

HOW TO RAISE FEMININE DAUGHTERS

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The very fact that we are asking how to bequeath femininity to our daughters is a sign of the times. We live in a postmodern, relativistic culture that has so thoroughly lost its way that even the simple issue of girls naturally maturing into womanhood is mired in confusion. So how do we approach this topic?

The dictionary defines *feminine* as “belonging to the female sex; characterized by or possessing qualities generally attributed to a woman; womanly.”

I could seize that definition and inject it full of the qualities I think should “generally [be] attributed to a woman.” I could write a treatise on the obvious effects of feminism and issue a call to women to return to traditional values. I could give a checklist of what good Christian mothers and fathers should be sure their daughters do and don’t do. And believe me, I do have opinions! However, a formulaic, prescriptive, behavioral approach is like shifting sand. It may give immediate ideas and temporary solutions, but it will not challenge our daughters to make lasting commitments and changes in the depths of their hearts.

Any discussion of femininity must be driven by God’s Word or it will lack substance, integrity, and longevity. I am fully aware of the

volatility of this topic, but my primary concern is to present a biblical foundation for womanhood. I believe this positive approach will help us show and tell our daughters the wonders of God's design and calling for women.

One sidebar before we explore this topic: As we think about raising feminine daughters, I encourage you to think covenantally and not just biologically. Our salvation is personal and individual; but when God saves us, He adopts us into His covenant family. We have spiritual brothers, sisters, mothers, and daughters. God deals with us as a household of faith. Whether or not we have biological daughters, we have spiritual daughters, and it is our covenant privilege and responsibility to pass on a legacy of biblical womanhood to those girls and young women entrusted to our church.

Now let's explore a biblical foundation for womanhood.

PURPOSE AND AUTHORITY

Whenever we craft a biblical apologetic for any topic, we need to begin by putting that topic in the larger context of creation, fall, and redemption. If we simply lift a few Scripture verses out of context and use those verses to construct our apologetic, we will likely come away with distortions. The same is true for womanhood. Our starting point is not roles and behaviors. The fundamental question is: What is our purpose and authority? Creation, fall, and redemption give the answers.

The opening words of Scripture tell us that "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. . . . God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen. 1:1, 3, NIV).

God is the Creator. He spoke, and creation happened. His Word is the absolute authority.

On the sixth day of creation God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Gen. 1:26, NIV).

It is incredible that the God whose words brought creation into existence would make a creature in His own image. The Creator

King fashioned a creature who would mirror certain aspects of His own character. This is what would set this creature apart from all the others.

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

—GEN. 1:27, NIV

The man and the woman were created with the capacity to reflect the very character of God. Herein lies the purpose and dignity of humankind.

Purpose and authority are the first steps in building a biblical worldview, including our perspective of womanhood. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* underscores this by beginning with these two foundational questions:

Q. 1. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

Q. 2. What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him?

A. The word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him.¹

Our purpose is God's glory, and our authority to know how to glorify Him is His Word. This shapes and simplifies life.

But the first man and woman rebelled against God's authority. Adam and Eve chose self-governance rather than God's rule. Sin separated them from God and from the reason for their existence. They could no longer live in God's presence, and so they could no longer reflect His glory. Adam was our representative; so his fallen nature and the wretched consequences of his sin were passed on to the human race.

But God did not leave us in this predicament. Through the covenant of grace, God made the way for us to be redeemed from sin and to live in His presence. In this covenant, Christ is our representative. He kept the terms of the covenant for us. He lived a perfectly

obedient life and offered Himself as the payment for our sin. God's covenant promise is, "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God" (Jer. 24:7, NIV). We do not deserve salvation, and we can do nothing to earn it. It is glorious grace from beginning to end.

SOME PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PURPOSE AND AUTHORITY

Our daughters will be products of their theology. Their knowledge—or lack of knowledge—of who God is and what He has done for them will show up in every attitude, action, and relationship. Their worldview will be determined by their belief system.

We must teach our daughters that their value and identity lie in the fact that they are image-bearers of the God of glory. This will protect them from seeking significance in the inconsequential shallowness of self-fulfillment, personal happiness, materialism, or others' approval.

Our daughters must know the wondrous truth that their overarching purpose in life is God's glory. This must determine every decision they make, from their choice of clothes to their choice of a husband. The question that guides all of our decisions should be: Does this glorify God? First Corinthians 10:31 should be one of the first verses they memorize: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." And they should see us making decisions based on this mandate.

The world will tempt our daughters to look to their feelings and experiences as their authority, but we must show and tell them that God's Word is the ultimate authority for faith and life.

We must tell our daughters about the expanse of God's love. They must know that we are justified and sanctified by grace. It seems that women are particularly prone to a performance orientation of life. We may acknowledge that we are saved by grace, but somehow we get entangled in "works righteousness" when we it comes to our sanctification. We think that if we are a little better, God will love us a little more. This distortion spills over into all other relationships. *If I'm a little better, my parents will love me more . . . or my friends will love me more*

. . . or my husband will love me more. This is exhausting for the one trying to earn everyone's love, and it drains the people whose approval we are trying to earn. Children who think they must establish their own righteousness through accepted behavior eventually become so weary that they give up or become masters of deceit.

A biblical understanding of justification will free our daughters. The more they understand that God declares us to be just in His sight on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ, and that the righteousness of Jesus is deposited in our spiritual bank accounts, the more they will live in the beauty and freedom of His grace.

All of this means that I must search my own heart. Am I trying to elevate myself through my daughter's accomplishments and behavior? Is my primary concern her happiness or her holiness? Is God's glory really the driving passion of my own life? These questions take me to the cross. They take me to Jesus to plead for grace and wisdom.

It is against this backdrop that we are able to perceive the particular uniqueness of God's creation of woman.

WOMAN'S CREATION DESIGN

In Genesis 2 we read, "The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (v. 18, NIV).

Why was it "not good for the man to be alone"? Because he was created in the image of the Triune God. The unity and diversity of the Trinity demanded an image-bearer that reflected this equal-but-different characteristic.

Equality did not preclude gender distinctiveness; rather, equality allowed the distinctiveness of the man and the woman to be so perfectly complementary that it blended into a mysterious oneness that gloriously reflected the oneness of the Trinity.

The helper design of the woman brought a completeness to the garden home that received God's pronouncement, "It is very good."

Yet we live in a culture whose hostility against this design and order has raged for several decades. The feminist philosophy says that equality means sameness and insists on independence from husbands and family. Now the daughters of those feminists are confused.

In her book *What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us*, Danielle Crittenden writes:

For in all the ripping down of barriers that has taken place over a generation, we may have inadvertently also smashed the foundations necessary for our happiness. Pretending that we are the same as men—with similar needs and desires—has only led many of us to find out, brutally, how different we really are. In demanding radical independence—from men, from our families—we may have also abandoned certain bargains and institutions that didn't always work perfectly but until very recently were civilization's best ways of taming the feckless human heart.²

Crittenden's research and analysis are helpful, but her solutions are flawed because they begin with woman and not with God. She, too, is searching for what will make women happy, and it is an endless journey.

I pray that our daughters will write books entitled "What Our Mothers Told Us" and that these books will celebrate God's creation purpose and His design of woman. This is a design that is never outdated because it transcends time and place. It is bigger than any given role in life, but it impacts every role. It is the design stamped upon us at creation. It is intrinsic to who we are as women.

So, let's explore this helper design. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for *helper* is used primarily to refer to God as our Helper. When we consider how God is our Helper, we begin to see the richness and strength of this word.

Moses spoke of God as his Helper who saved him from the sword of Pharaoh (Ex. 18:4).

In Psalms we read that God is the Helper of the victim, the fatherless, the needy, and the afflicted (Ps. 10:14; 72:12; 86:17).

God is referred to as our Helper who is our support, strength, and shield (Ps. 20:2; 28:7; 33:20).

I think you get the picture. This is not a fragile word, and we are not called to a mission of fluff. Our helper ministry is one of defense, comfort, and compassion. I addressed this topic in my book *By Design*:

The helper design is multi-dimensional. Different women will exhibit different aspects of this design in various ways. The same woman may exhibit it differently in each season of her life. . . . The relational strength of our helper design causes women to attach fiercely to people and purposes. We don't turn loose easily. This tenacity equips women to persevere in intercessory prayer for years. Countless mothers have prayed for wayward children long after others lost hope. . . .

We live in a culture void of hope. Woman's helper design uniquely qualifies us to enter this vacuum and to give help by proclaiming the "Hope of Israel, its Savior in times of distress" (Jer. 14:8).

In Psalm 146, the words *help* (*'ēzer*) and *hope* are linked together. This is significant. Help apart from hope is superficial and temporary. It is merely a stopgap measure that is a substitute for the real thing. Yet this is what our culture offers. . . .

The woman who can give authentic help is the one who has come to a place of hopelessness in self that drives her to God's Word where she finds her "help is the God of Jacob," and her "hope is in the Lord." She is qualified to help others because she has an eternal relationship with the Lord and she is saturated with His Word. She points them to the only viable Object of hope by directing them to the only veritable Source of hope. This is authentic help.³

Sin marred that design, and now woman tries to reinvent womanhood on her own terms. Since Satan slithered into the garden and convinced Eve to try the way of independence and individualism, women have been on a quest for their own happiness. In this autonomous vacuum the helper design is senseless and useless.

It is because of our redemption that we *can* live out our helper design. It is our redemption that breaks the reign of sin in our lives and empowers us to fulfill our creation mission. And it is our knowledge of our Redeemer's love for us that compels us to do so. In the covenant community, the helper design makes sense. Two of the characteristics of covenant life are community and compassion, and this is exactly what our helper design equips us to cultivate. Our nurturing

and relational strengths prepare us to foster a sense of family in the home and church and to be channels of compassion to the victims, fatherless, needy, and afflicted.

SOME PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE HELPER DESIGN

The redeemed woman who has a biblical apologetic of womanhood has a focus and clarity of purpose that enables her to be a true helper. She will embrace her helper design and will encourage and equip her daughters to do the same.

The redeemed helper will be a woman of prayer. She will defend her family and the covenant family on her knees, and her daughters will be drawn to emulate her selfless strength.

The redeemed helper whose covenant sensibilities have been honed understands the importance of the virtue of domesticity and the ministry of hospitality. But she knows this is more than baking her own bread and having a beautifully decorated home. Domesticity means a devotion to home life. It seems to me that the most definitive statement of domesticity was made by Jesus when He said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. . . . In my father’s house are many rooms. . . . I am going there to prepare a place for you” (John 14:1-2, NIV).

Domesticity means that we prepare safe places where troubled hearts can find rest and comfort, and we involve our daughters in this ministry in our homes and in our churches. In a must-read book for every woman, nineteenth-century pastor John Angell James said, “Whatever breaks down the modest reserve, the domestic virtues, the persuasive gentleness, of woman, is an injury done to the community.”⁴

The redeemed helper is not inward-focused. You will find her taking her children to visit the elderly as well as taking them across social and cultural barriers to extend the boundaries of the covenant to the oppressed and needy and afflicted. And as she does so, she trains another generation to live covenantally.

The redeemed helper who is not married understands that she is to be a mother in Israel and that she is to join with other women to be corporate helpers in God’s covenant community.

The redeemed helper values male and female distinctiveness because she knows that this is God's design and order. She is not threatened by male headship. She knows that submission has nothing to do with status. Submission has to do with function. It is the way God has ordered life in the kingdom, and it is good because He is good. This is a reflection of the ontological equality yet the functional difference in the Trinity. Headship and submission are God's ordained means for achieving oneness in marriage. She knows that submission is not a legalistic list of behaviors or mindless passivity. She understands that it is not about logic; it is about love. It defies logic that Jesus would release all the glories of heaven so that He could give us the glory of heaven. In Philippians we are told:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

—PHIL. 2:5-8, NIV

Jesus loved us so much that He voluntarily submitted to death on a cross. His command is that wives are to submit to their husbands. This is a gift that we voluntarily give to the man we have vowed to love, in obedience to the Savior we love. The redeemed helper knows that submission does not restrict her—it actually frees her to fulfill her helper design. And as she lives in the light of this truth, her daughters watch and learn. Quoting again from *By Design*:

There is an interesting verse in Psalm 144: “. . . our daughters will be like pillars carved to adorn a palace” (Psalm 144:12).

A pillar, according to the dictionary, is “a . . . support; one who occupies a central or responsible position.” Some of the meanings of the root Hebrew word that is used here are: “to attend, to defend, to give stability, to join.” The ideas of protection and support are clear in this imagery.

In summary, a helper supports by protecting, sustaining, upholding, refreshing, attending, defending, and stabilizing.⁵

HOW DO WE PASS THE LEGACY OF BIBLICAL WOMANHOOD TO OUR DAUGHTERS?

This is certainly not an exhaustive list of suggestions, but at least it will get us started.

First, we must remember that God has given us every resource we need. He has given us His Holy Spirit. We have the very power of God within us to give us grace and wisdom for the task, and we must pray for this same power to be at work in our daughters. It is the power of the gospel that will transform them.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

—ROM. 1:16, NIV

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

—2 COR. 3:18, NIV

He has given us His Word. We must diligently teach our daughters biblical truth and pray that the Holy Spirit will apply that truth to their hearts.

How can a young man [or woman] keep his [or her] way pure? By living according to your word. . . . I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

—PS. 119:9, 11, NIV

God has given us the privilege of prayer. We should pray for hedges of protection around our daughters. Select portions of Scripture and pray them into your daughter's life. For example, pray that she will trust in the Lord with all her heart and never lean on her own understanding; that in all her ways she will acknowledge Him, for He will make her paths straight. Pray that she will not be wise in her own eyes, but that she will fear the Lord and shun evil (Prov. 3:5-7). Pray Proverbs 31 for her.

The Lord has given us the church. The covenant family is part of our inheritance as members of the family of God. The church is “the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15, NIV), and believing parents have the unrivaled resource of the teaching and the relationships provided there. Louis Berkhof wrote:

Now, the children of the covenant are adopted into a family that is infinitely higher than the family of any man of rank or nobility. They are adopted into the family of the covenant God Himself. Even while on earth they are privileged to join the company of the redeemed, the saints of God. They take their place in the church of Jesus Christ, which is the heavenly Jerusalem.⁶

When our daughters are taught the truth of biblical womanhood, and they see the wonder and substance of this reality being lived out among Christian women, I believe they will be dazzled and will flourish.

The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, “The LORD is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.”

—Ps. 92:12-15, NIV

Second, the fight to recapture biblical womanhood is a spiritual battle, and we must utilize every weapon God has provided as we engage in this conflict. We cannot deny the fact that we have breathed feminist air for several decades. This poison has taken its toll. Raising daughters who are committed to a biblical perspective of womanhood will be like standing against a tidal wave. But stand we must.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and

against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

—EPH. 6:10-13, NIV

Third, we must teach our daughters that living for God’s glory is beyond their ability. It is a work of grace. We should teach them to flee to the cross for grace and mercy, and then to become a stream of grace and mercy to others. They will learn this best by seeing us live in this way.

Fourth, we must teach our daughters about biblical womanhood as we “sit at home and when [we] walk along the road, when [we] lie down and when [we] get up” (Deut. 6:7, NIV). We are teaching a way of life as we live life.

John Angell James, the nineteenth-century pastor quoted earlier, wrote about teaching our children through the course of everyday circumstances:

It is the sentiments you let drop occasionally, it is the conversation they overhear, when playing in the corner of the room, which has more effect than many things which are addressed to them directly. . . . Your example will educate them—your conversation with your friends—the business they see you transact—the likings and dislikings you express—these will educate them. . . . The education of circumstances . . . is of more constant and powerful effect, and of far more consequence to the habit, than that which is direct and apparent. This education goes on at every instant of time; it goes on like time—you can neither stop it nor turn its course.⁷

Fifth, we must not be naïve. We must be wise, like the “men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (1 Chron. 12:32, NIV). We must be aware of cultural influences, and we must warn our daughters of the dangers of ungodliness.

What kind of women will it take to raise feminine daughters? It will take true women.

THE TRUE WOMAN

In a book by this title I give the following explanation:

The dictionary defines *true* as “consistent with fact or reality; exactly conforming to a rule, standard, or pattern.” . . .

The true woman is the real thing. She is a genuine, authentic Masterpiece. The Master has set eternity in her heart and is conforming her to His own image. There is consistency in her outward behavior because it is dictated by the reality of her inner life. That reality is her redemption.

The true woman is a reflection of her redemption. . . .

By the transforming power of the Gospel, the Christian woman is empowered by God’s Spirit to give an increasingly true reflection of her Savior and thus to be a true woman. . . .

When my friend Sharon Kraemer was diagnosed with cancer, her response was, “I am confident that God will use this to take me deeper into His love for me.” I didn’t see Sharon until several weeks after surgery and several rounds of chemotherapy, and at my first sight of her I gasped. It was not because her body and her hair were so thin. My shock was because Sharon absolutely glowed with peace and love. She was awash with an undeniable radiance. I could only exclaim, “Sharon, you must have been spending some incredible times with the Lord.” She did not need to reply. The evidence was there.

This is the essence of the true woman. Regardless of the time in history when she inhabits this earth, she is one who lives in the presence of glory. Her redeemed character is shaped and driven by God’s Word and Spirit. Because she is the very dwelling-place of the Lord God, her reflection of Him is manifested in every relationship and circumstance of life. The distinguishing characteristic of her life is His presence in her radiating out to all who see her. The true woman’s life is not segmented into sacred and secular. All of life is sacred because it is lived in His presence. The true woman is a true reflection of God’s glory.⁸

Recently our granddaughter, Mary Kate, made her public profession of faith and was received as a full communing member of her church. Three generations of women in our family sat together and

watched the fourth generation pledge herself to Jesus Christ as each of us had done. There was a rush of gratitude for God's covenant faithfulness to families, and a profound sense of our responsibility to pass on a legacy of biblical womanhood. Mary Kate, and the generation of covenant daughters she represents, does not foresee the battles to be fought. But, to some degree, we know. And we are covenant-bound to "train the younger women . . . set them an example by doing what is good . . . while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:4, 7, 13-14, NIV).

May God give us grace and wisdom, and may He be pleased to give us daughters who have a passion to live for and to reflect His glory.

NOTES

1. *The Westminster Confession of Faith, Together with the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism* (Atlanta: Presbyterian Church in America Committee for Christian Education & Publications, 1990).
2. Danielle Crittenden, *What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 25.
3. Susan Hunt, *By Design* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994), 101, 108, 171, 173.
4. John Angell James, *Female Piety* (London: Hamilton Adams, 1860; reprinted Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994), 75.
5. Hunt, *By Design*, 118.
6. Louis Berkhof and Cornelius Van Til, *Foundations of Christian Education: Addresses to Christian Teachers*, ed. Dennis E. Johnson (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990; originally published Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1953), 77.
7. John Angell James, *A Help to Domestic Happiness* (London: Frederick Westley and A. H. Davis, 1833; reprinted Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 128-129.
8. Susan Hunt, *The True Woman* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1997), 22, 34-35.