

“Kathleen Nielson examines hard questions about women and God that some might be afraid to ask: Is God for women? Does he like us? Using God’s own words in Scripture, Nielson teaches us that the answer is a resounding ‘Yes!’”

Colleen J. McFadden, Director of Women’s Workshops,  
Charles Simeon Trust

“I have started to read loads of books on women, but this one is unique—partly because I finished it! In fact I couldn’t put it down. Kathleen has gathered all the tricky questions about women and tackles them head-on. Equipped with a unique blend of experience and insight into what it’s like to be a woman in today’s culture, Kathleen gives thoroughly biblical answers, pointing us to the gospel on every page. As I read about what I was created for, I was moved to tears and felt a burden lift from my shoulders. Every chapter brings fresh insights as Kathleen unflinchingly grapples with tricky verses. It’s simple, accessible, up to date and down to earth, and is a book I will keep coming back to.”

Linda Allcock, London Women’s Convention

“Some theological debaters become terribly shrill—both in their treatment of Scripture and of each other. In our day, debate over the treatment of women, especially in the church, is one of the hot topics. I hope that many readers on all sides of this debate will take the time and invest the energy to listen carefully and respectfully to Kathleen, a woman who has a keen mind, a heart devoted to Scripture, and the courtesy to treat other viewpoints fairly even while she marshals the evidence that supports her understanding of key passages and themes. She does not duck the “hard questions,” and she is swayed by ‘beautiful truth.’”

D.A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Illinois; President, The Gospel Coalition

“Kathleen Nielson proficiently unpacks difficult passages of Scripture that we sometimes want to avoid. On every page, she helps us wrestle with complex questions, while inviting us to embrace this beautiful truth: God is good to women. This is an excellent and needed book—I highly recommend it for both men and women.”

Melissa Kruger, author of *The Envy of Eve* and  
*Walking with God in the Season of Motherhood*

“At a time when there is increasing confusion and perhaps resistance to God’s word about gender, Kathleen offers a clear and wise path to understanding God’s word rightly in this important area. She carefully explores passages addressing our identity, our worth, and our responsibilities in God’s world. Yet don’t be fooled into thinking this is a book just for women. This is an excellent resource for men as well, as we all grapple with the Bible’s teaching on what it means to be a woman.”

Kara Hartley, Archdeacon for Women’s Ministry,  
Diocese of Sydney, Australia

“I have enjoyed reading this reassuring, satisfying book, which touches on many controversial issues that relate to Christian women. I applaud Kathleen Nielson’s courage in facing some difficult questions head-on and I think many will benefit from her thorough approach and carefully argued insights. I especially appreciate her insistence that all our questions on womanhood (and indeed on any subject) must begin with God. Often the issues dealt with in this book are fraught with emotion, which obscures careful reasoning. Kathleen keeps us fixed on the word of God, while showing his love and compassion toward women.”

Wendy Virgo, author of *Influential Women* and international speaker

“It is with great joy that I recommend *Women and God*. What I like most about this book is not that it is written by a woman for women but that it is written by a faithful Bible-teacher who happens to be a woman. Kathleen answers the hard questions the Bible raises in relation to women by showing us the beauty of the truths of Scripture and the glory of our Savior, Jesus.”

Juan Sanchez, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church,  
Austin, Texas

“I am encouraged by this book, which takes on a subject that is not easy or popular as it grapples with some seriously hard questions and helps equip us to answer them from God’s word. As you read the book, it is easy to see that Kathleen herself delights in the goodness of God’s plan for women as she carefully and winsomely seeks to show us how that goodness runs throughout the whole Bible.”

Andrea Trevenna, Associate Minister for Women,  
St Nicholas, Sevenoaks, UK; author of *The Heart of Singleness*

“I was deeply helped by reading *Women and God*. It is a book written by a wise woman, and it does not shy away from hard, painful, complex issues. Frankly, there are few people I trust more than Dr. Nielsen to push me, challenge me, and make me think rigorously, carefully, and biblically about these things. This book is faithful and sensitive, truthful and persuasive, restrained yet comprehensive, and Kathleen is alert (and sympathetic) to the questions that surround these issues in the church and the world today. She speaks with a woman’s experience, and with a desire to help us be faithful to God’s word, and to see the goodness of God both in who he created women to be and in what he calls them to do.”

Ligon Duncan, Chancellor, Reformed Theological Seminary,  
Jackson, Mississippi

“I loved this book! *Women and God* is more than just an overview of the roles of women in the family and the church. It tackles all the usual texts as well as the more shocking and perplexing ones that other people sometimes avoid. Kathleen anticipates all the questions and objections that people have, and then answers them from the text with wisdom, clarity, and sensitivity. What makes this book so compelling is her conviction that God is good, and that women can have confidence that living by his word is a beautiful thing and for our good.”

Carrie Sandom, Director of Women’s Ministry, The Proclamation Trust, London; Associate Minister for Women at St John’s, Tunbridge Wells, UK

“In *Women and God*, we find a writer well prepared to walk through the interior world of godly women who are in need of good answers. In reading it, I had the sense that Kathleen Nielson’s voice will encourage, assist, and support Christian women who have reason to feel that the goodness of God has escaped them.”

David Helm, Lead Pastor, Holy Trinity Church, Hyde Park, Chicago; Chairman, The Simeon Trust

KATHLEEN NIELSON

*Women  
& God*

HARD QUESTIONS.

*Beautiful Truth.*

The logo features a stylized, curved line above the text "the good book", which is in a lowercase, sans-serif font. Below "the good book" is the word "COMPANY" in a smaller, uppercase, sans-serif font.  
the good book  
COMPANY

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*To my mother.*

*One of those holy women  
who hope in God.*

(1 PETER 3 v 5-6)



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## Introduction

One title proposed initially for this book was *Is God Sexist?* I voted thumbs down on that—first of all because I wasn’t sure God would like it (even though he knew what my answer would be), and second, because it seemed too much like a set-up. Obviously the answer was going to be “No.”

But that question is good to acknowledge, because it gets at the heart of this book, which is to ask how the God Christians believe in views women, and to address fears that he may not view them entirely positively. Voices around us can feed these fears. Public discourse often lumps Christianity in the general category of “religions,” in discussions of sexism—that is, unfair attitudes or treatment based on one’s biological sex. In one blog article from *The Huffington Post* condemning sexism toward women, first on the list of culprits is “religious sexism and discrimination.”<sup>1</sup> The author cites the “ritualized silencing of women” practiced by “all major religions which, with minor exceptions, bar girls and women from ministerial leadership.” The result, according to this blog writer?

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<sup>1</sup> Soraya Chemaly, “10 Everyday Sexisms and What We Can Do About Them.” <http://bit.ly/1tTRNhH>. Posted on 7/31/2014. Accessed 9/26/2017.

“Access to the divine is mediated exclusively by men and their speech,” and females from the earliest ages learn that their voices are “powerless and not respected.”

This book is not an answer to the world’s voices. Perhaps you’re a follower of Jesus Christ—or perhaps you would like to be. This book speaks to you and to any who want to explore further God’s own words about the female human beings he made. The voices around us can be troubling. Blogs can be loud. Many people who believe in Jesus, or who would believe in Jesus, struggle to hold that belief together with what they hear the Bible says about women; a lot of negative things are to be heard. People read a lot of books on what the Bible says about women—and I have hesitated to add to that list! As the wise writer of Ecclesiastes wrote, “Of making many books there is no end...” (Ecclesiastes 12 v 12).

So many women I know are talking about this issue, in one way or another. We need to talk about it. The subject of women and God is not just theoretically crucial; it’s personally crucial, for both women and men. I deal with it all the time, both privately and publicly—in my family and church life, in ministry as a Bible teacher, and regularly in conversations with other women:

*What does it mean for me that every human being is created in the image of God? How should I process those Old Testament passages where women are so mistreated? Why should I or shouldn’t I teach this church class, or take this course of study? How do I deal with the charge that teaching submission leads to abuse of women? What does my faith have to do with my longing for children, or my having children, or my losing children?*

*Is God sexist?*

This book does not ask or answer all the possible questions; it does seek to address some of the hardest ones, by pointing us to listen well to God’s voice.

By “God” I’m referring in this book to the God of the Bible, the One who reveals himself through the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. If what the Bible says is true—that God made the world, and God came into the world to restore the world—then nothing else in the universe is more important than knowing this God. All questions and answers start with him. Gender-related issues are crucial to address—but the first and foremost question must be about God himself: what shall we say about the God who made us, in relation to these issues? As we consider this question, I’m going to assume that the Bible is true. I’m going to take the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as what they claim to be—God’s breathed-out word to the world, utterly authoritative and fully sufficient for all we believe and do (2 Timothy 3 v 14-17).

If you’re someone who doesn’t share these assumptions, I invite you to keep reading, and to feel warmly welcomed as a visitor to a biblical perspective. I hope you’ll find the Scriptures both beautiful and piercing. If you do share these assumptions, I invite you to listen again to God’s word, as I have tried to do, asking God by his Spirit to help us hear his voice ever more clearly. If your time is limited and you must choose between reading this book and reading the Bible, choose the Bible. Read it all the way through. Read and study it with God’s people. Take in those life-giving words. They are “words of delight” and “words of truth . . . given by one Shepherd,” says that same wise writer of Ecclesiastes. And he adds a warning: to “beware of anything beyond these” (Ecclesiastes 12 v 10-12, ESV).

With that warning in our ears, our method will be to listen closely to God’s word through a series of key biblical passages that relate explicitly to women. I wish there were time to develop these passages more fully, but the aim will be to hear them well in context, and through them

to discern God's heart and mind specifically in relation to women. We'll move through the Bible from beginning to end, for the Scriptures tell a unified story, and we cannot understand any part without paying attention to the whole. Even as we approach each passage in its immediate context, inevitably we'll need to make some jumps from one part of the Scriptures to another—especially from Old Testament to New. The Bible's one story tells of God redeeming a people for himself through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Any question about God's relation to the people he created is a question that from the beginning fully involves God's Son.

Even as we make progress, all of us still see dimly; we're on our way to seeing Jesus face to face, but we're not there yet. I hope this book will encourage you—even if you don't agree with everything in it—to dig into God's word more deeply. Working on it has certainly challenged and convicted me to do so. I'm hugely grateful for many wise encouragers and leaders who have not only helped me learn but also challenged me to work as hard as possible in my own study. We mustn't be satisfied with second-hand convictions, parroting a system of values or rules, from any source. That will convince no one, including ourselves. God's word is living and active, and through it God's Spirit opens our eyes and hearts, and gradually changes us into the image of Christ.

A spoiler alert is not needed for me to tell you that I'm out to show the goodness of the God who made us—specifically the goodness of God to his female image-bearers. This book is not simply about setting out the truth, but seeking to show how that truth is good and can therefore be welcomed and enjoyed, not simply accepted. I find—and I hope you will, too—that as we wrestle with the hard questions about God and women, we discover some beautiful

truths. I'm praying that when you're done reading, you'll be loving and thanking God for the way in which he has created us as gendered human beings. I'm praying you'll be more ready to speak clearly, compassionately, and helpfully with others who are asking questions about women in relation to God—perhaps others who differ in perspective, or who have questions about Scripture's teachings, or who are struggling to trust God in painful circumstances. And I'm praying you'll be more enthralled with the goodness of God's word, and of the Savior at its center.



## How We Got Here



**B**efore we ask what to do about where we are, we need to ask how we got here. The past makes a difference.

If there is a God who created us human beings, then our relationship with that God must be the most important thing in the universe. And if that God created us as male and female, then we need to ask what our Creator thinks about these male and female creatures he made. It's an urgent question. Voices all around us are speaking to issues of gender and sex and sexism; in the midst of the swirl of opinions we need to know how God regards us as men and women. But we need more than that. We need to hear God speak to us personally, as the beings he created and loves and knows, down to each hair on our heads and each organ of our bodies. And we need to respond to him. This book isn't about theory. It's about how we live, because it's about who we are.

As we ask what God says specifically about women in the Bible, it's important to remember that most of the Bible isn't about women; the Bible is about the God who made women and men and who saves them through his Son. The psalms and prayers of the Bible are not gender-specific; every human being cries out to God in praise or lament or

worship. The majority of God's commands and promises are not gender-specific; we're all called to love God, to believe in his Son, and to trust the power of the risen Christ in us through the Holy Spirit. And yet there is this distinct reality of maleness and femaleness that appears at the Bible's start and works its way right through to the end. Why? What does this mean?

These questions are hard and sometimes even painful, because we have an understandable fear that making distinctions harms women. I am writing, and you are reading, in a world where women have been and still often are harmed by men. We have only to look at human history, including the history of the church, to find patterns of women being treated unfairly and unlovingly. We rightly work hard to distance ourselves from past prejudices—that is, pre-judgments about women that are not based on reality and that have been used to hold back and harm deeply half of the human race.

Because of prejudice, for centuries women were not allowed to own property or participate in political processes: people pre-judged that women as a whole category were either not smart enough or not valuable enough to bear those responsibilities. In some cultures still today, women are not allowed to share the privileges open to men in areas such as politics and education; girls and women are pre-judged as inferior and unfit. In cultures that have progressed beyond such overt inequalities, prejudices still lurk. To take just one example, a friend of mine in the process of earning a graduate degree was asked by one of her professors whether all the work was worth it, considering both the job market and the fact that she would probably just go on to have children and raise a family. Throughout the world, the human race is still combating the ingrained effects of powerful prejudices from centuries past.

To battle prejudice, we instinctively seek to move forward, letting go of wrongful judgments and practices. Too often, however, the Bible becomes part of what is let go. The Old Testament especially is full of stories in which we seem to recall women who are not treated or valued well. The New Testament seems to contain instructions in which women are treated with prejudice. The old prejudices must go, the thinking runs, so that the new equality may come.

But here's the irony: in order to move forward in the human story, we have to go back to the beginning to find the way. In order to ask what to do about where we are and where we're headed, we do indeed have to find out how we got here. What if the problem is not that people are holding on to judgments that are too old, but to judgments that are *not old enough*?

The long-ago past makes a difference to everything. In fact, the opening chapters of the Bible tell us that everything and everybody today is pre-judged—but not by a human being, and not in a way that oppresses, but that blesses. In order to begin to grasp this, we have to go back to the beginning and to the only one who is perfectly capable of judging anything or anybody. We have to go back to the God who made everything, including us.

In order to talk about the creation of humanity we so often zoom right into Genesis 1 v 27. That verse is where we indeed must go:

*So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted from the New International Version (2011). Unless noted, Scripture quotations will be from this version. It is worth noting here that Genesis 1 v 27 is rendered differently in the more literal English Standard Version:

But let's first revel for a moment in the huge opening chapter of the Bible. Here are the roots to our human story. Here are the beginnings of the answers to the things we long to know: where we came from, who we are, and how we fit into this swirling life flow in which we find ourselves carried along. This is the front bookend of the whole story, and if we don't set it in place, we can't make sense of our part in it.

## Creation with Distinction

I vaguely remember studying mitosis in high school, though I had to download a YouTube video to refresh my memory of this process in which one cell divides into two.<sup>3</sup> The first cell's mass of swirling DNA molecules splits and lines up in two strands of paired chromosomes, which are then pulled apart by two opposite sets of hairy-looking microtubules. With these now two sets of cell matter, the original cell finally divides to form two completely new cells—amazing!

Reading the Bible's opening chapter is like watching a large-scale drama of mitosis. What's so striking is that the whole process of new life emerging, both on the microcellular and the macro Genesis-1 level, is a process of systematic separation and distinction. In thirty-one verses, the Bible's opening chapter takes us from an initial stage of darkness and formlessness through a sovereignly ordered series of creations and divisions: first, light, separated from darkness (v 3-5); then the sky, separated from surrounding waters (v 6-8); and then land, separated from seas (v 9-10).

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

3 [youtube.com/watch?v=C6hn3sA0ip0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6hn3sA0ip0). Accessed 9/26/2017.

All this division doesn't happen in eerie silence, or with some unnamed narrator, as it does in the YouTube video that refreshed my memory. It happens as the Creator God makes it happen; he is the starting point of the whole story: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1 v 1). His word is the action; we can't miss the insistent repetition of "And God said" or "Then God said" (v 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29). His words not only narrate; they create.

By his word the ordered distinctions continue, as the Creator fills the places he has created. First, plants and trees fill the earth, three times carefully described as bearing seeds and fruit each according to its kind (v 11-13). The order is insistent and beautiful. Next, the sun and moon and stars fill the sky, with the two great lights not only separating the day from the night, but also "governing" in their own distinct spheres: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light along with the stars to rule the night (v 14-19). Then begins the filling of the sea and sky and land with living creatures, all in their own places and seven times distinguished as according to their own kinds (v 20-25).

Here at the start of the Bible, before we come to know our own beginnings, we're first of all getting to know God. He is the only source of life. It's all derived from him, and it's all ordered by him—every part of the universe distinguished in its appropriate place and designed according to his word. From the Creator God there pours out this amazing ordered pattern of life and blessing. This is what God is like, from the beginning. When we get to the end of the Bible and glimpse God's throne in heaven, it is this glorious God of creation that all those around the throne are praising:

*You are worthy, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honor and power,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they were created  
and have their being. (Revelation 4 v 11)*

## Creation's Climax

God not only creates and separates and fills; he also judges. Repeatedly throughout the narrative, he stops, looks, and gives his verdict as he says that what he has made is “good” (Genesis 1 v 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). His word has created and shaped his creation perfectly, in a sovereignly ordered pattern that leads logically and beautifully to the final piece, the climactic creation. Each new step of creation begins with God saying, “Let”—from “Let there be light” (v 3) to “Let the land produce living creatures” (v 24). This pattern culminates with a distinction in verse 26, as God now says, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.”

This final step in creation is the same, but different. Again we hear “Let,” but this time it is “Let us” (v 26). Many commentators believe the “us” gives an early hint of the Trinity: one God in three Persons, in effect having a conversation with himself. The Spirit of God was introduced in verse 1: “The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” And the New Testament makes clear that “in the beginning” with God was “the Word”—the Word who “was with God, and [who] was God,” and who would one day, in human history, be made flesh: Jesus, the Son of God (John 1 v 1, 14, 17). It's this three-personed God—Father, Son, and Spirit—who says, “Let us make mankind in our image.”

The primary and entirely unique fact about the creation of mankind, stated three times in Genesis 1 v 26-27, is

that God created mankind in his own image. What does this mean? Genesis 1 shows us at least two initial answers to that question.

First, to be made in God's image appears to involve representing his authority, his rule over creation. We've watched God make the seas and the planets, and tell them where to stay and what to do: God rules his creation. But God also spreads his rule throughout that creation—as we saw with the sun and the moon, made to “rule over the day and over the night” (v 18, ESV). God's words, “Let us make mankind in our image,” are linked logically to his stated purpose that humanity will rule, or “have dominion,” over the other creatures (v 26). God's first recorded speech to his newly-created human creatures includes a command not only to fill the earth, but also to “subdue it”: “Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (v 28). Human beings made in God's image are not to rule as God, but to rule as God's representatives, with his delegated authority: they are to rule *like he does*. They are distinct from the rest of creation, made to steward and rule over it together.

So when farmers figure out how best to cultivate the ground to make it fertile and fruitful, bringing forth the most abundant crops year after year, humanity is imaging God in ruling over his creation. When scientists figure out the chemical compounds of penicillin and other life-preserving medicines, humanity is imaging God in ruling over his creation. When members of a choir join their voices to create something beautiful with words and melody, they are together imaging God their Creator. Any time a family grows and cultivates order and harmony in its little plot of living space on this planet, they image God in ruling over his creation. (I have shared this truth with growing boys in

relation to living spaces such as their bedrooms; it actually helps, sometimes.)

All this leads right to the second point: To be made in God's image appears to involve reflecting his relational nature, the "us" of our three-personed God. Read again those three lines in verse 27:

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

These are not three unrelated statements. Nor is God just being repetitive. What we see as lines are three parallel poetic units that expand one whole meaning, as Hebrew poetry often does. The meaning grows right before our eyes, in these living and active words. In these three lines, various emphases emerge and surround that word "created" which appears in each line and threads them together.

The first line emphasizes "God created." He did it. That's the foundational fact. The second line repeats and emphasizes "in the image of God." In the NIV translation, this second line ends with the pronoun "them," which suggests already that this mankind, made in God's image, involves more than one person. The ESV, in the tradition of the King James version, reads, "In the image of God he created *him*" (my emphasis). Scholars disagree on the most faithful translation here. In either case, the third line completely and climactically unfolds the meaning: the mankind God created in his image consists of "male and female."

Another division or distinction is being made, which after the pattern of divisions and distinctions throughout the chapter should not surprise us. In the process of these three lines, the "mankind" (NIV) or "man" (ESV) grows clearer and separates into two distinct forms: male

and female. Through this logically-connected process, we are being shown that, in our creation as male and female, we human beings reflect the image of God. As God calls himself “us,” implying an internally relational nature, so we humans as male and female show the image of God in us as we relate both to him and to one another in all kinds of ways, in the process of ruling together over creation.

The rest of the Bible (and this book) unpacks what this process looks like, as men and women together work to create and sustain life in social units built on families with husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters. The ultimate unpacking will happen in the church family, as the New Testament shows us. But even in the very next chapter of Genesis we will glimpse more of what this joint rule looks like. The primary and foundational point here is that humanity’s rule, showing forth God’s image, involves the interaction of two distinct sexes: male and female. So the primary, foundational application here is that we should wholeheartedly embrace this distinction of the sexes as a good gift from God our Creator. It is not uncommon to hear people speak as if our creation as male and female is separate from and even secondary in importance to our creation in God’s image. But as the Bible tells it, these truths are inseparable. Your gender (your identity as male or female) is a significant part of your creation as a human made in God’s image.

God’s speech to this first man and woman, even before telling them to subdue and rule, calls them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (v 28). Of course, God had also called the living creatures to be fruitful and multiply—but without mentioning anything about their different sexes (v 22). Only for human beings is this engendered aspect of creation stated, and it is stated in the context of their bearing the very image of God. Although it clearly means

that our physical bodies as God designed them are good, being made male and female involves more than just biological configuration or the ability to produce offspring. We humans are like the animals in many ways—made from the dust, made to reproduce—and yet we are different. We are made in the image of God.

### **God's Very Good Judgment**

As Genesis 1 concludes, God blesses the first man and woman (v 28). He not only calls them to be fruitful and multiply, to subdue and rule; he also gives them for food “every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit” (v 29, ESV). God's first interactions with human beings are not heavy-handed or full of mean distinctions, but rather they are open-handed, overflowing with abundant provision from a good and generous Creator.

At last, as God finishes his creative work, we reach the overall judgment of God: “It was very good” (v 31). Here is the original judgment, by the Creator God, having completed the climactic step of creating male and female in his own likeness. This is the foundational pre-judgment to be made of all human beings: God's creation of us in his image, as male and female, is very good.

What does Genesis 1 show about human beings in relation to their Creator? It is clear that all humans, male and female, are equally created by God in his image. Humans are created to rule over creation together, showing their Creator's good rule. Our lives as male and female in relationship together are meant to show forth God's own image in us. Amazing. This sounds like a high calling, a very good one indeed. Nowhere else will a person find a greater dignity than in being created in the image of our Creator God. This

is our human starting point, and we must never get over the wonder and the truth of it as we make our way through the Bible's unfolding story of God's dealings with his creation. It is the story with characters who are so valued by God that he made them in his own image, male and female. It is ultimately the story of a God so magnificent and so good that he created everything—and created male and female as the climax of it all, in his own image.

## Receiving the Goodness of Gender

Genesis 1 (and the rest of the Scriptures) tells us that human gender is not an arbitrary, or self-determined, or socially-determined part of our identity; it is our identity as male or female according to God's good design of our biological sex. Voices in the media and in fact all around us urge us to let people discover and choose what gender they're most comfortable with, no matter what their biological sex. "Gender identity" has become a hugely volatile and politicized issue. Wikipedia, social media's engine of current and cooperative definitions, defines gender identity as "one's personal experience of one's own gender." Gender seems to have morphed into something defined by each person from the inside, rather than something gifted by a God who made and rules the universe.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The issue of gender identity is large, and there is not space here to do justice to its nuances and its implications for the church. One helpful, biblical resource is Andrew Walker's *God and the Transgender Debate* (The Good Book Company, 2017). Rosaria Butterfield also helpfully discusses contemporary issues relating to gender and sexual identity, from a biblical and historical perspective. In *Openness Unbindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert* (Crown & Covenant, 2015), she carefully (and beautifully) develops claims like the following: "By defining humanity according to sexual desires and segregating it according to its gendered object Freud was—intentionally or not—suppressing the biblical category of being made in God's image, male and female, and replacing it with the psychoanalytic category of sexual identity" (page 94).

One of the first and most evident facts we humans discover about a new baby is whether it is a boy or a girl. There are indeed rare exceptions involving unusual combinations of chromosomes or hormones or body parts that make ambiguous the determination of sex; in those cases, the immediate ambiguity about sex determination highlights the primacy of sex determination. Those experiencing the condition of “intersex” are, like all human beings, fully made in the image of God, while suffering this particular effect of the fall (we’ll reach the fall, and look at its effects on the human race and our world, in chapter 3). The point here is that when we cry out, “It’s a boy!” or, “It’s a girl!” we are not imposing sexist, arbitrary, or authoritarian distinctions on a human life; we are receiving and celebrating the truth that this is how God made us, in his image, male and female. It sounds radical these days to affirm the Bible’s teaching that male and female genders were God’s good idea, instituted as part of his sovereign ordering of creation to show his own image in the people he created. But the Bible’s truth comes to us in the end not like chains that bind us, but like a light that shows us the path when we’re flailing about in the dark, trying to find our own way.

For a little girl who is struggling to figure out who she is, how awesome and how ultimately compassionate it is to teach her that she has a Creator who loves her, who designed her female body purposefully and perfectly, and who in fact intends for her to live out her femaleness in a way that shows off her Creator. This doesn’t mean she, like the rest of us, won’t struggle to walk in the light of truth, as the next chapters in Genesis will explain. But it means there is light, and that light is good. At a dinner I recently attended, the topic of discussion was news of a baby born whose parents refused to designate any sex on

the baby's birth certificate, so that the child would have the opportunity to grow up and choose a gender identity. Those parents were aiming to show compassion for that child, according to the wisdom of the world around us. According to the light of God's word, the most compassionate thing in the world would be to celebrate that child's creation as male or female.

We do not live in the kind of world described by Genesis 1, nor in the culture that existed when these words were first written down. But we can know that God intends humanity to continue living according to his creation order, no matter what our time and place in history. Jesus obviously thought so. During his earthly ministry Jesus was asked a question about divorce. He began his answer by referring to Genesis 1 v 27, making clear that this word from the beginning was normative for all people in all times: "Haven't you read ... that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female?'" (Matthew 19 v 4; see also Mark 10 v 6-9). If we don't start here, "at the beginning," in Genesis, we won't know how we got where we are—and we for sure won't be able to find our way forward.

The next chapter of Genesis will tell us a lot more about this first man and woman, and we'll continue to ask (even harder) questions about the way God makes distinctions between them. But it's crucial first to see this pair standing here before God in Genesis 1, made in his image, receiving his blessing, and hearing his voice together, equal and distinct. None of the unfolding of distinctions between them that will follow, in any part of the Bible, will contradict this foundational revelation of the equal value and glory of men and women made in the image of their Creator God. Even as we rightly oppose and strive to overcome a multitude of old prejudices, here is the most ancient and wonderful one—God's judgment from the beginning that

his creation, including us as men and women made in our Creator's image, is very good. We can and must forever share God's "prejudice" that to be a woman, as to be a man, is very good.