

GENDER STUDIES IN REVIEW

A Review of Claire Smith. *God's Good Design: What the Bible Really Says about Men and Women*. Kingsford, Australia: Mathias Media, 2012.

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There are a host of books that exist on the topic of men and women's roles in the home and church. Some are written with the purpose of wrestling with difficult texts and dissecting biblical passages in the original languages. Some are written to answer more pragmatic questions, such as, "How are men and women to relate to each other in the home?" or "Can a woman work outside the home if she has children?" It is rare, though, to find a succinct resource that engages both of these discussions well.

One of the dangers in the dialogue of God's design for gender in the home and church is to divide the theological from the practical. In *God's Good Design*, Claire Smith lays down theological soil from which practical directives for gender roles and responsibilities spring forth. The book begins with a quick glance at "The Fine Dust of Feminism" (chapter 1). Graciously, Smith states, "I do not think that feminism is to blame for everything that is wrong with the world." This is a powerful statement, and one that allows for honest discussion between those on both sides of the gender debate. This book is not a treatise on who's to blame, but, rather, on how to live obediently in light of biblical directives.

Tackling a few of the most hotly debated and criticized texts on these issues, the first section of the book (chapters 2–4) centers upon what God's design for women within the church *should* reflect. With the example of Adam and Eve's fall into sin as a framework, the reader is able to trace how God's design, when thwarted, provides a slippery slope of role reversal. She points out that "the bat-

tle for women in our day is to accept wisdom in this [God's design] and be content with it, when our entire culture has taught us not to be" (37). Ultimately, a woman's obedience in issues of submission revolves around whether or not she believes that God's design really is better: better when culture says it's not, better when one's husband isn't leading well, and better when that woman's desire to lead is strong. Simply put, this is less a debate about Greek and Hebrew nuances and ultimately a matter of trust in God's wisdom.

In section II, Smith discusses complementary roles within the home. These chapters provide the bulk of the book's content, with Ephesians 5 as the starting point. She explains how the relationship between Christ and his bride is a compelling motivator for submission in that "Jesus Christ has taken a filthy naked, shameful social outcast, and washed her and clothed her and taken her in as His cherished bride" (113). When properly understood, the redemptive way Christ relates to his bride provides a compelling example—an example that can be mirrored within marriage itself.

Chapter 6, entitled "Won without a word," provides the reader with an astounding view of how submission in marriage, properly lived out, has far-reaching gospel impact. With 1 Peter 3 as the foundation, Smith explains that submission is not a mindless, robotic lifestyle or a license for slavery—both misunderstandings that can weave themselves into this discussion. Rather, "ordered relationships in marriage are not based on merit or status. They are based on God's good design for His equally

loved and equally adopted children” (146).

The reader then enters into a beautiful and helpful discussion in chapter 7 of the original man and woman as created in God’s image and how the order of creation displays a pattern for male headship. Then, recounting the fall of mankind into sin, Smith shows how God’s order for leadership was reversed (175–76). This picture of distorted leadership provides the framework for chapter 8, “The ultimate distortion” of abuse—a sad reality in our broken world, which is far from the sacrificial and loving example of Jesus Christ.

Smith ends section II with a picture of the “ideal” wife as portrayed in Proverbs 31 (chapter 9) and concludes the book with a final question: “But does it work?” (chapter 10). This latter question speaks to the practical concerns that many people have. Can sacrificial leadership and submissive spirits really, truly “work” these days? Can a marriage really be enriched and the gospel really be displayed by following these directives? According to Smith, the answer is yes, not because it is easy or always even a delight, but because faith in the goodness of God’s design should tame a woman’s desire to lead in ways she has not been created to lead. She summarizes: “It is an outworking of my belief that the canonical Scriptures are the Spirit-inspired word of God in which God reveals all we need to know for salvation and to know and please Him, and that therefore his written word has priority in deciding all matters of faith and life” (217). The beauty of *God’s Good Design* is not just that it deals with the honest issues of gender roles and marriage, not just that it is theologically rich and well written, although both of these things are true. The beauty of this resource, I believe, is that women at all stages of biblical understanding can benefit from its discussion. This resource would be well placed in the hands of a woman new to Christianity and hungry for a desire to understand her role in marriage. It would provide a theologically rich benefit to the woman who does not agree that God’s design is, in fact, good. And finally, it would be an excellent academic resource for students hungry to delve into these passages deeply. *God’s Good Design* is well researched and written,

thoroughly undergirded by Scripture, and gracious in discussing controversial topics.