



Raise Your Voice

'If she have the necessary gifts and feels herself called by the Spirit to preach, there is not a single word in the whole Book of God to restrain her, but many, very many, to urge and encourage her.'

Catherine Booth



**GOD'S DESIGN FOR
GENDER EQUITY**

A Bible study from creation to Jesus, and beyond.

Chapter 2



Chapter 2

Naked and Afraid: Genesis and Gender Equity

by Major David Noakes



'If we are looking to [the story of the Fall] as a model for gender relationships, we are looking in the wrong place.'

Anonymous

Let's start

In this second study, we journey back to the very origins of gender equity which, lie in the Book of Beginnings, Genesis. This builds the foundation of the major themes in the Bible: it introduces the social order as God originally intended it. We call this social order the kingdom of God. Having introduced and then lost this kingdom in Genesis, the whole of scripture outlines how God has attempted to, and will, restore it. Gender relationships are a critical part of this restoration process.

There are, however, some important guidelines to keep in mind when we delve into this Book of Beginnings.

Genesis is not a science textbook. It seeks to explain the deepest truths of who God is, what his kingdom looks like, and what it means to be human.

These truths are presented to us in narrative or story form. Genesis sets the scene for a huge drama that proceeds through a series of 'acts' or 'chapters', in which Genesis is the first and foundational scene. The story then unfolds until the final scene, in which God and his kingdom are finally restored in the Book of Revelation!

Some Christians view narratives such as Adam and Eve as an actual or literal story. Others see Adam and Eve more metaphorically, or as a rich picture book. Often Christians argue over these two approaches, but the arguments can obscure the truths Genesis is outlining about God and humankind.

We all approach the Bible (and Genesis) with our own particular lenses or glasses. These lenses have been strongly tinted by our culture. This is unavoidable. From the moment we are born our culture strives to tell us who we are, and to define us from its own perspective and the stories which have influenced the culture.

For many centuries we have viewed the Bible (and Genesis) through a patriarchal lense—in other words, through a viewpoint dominated by men. It is only in the past half century that feminist theologians (of which Catherine Booth was a very early forerunner) have begun to view scripture through women's eyes, outside of the world of men. It's very important that we acknowledge this dynamic, and how our ideas about gender influence the way we see the creation story.

Let's read

Read all of Genesis 3, with a special focus on verse 16...

*I will make your pregnancy very painful;
in pain you will bear children.
You will desire your husband,
but he will rule over you. (CEB)*

Let's discuss

- What are some of the key truths we learn about God from Genesis 1–3?
- What are some of the key truths about humankind?
- We said that Genesis is not a science textbook—what do you think that means?

Let's dig deeper

We now turn to look briefly and in broad terms at the scripture we'll be studying in relation to gender equity: Genesis 1–3.

This tells the stories of God's creative work over six days, ending with the seventh day of rest. It then focuses on the formation of the man Adam from dust, a description of the Garden of Eden and restrictions surrounding the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, the creation of Eve, her yielding to temptation and the introduction of human fallenness and its consequences.

It is this portion of scripture that has been used to define gender relationships. Eve is firmly placed at the centre of original disobedience and waywardness. She is the one who sins first and then leads the hapless Adam astray as well. For her, the consequences are severe pain in childbirth and desire for a husband 'who will rule over you'. But there is a problem...

The two creation stories

If this is how Genesis has been viewed and interpreted, especially to bolster the power and position of men, it can come as a surprise to learn that there are actually two creation accounts in Genesis that depict Adam and Eve. The Genesis 2–3 narratives are, in fact, second-in-line within the wider Genesis story.

Let's read Genesis 1:26–31 (CEB):

Then God said, 'Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.'

God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them.

God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground.' Then God said, 'I now give to you all the plants on the earth that yield seeds and all the

trees whose fruit produces its seeds within it. These will be your food. To all wildlife, to all the birds in the sky, and to everything crawling on the ground—to everything that breathes—I give all the green grasses for food.’ And that’s what happened. God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good.

In this first creation story, the distinctive statements are made:

- God created humanity
- humans have stewardship and responsibility functions
- humans have been made in God’s image
- humans are created male and female
- God blesses them
- humankind is to be fruitful, multiply and will have their needs provided for.

But wait ... as if to underline the importance of this story, it is repeated again in Genesis 5:1–2: ‘On the day God created humanity, he made them to resemble God and created them male and female. He blessed them and called them humanity on the day they were created.’

This raises some important questions with respect to gender equity. The first creation account describes how God originally intended and pictured his kingdom, or social order. It was based on relationships of equality. There is no hint of inferiority or superiority between the man and the woman, and no attempt to create a pecking order to relationships.

The second account (Chapters 2–3) also describes the advent of Adam, but with Eve arriving later. Significantly, it then describes the introduction of sin and the subsequent inequality of relationships. It describes the fallenness of our relationships because of sin.

Should this, then, be the narrative we look to in guiding our thinking and behaviour around gender relationships?

Male domination has naturally oriented itself to the view that this second narrative is the ‘natural order’ because it has reinforced and bolstered the status quo. But it’s important to recognise that this is a sinful status quo. It describes fallenness, disruption, upset and dissipation. If we are looking to this as a model for gender relationships, we are looking in the wrong place.

Instead, Christians are charged to work for the ushering in of God’s kingdom. As Jesus prayed in Matthew 6:10: ‘Bring in your kingdom so that your will is done on earth as it’s done in heaven.’

Later in this study, we’ll see how Jesus deliberately lifted women up and restored their equality. He wasn’t doing this because he was ‘a nice guy’. He was ushering in the kingdom of God, as it exists in Heaven, restoring God’s original design for male and female, who are equally made in God’s image.

This may require new lenses—a new pair of ‘glasses’—so we can see God’s kingdom vision more clearly. The foundation to our theology and thinking should lie in equality, as imaged by God for his kingdom, and not in the disastrous consequences of disobedience and revolt.

Let’s break it down

Let’s summarise the two distinctive stories, in which humans are created.

The first creation story: Genesis 1:27–31 presents the intended kingdom and social order through the eyes and lenses of God as God originally foresaw it. This was distinctively:

- the original order
- God’s kingdom as God ordained and intended
- a mirror of God’s image and nature

- the categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ complete this image
- this original order is ‘blessed’
- there exists dignity, mutuality, oneness and unity in this kingdom
- it is God’s crowning touch.

The second creation story: Genesis 2–3 presents a radically disrupted and degraded social order. This was distinctively:

- a later and subsequent order
- an order of fallenness and failure.

Look back over Genesis 2–3 and see where these concepts are introduced, in this new and degraded order:

- shame
- hiddenness and secrecy
- deception
- distortion
- lies
- loss of innocence
- disobedience
- subjugation
- dominance
- blaming
- social positions
- gender positions
- irresponsibility.

Which of these two stories should be our focus if we are wanting God’s will to be done on Earth as in Heaven?

Re-thinking gender relationships

What are some steps we can take to help us move our thinking towards a more equal view of gender?

1. **Be prepared to examine and change our lenses:** Do we need to change our lenses (or give them a good clean)? The Christian journey is for each of us an ongoing voyage of discovery, with new insights into the kingdom as God ordained and intended. This does not mean we’re re-writing God’s Word; it means we’re willing to examine where we may have not fully understood God’s Word—it’s the difference between a static mindset and growth mindset. It’s a privilege as followers of Christ to be continually growing and seeing new aspects of God we had not seen before. How can the Genesis narratives reveal something new to us about gender and God?
2. **Check our theology and thinking:** Correct thinking and theology means that we’re much more likely to behave correctly and ethically. If our thinking or theology is wrong, we’re more likely to behave incorrectly and unethically. This being the case, which Genesis narrative have we followed in our relationships?
3. **Recognise our role in society:** Being a Christian means that we belong to another kingdom beyond our physical world. We adhere at times to a different set of values than our wider society. We may be in opposition, neutral to or supportive of the values and priorities of society at large. How could we lead our nation into a greater kingdom view of gender equity?
4. **Get to know the story of the Bible (called ‘biblical theology’):** The Bible is a story with key themes, beginning in Genesis. Gender relationships are an integral part of this, as the Bible shows how to have a relationship with God and each other. The Old Testament was dominated by a patriarchal mindset, but in the New Testament we find Jesus, Paul (and John) seeking

to raise the status of women. In their letters, Paul and John radically re-interpreted male dominance in their own culture. Was this a new development or were they operating from a much older story throughout the Bible?

5. **Get to know our context (called ‘contextual theology’):** This is where things can get complicated! Systematic theology is the body of doctrine and belief passed down through the generations of the Christian church. For Salvationists, this is best summarised in the 11 Doctrines of Faith. But, as society changes—and as God’s kingdom works towards justice in the world—there are times when Christians need to ask: ‘what does the Bible have to say about that?’ This is known as contextual theology: we gain new insights when we read scripture through the different lenses of a social context. What new insights can changing gender roles in our society bring to our reading of scripture?

Let’s discuss

- Why are there two creation accounts of Adam and Eve in the Genesis narrative? And what does that tell us about gender relationships?
- What was Adam and Eve’s relationship like in the first creation narrative, before ‘the fall’?
- Do you agree that the Old Testament is patriarchal—and what does this mean?
- As followers of Jesus, how do we restore gender relationships as God intended them?

Made in God’s Image: Powerful and Equivalent

Many of us have been taught that woman was created as a ‘suitable helper’—but what does this really mean?

When humankind was created, God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...’ (Genesis 1:26, RSV). There is a small but fascinating word used here: *us*.

This verse is our first hint of the Trinity in Genesis. They create both male and female in their image. God holds both feminine and masculine qualities, and, in return, both male and female reflect the image of God.

Let’s move through the creation story to Genesis 2:18 (CEB): ‘Then the LORD God said, “It’s not good that the human is alone. I will make him a helper that is perfect for him”’.

The word ‘helper’—or *ezer* in Hebrew—has led many to view women as an assistant or support to the male. The implication has been that she exists to serve the man and is subject to his desires.

Yet we find this same word *ezer* elsewhere in the Bible—to describe God. For example, this beautiful line from Deuteronomy 33:26: ‘There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to help you...’

Ezer is used particularly ‘to describe God being Israel’s help in times of war... It is an empowering presence’, says Hannah Thompson from The Junia Project.

Would we describe our helper God as subservient to us? No! God is our rescuer, powerful to save. This is the same word used to describe Eve.

Similarly, the word *kenegdo* has been weakened to ‘suitable’, when in fact the richly layered Hebrew word literally means ‘in front of’—in other words, compatible, similar and equivalent to.

So, God created Eve as a powerful rescuer, compatible and equivalent to Adam. Rather than emphasising the difference between men and women, the creation story actually emphasises our similarity and equality, argues Thompson.

How does *ezer kenegdo* reflect the image of God? And how does this influence our view of ourselves?