

Biblical
Femininity

“To think lazily about gender in our day is to make oneself a punching bag for our sex-crazed culture. Usually, Christian thinking about gender starts with your church’s tradition or a few Bible verses ripped from their context. This is what makes the ideas presented in *Biblical Femininity* so refreshing. It starts with God Himself, and then thoughtfully and practically surveys the biblical data offering a fresh paradigm for understanding His design. I have used portions of this material in premarital counseling, marriage seminars, and even in systematic theology classes! If you want to think well about biblical femininity, you have to read this book.”

~ Jim Thompson,
equipping pastor at Fellowship Greenville
and author of *A King & A Kingdom*

“This book offers a relevant and refreshing voice to the oft-dreaded subject of biblical femininity. Written with grace and thoughtfulness, it draws all women to embrace their lifetime calling through the truth of the Word and the freedom of the gospel. This challenging reflection speaks to the very nature of our soul and what we were created to be—strong and supportive women who reflect the very image and glory of God.”

~ Cheri Jimenez,
pastor’s wife, Taylors First Baptist Church
and former speaker for Council on Biblical Manhood
and Womanhood

“*Biblical Femininity* offers a refreshing look at what it means to be a woman—and thankfully that definition doesn’t have anything to do with whether or not we are married, have children, or bake our own bread. It has everything to do with our identity and calling, neither of which is defined by roles. This book will open your eyes to the freedom that comes when we embrace who we really are as women created in the image of God.”

~ Ruthie Delk,
author of *Craving Grace*
and women’s conference speaker

Biblical Femininity

DISCOVERING CLARITY AND FREEDOM
IN GOD'S DESIGN FOR WOMEN



CHRYSTIE COLE



AMBASSADOR INTERNATIONAL
GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA & BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND

www.ambassador-international.com

Biblical Femininity

Discovering Clarity and Freedom in God's Design for Women

Copyright 2013 Grace Church and Chrystie Cole

This revised edition © 2015 by Grace Church and Chrystie Cole

All rights reserved

ISBN: 978-1-62020-544-0

eISBN: 978-1-62020-452-8

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture references marked NLT are from The Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004. Tyndale House, Publishers Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture references marked ESV are from the ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001, 2008 by Crossway, Wheaton, Illinois 60187. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture references marked NIV are from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations.

Cover Design & Page Layout by Hannah Nichols and Matt New

eBook Conversion by Anna Riebe Raats

AMBASSADOR INTERNATIONAL

Emerald House

427 Wade Hampton Blvd.

Greenville, SC 29609, USA

www.ambassador-international.com

AMBASSADOR BOOKS

The Mount

2 Woodstock Link

Belfast, BT6 8DD, Northern Ireland, UK

www.ambassadormedia.co.uk

The colophon is a trademark of Ambassador

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The creation of this book is a story involving years of dedication, development, and contribution by Grace Church leaders and members. It would be impossible for this book to exist without the direction and persistence of Bill White, the hours of study and research contributed by Ryan Donell, and the wisdom, biblical knowledge, and direction of Virginia Griffin. Thank you.

Thank you to Julia Taylor, who led the original curriculum team as editor and provided the framework for much of what exists now, and to Jim Taylor for his theological insight. Thank you to Heather Nelson for the wisdom and insight you contributed to the original curriculum team and for making sure this book remained rooted in the gospel.

Thank you to Mark and Renee DeMoss for opening your home for an entire weekend so that the curriculum team could have quiet space to think and create. Thank you to Joy Jones for embodying the *ezer* calling, for serving the curriculum team, and for championing the women's ministry of Grace Church with your hours of dedication. Thank you to Renee DeMoss, Keri Geary, and Abby Moore for the time and energy spent editing and re-editing, making this a polished, accessible product.

To our faithful test readers: Alicia Matthews, Jenny Talbott, Bailey Edmonds, Debra Williams, Allyison Merritt, Barbara Dansby, Chris Curtis, Christa Moormeier, Cindy and Mike Chibbaro, Cristin Henry, Joy Jones, Emily McGowan, Emily Voelkert, Jim Taylor, Libby Thomas, Maria Weaver, Leah Pinckney, Lee Anne Cavin, Molly Burns, Rachael White, Taylor Beard, Trina Thiry, and Ruthie Delk. Thank you for your vital insight, feedback, and sensitivity!

Thank you to the Ambassador International team—Brenda Covert, Tim Lowry, Anna Raats, and Hannah Nichols—who have labored alongside us through the publishing process. We are grateful for your commitment, diligence, and dedication to the Ezer resources.

And finally, thank you to all of the women at Grace Church who have filled out surveys, attended development meetings, provided feedback, led our studies, and ultimately championed our cause. This study is the fruit of your contributions, and we are forever grateful for the time, energy, and resources you have invested.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 7

PREFACE 11

1

AN ESSENTIAL COUNTERPART 13

2

BACK TO THE BEGINNING 37

3

INVITING 57

4

NURTURING 81

5

PARTNERING 111

6

THE GOSPEL TRUTH 143

7

NOW WHAT? 161

NOTES 175

APPENDIX 1

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES 178

APPENDIX 2

A GENTLE AND QUIET SPIRIT . . . 187

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES 191

PREFACE

After more than eight years of dialogue, argument, and research, I have come to the following conclusion: gender is a big deal. Our distinctiveness, as male and female, lies at the heart of what it means to mirror the image of God in the world. The categories established in Genesis 1 through 3 still dominated the Apostle Paul's thinking thousands of years later, and he did not hesitate to apply them with startling clarity to the church of his day. I would argue that we must undertake the same work in our generation.

This book is the product of one church's struggle to understand the implications and applications of what the Bible says about femininity. We are a church filled with people from every conceivable religious and irreligious background, but we are swimming in the waters of fading Southern fundamentalism. We live in a conservative context and serve a group of women who carry wounds from an obsessive pursuit of clarity and control. But even in the Bible Belt, we increasingly engage an emerging generation of young women who are obsessed with self-expression and view gender as just another way to express their individuality. The consequences of this quest for absolute freedom are terrifying beyond imagining.

12 BIBLICAL FEMININITY

What you hold in your hands is the product of what Marva Dawn would call “Spirit-led consensus.” No one person can claim to be the author of this work; rather, it is the product of a local community seeking to do God’s work and understand His way. I am certain that we still have much to learn, but I do believe we have something to say that might be of help to other churches who are striving to help women reclaim the glory of femininity as a reflection of the image of God. May God make it so.

—Bill White

Teaching Pastor, Grace Church

AN ESSENTIAL COUNTERPART

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God
he created him; male and female he created them.

~ Genesis 1:27 (ESV)

IMPOSSIBLE STANDARDS

What does it mean to be a woman or a man? What is it that makes you masculine or feminine? Posing this question to a group of young people today is always an interesting experiment. Silence often fills the room, and perplexed looks wash over their faces. No one is quick to speak, but eventually someone musters up enough courage to speak, and then eventually others follow suit. Their answers often include things like physical makeup, mental and emotional processes, and how you relate to people.

But are these accurate metrics by which you can define what it means to be masculine or feminine? If masculinity and femininity

are defined by how you relate to people, what does it mean when a man is more relational than a woman? The same is true with mental and emotional processes. If a man is more sensitive and emotionally charged, does this mean he is not masculine? What if a woman is more analytical and good with numbers but is relationally awkward?

This uncertainty and lack of clarity leaves many unknowingly struggling to find solid ground upon which they can base their identity. Our need for clarity drives us to create rules and standards for ourselves so we can know we measure up. Then we apply those same standards to all women. Women who work outside the home look in judgment on women who stay at home with their children, believing that they are wasting their potential. Women who stay at home with their children look in judgment on those who work outside the home, believing they are abdicating their role as a wife and mom. Married women look in pity on single women, believing they are somehow incomplete without a spouse and children. Mothers who homeschool their children look in judgment on those who place their children in the public school systems, and mothers who place their children in public school systems look in judgment on those who homeschool their children.

This confusion has caused much pain and turmoil for women trying to navigate through today's world. One woman stated:

“Within these stereotypes of womanhood, there are impossible standards for success, making some girls feel like they will never become the woman they're supposed to be. While they try to sort through the confusion, girls see wealthy but isolated businesswomen, proud but unfulfilled housewives, and exhausted women who struggle to fill both roles at once. On the other side of the spectrum, “successful” women

still receive criticism. Our culture seems to label motivated women in the workforce as too aggressive, especially in male-dominated fields, and dedicated mothers as too submissive or even apathetic in their life goals. It's no wonder girls head into womanhood looking like a deer in the headlights."¹

As a result of all of the confusion and stereotypes, many young women fight against their own femininity, seeing it as weaker, subservient, and less valued than their male counterparts. They strive to be free of any perceived constraints, and model their leadership, their ambitions, and their thinking after men. Others create their identities around a distorted version of femininity, reducing it to roles like wife and mother, and base it around legalistic ideals that marginalize, even patronize, femininity. This type of thinking tends to create rules such as women should not work outside of the home or hold positions of leadership. So they strive to conform in an effort to measure up and follow the rules. But both of these views lack the power and glory of true biblical femininity as God created it and as displayed through the Scriptures. One strives for absolute freedom, which leads only to the tyranny of self and makes you a slave to your own desires. The other strives for absolute clarity and control, so you don't have to trust God, and leads you to self-righteousness. And in the end, all this produces is embittered, frustrated, exhausted women who somehow feel they can never quite measure up.

Questions for Reflection

1. What do you think it means to be feminine?
2. Based on that definition, do you feel like you measure up, or do you miss the mark? Why?

A CULTURAL SNAPSHOT

There is, no doubt, much confusion surrounding gender in today's world, in both secular and traditional religious cultures. Some now argue that while one may be born with a sex, gender is a choice. What began as a fight for gender equality in the feminist movement is now transitioning into a fight for gender neutrality.

Freedom and individual rights are highly valued in today's culture—so much so that any truth not self-defined is often viewed as restrictive, oppressive, and unjust. This worldview is a form of relativism—a belief that there is no real truth except that which is defined by the individual. The results of this movement are landmark changes occurring around the world. In early 2012, Sweden introduced the word *hen* as a new gender-neutral pronoun, replacing the traditional *he* or *she*.² Also ushered in during 2012 is the inclusion of the first transgendered Miss Universe contestant.³ Both of these examples illustrate mankind's attempt at defining oneself—the quest for identity outside of social, cultural, and religious norms.

While the modern feminist movement may not be leading the charge toward gender neutrality, the rallying cry is still one of self-determinism. It is a fight against absolutes, standards, or constraints. It is a belief that women can be and do, should be and do, anything they want. It is a fight not just for equality, but also for sameness in which gender distinctions are eradicated.

There is no doubt that the feminist movement has been a catalyst providing women with great opportunities such as the right to vote, the right to work, the Family and Medical Leave Act, and equal opportunity for jobs, salary, and benefits. Women, who once

had to fight for these rights, now outnumber men in colleges and in the workforce.⁴

Yes, we are witnessing the rise of women. But at what cost? Women are twice as likely to suffer from depression and anxiety as men. Approximately seven million women in the United States alone suffer from clinical depression.⁵ *Could it be that in seeking freedom, women have actually found a new form of bondage?*

On the other end of the continuum is the extreme traditionalism of some religious cultures. This view of femininity often gravitates toward a strict code of ideals and a role-based mentality centered on that of wife and mother. This results in a belief that adhering to moral standards shapes a woman's identity and earns her approval as a woman. Religion is mankind's attempt to adhere to moral standards, not godly standards. These standards, whether real or perceived, often prove burdensome and discouraging to women who do not fit this mold.

Based on these traditional standards, singles and women without children often feel they are incomplete apart from a man or children. Likewise, women with gregarious personalities or those who work outside of the home often feel like they too somehow miss the mark when it comes to living out biblical womanhood. Women find it difficult to live up to these standards because they are founded on false ideals.

Like feminism, traditionalism has a positive contribution to make as well. While they are not exclusive to traditionalism, morals, belief in biblical truth, and family values may well find roots from more traditional ancestors. *But, while seeking to adhere to biblical truth*

and standards, could it be that traditionalists have created a standard of femininity that is too narrow?

Ironically, while these opposing views look very distinct on the outside, they are both ways to attain autonomy—an individual status or identity, apart from God. Both are so deeply entrenched within culture that women will likely find themselves on one end of the continuum or the other.

While there are positives to both views, both are equally destructive. Neither end of the continuum accurately portrays the magnificence of the image of God as displayed through femininity. So what is the answer? There is a third way of thinking that is not on the continuum between these two mistaken opposites. In an article called “The Centrality of the Gospel,” author and pastor Timothy Keller describes this third way dynamic:

“Since Paul uses a metaphor of being ‘in line’ with the gospel, we can consider that gospel renewal occurs when we keep from walking ‘off-line’ either to the right or to the left. The key for thinking out the implications of the gospel is to consider the gospel a ‘third’ way between two mistaken opposites. However, before we start we must realize that the gospel is not a halfway compromise between the two poles—it does not produce ‘something in the middle’ but something different from both. The gospel critiques both religion and irreligion (Matthew 21:31; 22:10).”⁶

The goal is not to find the perfect halfway point between these two incorrect views but to find freedom from them. This freedom can be found only in the power of the gospel.

Questions for Reflection

1. Toward what end of the feminism/traditionalism continuum do you lean? Are you seeking absolute freedom to define yourself as you wish? Or are you caught on the performance treadmill, trying to control and measure up to what others think you should be?
2. In what ways might you be experiencing bondage to your current views of femininity?
3. How is your view of femininity different from that of other generations, such as your daughter, mother, or grandmother? What are the strengths and weaknesses of their views? What are the strengths and weaknesses of your view?

GOAL OF THIS STUDY

The Bible reveals that God created mankind in His own image—as male and female (Genesis 1:27). This means that God is the one who created the distinctiveness of maleness and femaleness. Gender is not a false construct of society, but straight from the mind of God who chose to create male and female to reflect His image in distinct ways that bring Him glory. However, this too is subject to sin and the brokenness brought about by sin, and as a result we have witnessed the destructiveness of religious oppression as well as cultural self-expression. But this need not lead us to eradicate gender altogether. Rather, like all of God's good creation, it must be redeemed.

Someone once said that if you want to change a culture, you need a theology and a common language. We have seen this to be true. If we, as Christians, are going to generate helpful discussion around the chaos and confusion surrounding gender and the difference between personality, roles, and design, then we must speak

the same language. If your job sends you to work in a foreign country where you do not speak the language and your coworkers do not speak your language, you will not be able to accomplish much together. However, if you speak the same language, you will be able to make great strides toward accomplishing your goal. The same is true of discipleship. This study is meant to be a discipleship tool for women. While it may be good to read alone, it is better when these truths are discussed and worked out within the context of biblical community. Our goal is to provide a practical, helpful resource that equips women to think biblically about what it means to be a woman and that provides a common language with which women can speak in order to spur one another on toward growth in spiritual maturity.

This study aims to be a clear and distinct biblical voice amid the confusion by providing a theology and language for what it means to be a female image-bearer. We believe that a basic understanding of femininity should be derived from Scripture—Scripture that is still culturally relevant today. We do not desire to create a caricature of femininity or an artificial cultural box, thereby depriving women of the power and glory of the image of God as it expresses itself through godly femininity. Defined standards, such as those that require Christian women to work in the workplace, homeschool their children, or dress a certain way, marginalize women and limit the diverse ways in which God has designed women to reflect His image and glory. On the contrary, our goal is to provide women with CLARITY and FREEDOM. We strive to be as clear as the Scriptures and to provide women with freedom from rigid constructs so that they might be free to reflect and glorify God in their own distinctiveness.

WHAT IS EZER?

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him.” . . . So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. While the man slept, the Lord God took out one of the man’s ribs and closed up the opening. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib, and he brought her to the man.

~ Genesis 2:18, 21–22

The Ezer study is derived from the Bible’s story of creation found in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis, which will be explored in more depth in the following chapter. These beginning chapters of the Bible reveal that humanity was created in the image of God: male and female—equal, but different. Each gender uniquely represents the glory of God. This is too significant to simply skim over. Men and women were created by God, in the image of God, and for the glory of God. And as the Creator, He alone gets to determine their identities.

More specifically, as it pertains to feminine creation, God says, “I will make a helper who is just right for him,” or as some translations say a “helper fit” or a “helper suitable.” In the original Hebrew, this is *ezer kenegdo*. However, when these words are translated into their English equivalent, they lose the robust Hebrew meaning. Through the years, the word helper has taken on a negative connotation. It seems weak, patronizing—not substantial enough. *Ezer* means one who helps, one who brings that

which is lacking to the aid of another. An *ezer* assists another toward accomplishing a goal. Thus the word *ezer* actually connotes an inherent strength. The word *kenegdo* means corresponding to. So joined together, *ezer kenegdo* means essential counterpart or corresponding strength.

A good illustration of this can be drawn from a 12th century architectural innovation called the flying buttress. Commonly used in Gothic architecture, the flying buttress provides essential support that preserves the architectural soundness and integrity of a building. These buttresses bear the weight and relieve pressure from the walls, allowing for higher ceilings, ornate latticing, and more windows. Like these powerful structures, a woman provides an undergirding strength within the context of relationship that empowers another to become and achieve things that might have otherwise been impossible. She is an essential counterpart providing necessary, load-bearing support.

The word *ezer* is used twenty-one times in the Old Testament, the majority of which refer to God. *Ezer* is used twice in the Genesis creation narrative, specifically pertaining to women. Throughout the rest of Scripture, it is used three times as a military term, and sixteen times God identifies Himself as an *ezer* (see Psalm 146, 54, 70, 118). *Ezer* is not a weak word; it is a strong word. An *ezer* is someone who is for you, an ally—someone who supports, aids, rallies to your cause, and brings you strength. And God entrusted His *ezer* nature to women so that they might reflect His character in this distinct and powerful way.

Given an understanding of the Hebrew and seeing *ezer* in other contexts, one can appreciate the significance of the *ezer* calling. As *ezer kenegdo*, femininity is a strong and necessary part of the combined reflection of God. The feminine reflection was not the

inferior, second thought of an absent-minded Creator. It is the beautiful, intentional completion of the divine portrait. A woman's core calling is to be an *ezer*. Women primarily mirror the *ezer* nature of God. For the remainder of the study, we will shorten *ezer kenegdo* to *ezer*.

Everything about what it means to be a woman is essential and valuable. Women reflect God in and of themselves. That's important. As a woman, your value is not first in what you do, but in who God created you to be, who you are as His reflection.

Another vital thought is that a woman's nature is one that corresponds. One of the things this means is that a woman's identity is irreducibly tied to relationship. In the context of marriage, one can see the necessity of both male and female image bearing. Femininity is uniquely suited to find and meet need in the context of relationship. Although Scripture introduces the design of woman in the context of marriage, a woman can still gain understanding of her unique image bearing regardless of marital status.

In the book, *God's Good Design*, author and theologian Claire Smith states:

"Man's problem in the garden was not singleness; it was solitude. He was alone, not unmarried. Sexual differentiation means none of us is alone—as Adam was alone—because we are all in relationships—more than that, we are all in gendered relationships. All of us relate to men and women, as parents, siblings, friends, workmates, at church—in fact, everywhere we go. And, so with varying degrees of intimacy, all of us experience the complementarity, the dance, between women and men."⁷

Female image bearing is fully adequate beyond the bounds of marriage. That is to say, healthy and robust femininity does not depend on marriage for its expression, but it is expressed fully within the context of community and interpersonal relationships.

This raises an important distinction. There is often confusion between role and identity, between function and design. We are not talking about roles, but about identity. Women tend to define themselves by roles (student, career woman, boss, mother, wife, grandmother, etc.) or by the absence of such roles. But there is danger in defining yourself by a role you play. Roles are often temporary, lasting for a season. Some roles, like that of wife or mother, may span decades. Other roles such as student, employee, athlete, or single are shorter, lasting just a few years. Roles may bring clarity to how and with whom you live out your calling, but they do not determine your identity or your calling.

Your **identity** is certain and secure; it does not shift. You are a human being created in the image of God. You were created as a woman. Your calling is an outflow of your identity as a created being. As a woman created in the image of God, your calling is to be an *ezer*.

Ezer is not a role; it is a lifelong calling. It is part of your DNA, so to speak. *Ezer* is not limited to one role; it is who you are. It is a God-given design. Women are not defined functionally by roles; they are defined inherently by how God created them. Like your identity, your calling as an essential counterpart, *ezer kenegdo*, never changes.

Questions for Reflection

1. Read Psalm 146. List the ways in which the Lord is an *ezer*.
2. How does understanding God as our *ezer* change how you view your calling as an *ezer*?

PERSPECTIVES OF BIBLICAL FEMININITY

Every woman was created to reflect the *ezer* nature of God. But *how* a woman lives out her calling, as an essential counterpart, looks different because every woman is different. This is where theologian John Frame’s work on viewing truth through multiple perspectives may be helpful. Frame believes that by considering three perspectives—knowledge of God’s norm (the unchanging truth of God’s Word), knowledge of our specific situation, and knowledge of ourselves—we can better understand and apply truth to our lives. By bringing these three perspectives together, we begin to gain clarity into what it means to reflect the *ezer* nature of God (the norm) in distinctive ways as individuals, in a variety of seasons and circumstances.

The triangle illustration below identifies the three perspectives of biblical femininity: Calling (knowledge of God’s unchanging truth), Season (knowledge of your specific situation), and Individuality (knowledge of yourself). As you seek to apply your calling, it is important to consider these three perspectives. The illustration is a



helpful tool to provide clarity on how your calling as an *ezer* plays out in your life.

CALLING – At the top of the triangle is your calling. A calling is the purpose for which you were created. You were created, as a woman, to reflect the *ezer* nature of God. This is your calling, and it is common to all women. Being an *ezer* is primary, and it is the only unchanging component of femininity. It is who you are and who you were created to be. There is great CLARITY in this area based on the truths of Scripture.

SEASON – At the bottom right of the triangle is your season. “Season” is a way of referring to roles, age, circumstances, or relationships at a specific time. Seasons change and, as they do, they may bring new roles, circumstances, priorities, and needs. A woman could be single, a wife, an employee, a supervisor, a mother, or a student at any given point in time.

INDIVIDUALITY – “Individuality” is what makes you *you*. Your individuality includes your gifts, passions, interests, personality, backgrounds, sins, wounds, strengths, weaknesses, etc. Individuality, like season, also changes as you age and mature. God takes the good and bad of your individuality and weaves it together to equip you as an *ezer*. There is great freedom in this area. Knowing that God uses your uniqueness, you are freed from trying to model yourself after any other woman.

What does all this mean, and why does it matter? As a woman, your calling is certain. You were created to be an *ezer*, to be one who comes alongside as a corresponding strength or essential counterpart. This is who you are, and that never changes. But how you live out your calling, and with whom, is clarified through

your individuality and season of life. For example, a woman with a strong shepherding gift, in a season of helping her aging parents, may not have the time or energy to mentor a young teen. The same woman, in a different season of her life, may be able to spend considerable amounts of time and energy in a discipleship relationship. Her individuality (her shepherding gift) and her season (helping aging parents) factor enormously in how she lives out her calling on a daily basis.

There is clarity about our common calling as women, but there are many legitimate expressions of this calling. The individuality displayed in Scripture is vast and encouraging, bringing freedom from rigid constructs and stereotypes. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, Scripture represents a diverse group of women. Anna was a widowed prophetess who served in the temple for most of her life (Luke 2:36–38). Lydia was a businesswoman, a merchant who sold her wares in the marketplace (Acts 16:14). Deborah was a judge and a prophetess (Judges 4:4). Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a young bride and mother (Matthew 1:18). Rachel was a shepherdess (Genesis 29:9), as well as a wife and mother. And Priscilla was a wife and tentmaker by trade (Acts 18:3). The point is that there is much more freedom and diversity in Scripture than we are willing to embrace.

As you seek clarity on what it means to think biblically regarding what it means to be a woman, you must consider the purpose for which God created you (to be an essential counterpart) and who you are uniquely (your individuality) as you seek to live out your calling as a woman created in the image of God in your current season or circumstance.

Questions for Reflection

1. In what ways have you felt like you do not fit society's or religion's depiction of femininity?
2. In what ways have you confused identity, role, and calling? What are some consequences you have experienced as a result of your confusion?
3. How does an understanding of the perspectives of femininity (calling, individuality, and season) change your idea of what it means to be a woman?

CORE CAPACITIES

INVITING, NURTURING, PARTNERING

All human beings have the image of God instilled within them, regardless of whether or not they are Christians. Men are uniquely designed to reflect the image of God in distinctly masculine ways. Likewise, women have the capacity to reflect the image of God in distinctly feminine ways. This idea, though biblical, has been corrupted throughout the years and, as such, the true meaning of what it means to reflect God as a man or as a woman has been distorted or in some cases lost altogether.

Masculinity is not about machismo, hunting, playing football, or blowing things up. Similarly, femininity is not about cooking, shopping, and emotional sensitivity. These false constructs lie at the root of many of culture's arguments against the perceived oppression of gender distinctiveness, and rightly so. These ideas are rooted more in a person's individuality—their own likes and dislikes, personality,

gifts and talents, strengths and weaknesses—and are not necessarily gender-specific.

There are many men who are highly relational, tenderhearted, love theater, and enjoy cooking, while there are many women who are more introverted, love sports, hate to shop, and are not sentimental, hopeless romantics. The point is that reflecting the image of God as a woman or as a man is much more broad than these narrow ideas allow. So, for the purpose of this study, we will explore how the *ezer* calling is lived out through three core capacities: **inviting**, **nurturing**, and **partnering**. A *capacity* is simply the instilled ability to reflect an attribute of God. We will explore through scriptural examples how these capacities reflect the *ezer* nature of God and how He has entrusted women with these capacities to reflect Him and to bring Him glory.

Inviting, nurturing, and partnering are part of the constitution of every woman, but each woman brings her own individual application. These capacities can be honoring to the Lord, as intended, or corrupted through sin. Because every woman is unique, these capacities will manifest themselves in different ways, according to each woman's personality, strengths and weaknesses, and temptations and propensity toward sin.

The distinctions in genders, as they work together and complement one another, give a more complete reflection of God. Both are necessary and essential if we are to understand more about God's character. But, the image of God as portrayed through masculinity and femininity is much more robust than we are able to do justice within the pages of this study. However, as common language, these terms are helpful in encompassing much of the *ezer*

calling. Throughout the remainder of the study, we will explore each of these capacities, how they have been corrupted, and how the gospel redeems them within femininity.

WHAT ABOUT SIN?

We cannot go much further without acknowledging that because of sin, the image of God as displayed through humanity, is fractured. Like Eve, all women have chosen their own way. They have chosen autonomy. And in choosing autonomy, fellowship with God and humanity was broken. Not having power to right yourself, you were destined for destruction on both an eternal level and on a daily level. You are truly powerless to change on your own.

Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God’s anger, just like everyone else.

~ Ephesians 2:1-3

The good news is that God freely gives His daughters a renewed identity. The Bible teaches that Jesus was the complete human being. He bore the image of God perfectly and in every way. Christ came to right what humanity wronged. When you trust in

the gospel, you are free to live out your calling as an essential counterpart. Christ took your punishment for your sin, and in turn gave you His “perfect image-bearer” status. He offers the freedom that comes with being declared “not guilty” for all the wrongs you’ve committed against your Creator and gives you a new life with new potential.

The Son radiates God’s own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven.

~ Hebrews 1:3

Since we believe that Christ died for all, we also believe that we have all died to our old life. He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them. So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now! This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

~ 2 Corinthians 5:14b-17

When you begin to approach your life as a woman from this new identity, this freely given status in Jesus, you find that

there are a host of arenas where this renewed femininity can be expressed. The reality is that God has chosen for His renewal to be an ongoing process. If you believe in Jesus, then you have already and completely been “approved” with His status. Nothing you do or don’t do will ever add or take away from this fact. However, the work that’s been done in you and for you now has to be worked out through you.

But here is where we wish to offer a word of warning. Believers tend to gravitate toward one of two poles (or somewhere in the middle). On one end is “checklist spirituality,” and on the other end is “passive spirituality.” The former tends toward “doing,” and the latter tends toward abdicating personal responsibility.

A woman who leans toward checklist spirituality may be tempted to reduce this study to a list of to-do items to check off at the end of the day. This is a works-based mentality in which she is attempting to earn God’s favor and the favor of others based on how she fulfilled her calling as an *ezer*. The danger in this type of spirituality is that she may modify her behavior, but she may never experience transformation at a heart level.

A woman with this tendency lives in an emotional and spiritual state of flux, experiencing wide swings based on her performance. When she performs well, she swings toward pride, and when she performs poorly, she swings toward despair. She is not living in the hope and freedom of the gospel but is bound instead as a slave to her own ability to live out her calling.

The Apostle Paul reminded the Galatians, who had abandoned the gospel of grace and had once again become slaves to the law, that if “keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no

need for Christ to die” (Galatians 2:21b). The good news of the gospel is that Christ’s righteousness has been given to you. You can’t earn it. It is because of Christ that you stand holy and blameless before God. A woman who knows and understands this is free from slavery to pride and despair. She knows her identity and acceptance rest safely in the hands of Christ, and her obedience is from a place of freedom rather than fear.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the woman who leans toward passive spirituality. She may be tempted to inaction as she rests on God’s gift of grace. For this woman, the study is just good information that she never feels the need to apply. She bases her inactivity on the fact that Jesus did it all, grace covers her, and now she just gets to live in that freedom.

She may or may not see grace as a license to sin, but she does not feel responsible to work hard to show the results of her salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear (Philippians 2:12).

This mentality is just as much a distortion of the gospel as is works-based righteousness. Paul exhorted the Philippians to “live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ” (Philippians 1:27a). The good news of the gospel is that because of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection on your behalf, you have been set free from sin. You are no longer a slave to sin; but now “you must give yourselves to be slaves to righteous living so that you will become holy” (Romans 6:19b).

The heart of a woman who has been captured by the gospel will seek to live in a way worthy of the gospel. She knows and understands that she cannot earn her salvation or righteousness, but it

is from that free gift she seeks to live an obedient and holy life. A woman who knows what the gift cost the Giver will live a life of obedience that flows from her grateful heart.

These things may sound contradictory, but we assure you they are not. This is the good news of the gospel: you cannot earn your salvation. Christ's blood, shed on your behalf, purchased it for you. Now you are no longer a slave to sin and death, but have been adopted into the family of God. And, having been adopted, you were given the power of the Holy Spirit to live lives worthy of the kingdom of God (Ephesians 2:8–9, Romans 6:6–7, Romans 8:15).

With that said, it is important for you to do two things: First, identify your tendency toward either end of the spectrum in order to receive the full impact of this curriculum. Second, identify what gospel solution you need, even if it is different from that to which you are accustomed. This will be hard work, but our goal is heart change, not mere behavior modification.

A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

God created you to be who you are and, in Jesus, it is very good (Ephesians 2:10). There is no template for the perfect woman. Diversity is not only inherent but also necessary in the church. Jesus Christ frees you from the need to compare yourself to others. You already have an identity in Jesus. When you are living out your identity in Christ, reflected through your *ezer* calling, you can be you and glorify God. This is true freedom.

Questions for Reflection

1. Toward which type of spirituality do you lean, checklist spirituality or passive spirituality?
2. What gospel solution do you need in order to be freed from these two inaccurate views of the gospel?
3. What concerns or fears do you have about this study and how it might affect you?
4. How open are you to this study?