

A Primer for Biblical Masculinity & Femininity

grace church articles

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, there is a great deal of confusion surrounding gender in both secular and traditional religious circles alike. Masculinity and femininity are topics that most people find themselves confused about and in need of a great deal of clarity.

As disciples of Christ, we are called to put every area of our lives under the banner of God's authority and to be rooted in the transcendent truth God has given to us in His Word. *How am I to live as a man/woman in the 21st century? How am I supposed to interact with members of the opposite sex?* At Grace Church, we feel compelled to step outside of our own understanding and discover the truths the Scriptures provide regarding questions like these. As a church, we are committed to being biblically oriented in the way we understand and live out all different areas of our lives, including gender and all that it entails.

Our aim is to be a clear and distinct biblical voice amidst the confusion by providing a theology and **language** for what it means to be image bearers of God, both male and female. We cannot oversimplify God's definitions of masculinity and femininity with broad, superficial generalizations. We need a thoughtful grid, a definition rooted in something transcendent that will bring us truth in a clear and powerful way. Striving to be as clear as the Scriptures, we hope to equip men and women with a biblical framework and language for envisioning how they can best reflect and glorify God in their own distinctiveness. From this, we hope to have a voice that offers clarity rather than confusion, one that carries a weight and power uncommon in today's society as we seek to reclaim the glory of masculinity and femininity as reflections of the image of God.

GENESIS: MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM

Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground." So God created human beings in His own image.

In the image of God He created them; male and female He created them.

— Genesis 1:26-27

Within the first few chapters of the Bible we are presented with a framework for understanding how God originally designed men and women to uniquely reflect His image. The Genesis account is a mountain of truth that we return to time and time again to gain clarity on what biblical masculinity and femininity were meant to look like. The truths of Adam and Eve's story go beyond the moment in the garden and inform the way we live life today; they are invaluable, timeless truths that help us understand our present reality.

The Creation account teaches that men and women both were created in the image of God—equal, yet distinct—and intended to represent the glory of God in unique ways. And since each of us have been created by God, in His image, and for His glory, it follows that we can learn much about our identity, design, and purpose in life by viewing ourselves through the lens of our Creator.

The diversity displayed in the rest of creation of light and dark, heavens from earth, and land from sea, is also seen in the creation of mankind. Each part of creation is distinct, yet complements its counterpart. In the creation of mankind, God yet again distinguishes them by creating male and female. They are equal in value as image-bearers, yet different in form and functions as male and female. They are, like the rest of creation, complementary counterparts.

Genesis 2:15 says, "The Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it." Even before Eve appears on the scene, Adam has already been given some authority and a major responsibility (work) to direct his experience. Man was created to cultivate God's creation, tending to it and making it fruitful. He worked in the garden, naming the animals, categorizing creation and establishing order over it. But as he did so, he felt his lack; there was no counterpart, no complement for him. Given the task at hand, God saw fit to make for the man

a helpmate.

In Genesis 2:18, God says, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him.” Some translations say a “helper fit” or a “helper suitable.” It can be easy to view the word “helper” in a negative light: it can come across as weak, patronizing, and altogether insubstantial. Now, propelled by a growing sense of egalitarianism, cultural consensus would be that the “helper” label is condescending at best.

Yet “helper” fails to capture the full, robust meaning of the original Hebrew phrase used to describe the woman: **ezer kenegdo**. In Hebrew, **ezer** actually connotes an inherent strength; **kenegdo** means “corresponding”, “suitable”, and “essential.” Thus **ezer kenegdo** more appropriately translates to essential counterpart, indispensable companion, or corresponding strength.

An **ezer** is one who comes alongside and lends strength. She is strong and powerful in her own right, but is created with the specific intent of coming and bringing her strength alongside the cause of another. Like the flying buttresses of Gothic architecture that provide essential support for preserving the architectural soundness and integrity of a building, an essential counterpart provides necessary, load-bearing support.

In this Creation account, we see God’s intended design for men and women expressed primarily in their respective **core callings**. Created and given authority over the earth and the responsibility to lead, we would say that Adam’s core calling is one of responsibility and leadership. The core essence of masculinity is the ability to move. He is entrusted to lead, work, initiate, be an agent of reconciliation, and move into difficult situations, bringing blessing to others through his actions. Leadership for a man is not optional; it is his primary responsibility and calling.

The core calling for a woman is to be the **ezer kenegdo**, or essential counterpart, described above. How a woman expresses her core calling will be based on her own individuality and season of life, but a woman generally is to invite others into relationship with her, to come alongside them and bring strength, helping further their causes. The focus is on creating independence and strength in another that helps them become more of who God intended them to be.

GENESIS: THE FALL

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

— Genesis 3:1-6 (ESV)

Adam and Eve were free, with the enjoyment of all of creation at their disposal. Nothing was forbidden from them besides the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. All was good in the garden, but then the serpent entered the scene and everything changed.

When the serpent entered the story, he directly attacked God’s created order, circumventing Adam and addressing Eve first instead. God had created Adam to be the leader, the head of his wife; He had created her to come alongside and under the covering of leadership Adam would provide. But she chose to step outside of God’s direction, provision, and protection and rely on herself instead. As for Adam, we see in verse six that he was right there with his wife when sin entered the story. Created to lead her through situations just like this, he failed to lend his voice, strength, or energy to the situation. Rather than moving towards the situation, he withdrew, stood by, and allowed the situation to unfold.

In chapter three of the Genesis account, known simply as the Fall, we see the **core temptations** of man and woman exposed. Rather than acknowledging God’s right to rule, Eve established herself as the supreme authority and chose her own way. We would say she is **autonomous**, and that autonomy is the core temptation for all women. Autonomy is self-rule and rejection of authority; it is seeing oneself as sovereign and as morally independent. The fundamental idea of autonomy directly opposes a woman’s core calling as an **ezer**. As a woman rejects her calling as an essential counterpart and embraces autonomy, she becomes further absorbed with self, resulting in either self-promotion or self-protection.

Rather than accepting responsibility for the situation and filling the leadership role that he had been entrusted with, Adam stepped back in the midst of a difficult situation and left a void that Eve could step into. We would say that Adam is **passive**, and that passivity is the core temptation for all men. Passivity is not about personality; it is not about being shy, being verbal or nonverbal, or being compliant. Even domineering men are passive, rejecting responsibility for those entrusted to them. As a man rejects his calling as a leader who accepts responsibility, he is tempted toward silence, detachment, disengagement, retreat, and a lack of movement.

BIBLICAL MASCULINITY & FEMININITY

Often there is confusion between role and identity, between function and design. We are not talking about roles, but about identity. Women and men both tend to define themselves by roles (e.g., student, boss, mother, husband, 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. While they may bring clarity to how and with whom you live out your calling, roles do not determine your identity or your calling.

As a human being created in the image of God, your identity is certain and secure – it does not shift. As we will see, the first three chapters of Genesis are foundational to our understanding of our human identity as well as our identity as male and female. In particular, this portion of Scripture helps us see the core calling, core temptation (sin), and core capacities for men and women.

	Man	Woman
Core Calling	Leadership/Responsibility	Essential Counterpart
Core Temptation	Passivity	Autonomy (Self-Protection, Self-Promotion)
Core Capacities	Pursue, Provide, Protect	Invite, Nurture, Partner

The core callings described above detail who you are designed to be as a man or woman, while core temptations are the most prevalent tendencies that lead you away from your core calling as a man or woman. Core capacities, then, are instilled, God-given abilities to reflect His attributes. While men are uniquely designed to reflect the image of God in distinctly masculine ways, women have the capacity to reflect His image in distinctly feminine ways.

Our distinctiveness, as male and female, lies at the heart

of what it means to mirror the image of God in the world. The core capacities detailed below are powerful principles for us to think through who we are, what God wants for us, and how they can best reflect and glorify God in our distinctiveness as male and female.

Pursue, Provide, Protect

As a man, embracing your calling is fueled by these three distinct types of energy. Men are designed to be chasers, initiators, and pursuers; when Adam sees Eve for the first time, he moves toward her, singing out “Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh!” (Genesis 2:23) and engaging her. God had given men the capacity to be an initiator, and they are driven by it. The masculine experience is one oriented toward action, movement, and pursuit.

Providing and protecting connote the idea that a man is on the hook to steward the energy God has placed within him to bring redemption to situations he faces. Provision and protection are expressed in a man’s ability to care for others’ needs, especially in a proactive way—in which he is thoughtfully envisioning ways others can be blessed through his actions. These capacities can be manifested primarily in a man’s sexual energy, seen in a redeemed way in his relationship with a woman in the context of a marriage relationship, and in his work energy, seen in a redeemed way in his drive to subdue the earth and cultivate the ground.

Invite, Nurture, Partner

Inviting is an active and intentional disposition. As a woman, to invite someone into relationship requires intentionality and action on your part. It requires extending yourself and holding yourself out to another. To be inviting describes the way in which you hold yourself out to them. A woman, as an image-bearer, reflects the desire of God to express beauty, promote delight, rest, and refuge. She invites delight. All throughout Scripture God reveals Himself as an inviting God—welcoming us into relationship with Himself as a source of life and strength—and He has graciously instilled this attribute of His character within women.

The essence and goal of nurturing is to take frail, vulnerable life and create an environment where this life can come to full intended form. Nurturing is caring for and encouraging the development of another in a way that creates strength in them and enables them to flourish. The goal of nurturing is maturity and independence, to bring strength to bear on another in a way that launches them and enables them to succeed.

Partnering is defined as the intentional, proactive utilization of God-given gifts to bring strength and further a mutual cause. While nurturing builds up another to be who God desires him to be, partnering assists another in the movement toward a goal. Using her partnering capacity, a woman can advance a mutual mission. A woman uniquely reflects the Trinity in her core capacity to partner, as there is no better or more beautiful example of partnering than that of the Trinity.

CONCLUSION

God's intended design is splendid and magnificent, and when men and women live out their core callings, their interactions display the glory, unity, and diversity of the Trinity. Our hope is that you would develop a hunger for knowing more about how to live out your masculinity or femininity in a redeemed way so that you can more effectively live for the glory of God and the good of others. We believe there is much at stake under the banner of biblical masculinity and femininity; the topic of gender transcends the cultural status quo and informs the way we live at every level.

If you feel compelled to find out more about your core identity as a man or woman, we encourage you to engage in deeper study together as part of one of our Men's Roundtable or Ezer groups. If you've been through the study before, consider revisiting it, or even seeking to understand more about the identity of the opposite sex—remember that both the Men's Roundtable and Ezer studies contain principles and timeless truths founded upon God's word that are useful for everyone, regardless of gender.