *those* Christians?

It would be easier. But it wouldn't be better. Or faithful. Or truly loving.

Part of the reason we've spent so much time in this book describing the biblical theology of marriage and gender, the picture of the family of God and its right ordering, is to convince us that these things aren't just true, they're also beautiful. When men and women live this way in their marriages, with their children, and in their churches, people

aren't harmed, repressed, or oppressed. Instead people flourish. Women are honored. Children are protected. Authority is guarded from abuse and used for good. Error and evil are confronted and contended with. And the people who bear the most scars from those confrontations are those God has called to that task: elders who lead their churches and protect them from wolves, and fathers who sacrifice for their children and lay down their lives for their wives. Ultimately, when all this takes place, Christ is honored and glorified.

If deep down we think that complementarianism is like kale for the soul and the church—good for us, but unappealing to look at and bitter to swallow—we'll never stand up with the courage and hope that we need. We won't labor to pass this profound mystery on to our children, our grandchildren, and to generations that we won't live to see. And if we fail to do that, they will suffer for it.

So consider this final chapter an appeal from the heart: don't be misled. Don't buy the lie that this is harmful and hateful. See the goodness, the beauty, the glory of God's plan for men and women in Christ. Love it, so that you will live it.

And to help us do that, we need to remember some sobering yet soul-stirring truths.

REMEMBER WE ARE STRANGERS AND ALIENS

A common New Testament theme is that this world in its fallen state is not our home. Yes, we love and rightly enjoy the glories of God's creation and all the good it contains. But for all those ways in which we are at home in our Father's world because he made it, we're still longing for our eternal home.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. (1 Pet. 2:11)

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. (Heb. 11:13)

Let that sink in. For the entirety of our lives here on earth, we will never be perfectly at home, accepted, or welcomed. We don't fit in (and if we do, that's a problem). The reasons they call strangers "strangers" is because they look strange. That's normal—and the converse is that it's never safe when the people of God look like the people of the unbelieving world around them.

So remember that when you're tempted to think that your beliefs or your church's convictions make you stick out. They do. They're meant to. Somehow, just knowing it takes some of the shock away. The things we believe sound different because we are different—by the grace of God, through the work of Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Being "out of sync" with the culture should be a normal part of our experience as the people of God.

But there's something else to remember here. We are strangers and aliens now to the world around us. But once we were strangers and aliens to Christ and his salvation:

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope

and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. . . . And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. (Eph. 2:12–13, 17–19)

Isn't that glorious news? Yes, we don't fit into the world around us, a sinful society with ever-changing norms and goals and hopes and dreams. But that's because we now belong to a people with a greater hope and more glorious story than any earthly dream of Babel glory or Babylonian luxury. "Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior . . ." (Phil. 3:20). Don't lose sight of that identity, which has been given to us by our Father through Christ our Savior. Remember, we're strangers and aliens here because we are citizens of a better kingdom.

REMEMBER WE WILL BE PERSECUTED

According to Jesus, this second reminder flows directly out of the first reminder:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. (John 15:18–19)

We don't fit in with the world around us because we follow Christ. The world around us is not neutral to Christ and his claims. Those who love the darkness hate the light, and Christ is the light of the world. So they hate him, and they will hate us as a result. Don't be surprised! Jesus says it clearly in John 15, and Paul is equally clear in 2 Timothy 3:12: "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

And it's clear from Jesus' words to the disciples that this persecution might even result in divided families.

Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. (Luke 12:51–53)

The pain of this kind of division is not to be taken lightly, but neither should it surprise us.

Speaking of persecution, however, requires nuance, especially in a global family of churches like Sovereign Grace. Among our brothers and sisters and in the local churches we partner with around the globe, some brothers and sisters are beaten for their faith—even, in places, for teaching basic Genesis 1–2 truths about men and women. Others are imprisoned, lose their jobs, their homes, and their basic safety. And though we haven't yet experienced martyrdom as a denomination, it is a threat or reality hanging over many Christians. For those of us who live in America, or the global West, those stories

should humble us. I've never worried that I'll be put on a hit list for writing a book about complementarianism. And you're probably not afraid for your life while you sit here reading it. Don't overinflate the challenges that Western Christians face because of our complementarian doctrine. Be humble, and pray for our brothers and sisters who experience much greater persecution.

Yet there's a danger in the opposite direction. Biblically speaking, I think a good short-hand definition of persecution is "opposition, hatred, and harm because of Christ." It's a broad enough category to include bad things spoken about us (Matt. 5:10–12), imprisonment for our faith (Luke 21:12), dying for Christ (Rev. 12:11), and everything in between.

For those of us who haven't experienced more intense persecution, there can be a danger that we actually relabel lesser forms of persecution with unbiblical categories so that we can avoid them: "Flying the pride flag on my desk and wearing the button has nothing to do with avoiding persecution—it's just the price of doing business in modern America." Yes, we should pursue humility by recognizing that others suffer far more than we do in the West for our witness to Christ. But we should call things by their right biblical name. Even if we never experience persecution or death because of our convictions about complementarianism, we will still be persecuted somewhere, somehow, if we're faithful to Christ in a sinful society—just as believers in every age have experienced the same opposition. What we can't do is alter the label so that we can avoid counting the cost. It's clarifying to look at the consequences of our convictions, recognize the cost we will face and our desire to avoid it, and then tell our

souls, “Dodging this, failing to speak up or stand out, would be cowardice. Lord Jesus, give me strength to do what I must do and say what I must say for your sake, because anything less is not worthy of you.”

That’s a hard word, isn’t it? But there’s more to remember here, also. Jesus’ warnings about persecution come with a promise:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt. 5:10–12)

Why is it worth being opposed for believing and receiving what the Bible teaches? Because when we do, we are storing up blessing and reward for ourselves. It’s staggering grace. It’s only our duty to obey our Master (Luke 17:10)—and yet he promises to reward our obedience and make it a matter of his justice to ensure our scars and sufferings are noticed and superabundantly repaid (Heb. 6:10). Remember, we will be persecuted and our God will reward us.

REMEMBER GOD WILL BLESS US

I don’t have in mind here specific rewards for our persecution, or the general rewards that await us on the Last Day, as vitally important as each of those are. Here I simply want to remind us that obeying God and treasuring his Word always leads to

blessing. When we love and live out our complementarian convictions, we will experience the blessing of Psalm 1:

Blessed is the man
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree
 planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
 and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers. (Ps. 1:1–3)

We will experience the promise of Isaiah 66:2: “But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.” In our souls, marriages, families, and churches, gladly receiving the Word of God is always safe, right, and blessed.

Let me be clear. I’m not taking “blessing” in a prosperity gospel sense, where everything goes right and we never suffer or face hardship or persecution. The prosperity gospel is wrong on so many fronts, but one of the deepest errors is that it assumes a soul can only receive blessing from God in the midst of worldly prosperity. That’s the opposite of the biblical picture. And it misses the profound paradox of true spiritual blessing: we are “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing . . . having nothing, yet possessing everything” (2 Cor. 6:10). We rejoice always (Phil. 4:4) even as we grieve with tears over

enemies of the gospel (Phil. 3:18). “Blessing” is not the same as full bank accounts and shallow circumstantial happiness. The problem with that kind of “blessing” is that death takes it away instantly. The problem with that kind of “happiness” is that it’s plastic, shatters at the first encounter with the real world, and once shattered can never be put back together again.

Biblical blessing is much deeper. It is the presence and empowerment of God in all circumstances, leading us to everlasting happiness at his right hand forevermore.

That road of blessing always runs through the Word of God. Don’t buy the lie that some biblical doctrines are true, but not good for people. We want to be people and families and churches who live our lives, even as we suffer, under the shining face of our God, who makes his peace and grace and blessing known to us as he keeps us forever. God is faithful, and he will do this. The road to blessing is through glad obedience to his Word.

Remember, God will bless us.

REMEMBER CHRIST IS COMING

We’ve referenced Revelation 19 and the wedding feast of the Lamb throughout this book. But it’s not just a literary theme or a biblical-theology idea—it’s a coming reality! Our Savior is coming back. We will rejoice with him forever. And in our identity as men and women, in our marriages, and in our churches we get to live lives now that reflect and bring near that coming glorious wedding Day.

Human marriages can be deeply scarred by sin. No marriage between two sinners makes it to its golden wedding

anniversary without some regrets, some reminders of sins and weaknesses. In marriage, as in all of life, we stumble in many ways. But, leaving aside a naïve, Hallmark sentimentalization of marriage, there's a reason why weddings are still happy days. Even smeared and scratched by sin, weddings are windows into a joy too vast to be contained in the world as we know it. God built that joy into human weddings because, before the foundation of the world, he had planned a salvation that would bring everlasting, infinite joy to his people. The party will be so big that the whole cosmos will need to be renovated to be a fit backdrop for the beauty of the Bride, and the glory of her Head (Rev. 21:1–2).

Brother or sister in Christ, that Day is coming. When you gathered last Sunday with the family of God in the church your Father has placed you, you anticipated that day. You participated in a very small but very real dress rehearsal for the wedding feast of the Lamb. Married or single, we tasted in that gathering the one covenant that outlasts death itself. And when you and I gather this coming week with the people of God, we will be one Lord's Day closer to the real thing than we were last week. We know it and believe it now by faith. But on that Day faith will become sight, and joy will last forever.

So hold fast to this profound mystery. Polish the mirror of your marriage to reflect a tiny bit of that coming glory. Rejoice in who God made you as a man or a woman, embracing the dignity of your specific calling, which will both bring fulfillment and joy now and point to a greater reality which is to come. Build your family to look more and more like the family of God and point your kids to the one family that matters most and lasts forever. Single, married, widowed, divorced, teen,

pre-teen—give your life to a local church that orders its life under God our Father and Christ our Head.

Because Christ is coming, the Bride is making herself ready. We're almost there.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Rev. 21:1–4)

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