

SECOND EDITION

GOD'S GOOD DESIGN

WHAT THE BIBLE REALLY SAYS
ABOUT MEN AND WOMEN

DISCUSSION
GUIDE NOW
INCLUDED

CLAIRE SMITH

ALTHOUGH CLAIRE SMITH was a young adult when she came to know Jesus, it was some years before she noticed parts of the Bible that challenged her feminist views. Studying these passages led to radical changes in her life.

In *God's Good Design*, Claire Smith takes us on that same journey. With warmth and clarity, she looks closely at seven key Bible passages about men and women and how they should relate together in God's purposes. Along the way, she deals with many common objections, and applies the teaching of the Bible simply and practically to our relationships at home and in church.

"This outstanding book is comprehensive, thoroughly readable, full of useful application and apologetic, and will provide us with a magnificent resource for our churches for many years to come. I could not commend it more highly!"

—William Taylor, Rector of St Helen's Bishopsgate, London

"Claire Smith's little book comes with a refreshing sanity, a happy eagerness to let Scripture speak, and a simple style that will frustrate the pundits and make many ordinary Christian readers rejoice over this breath of fresh air, this godly and biblically faithful call to rejoice in *God's Good Design*."

—DA Carson, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Chicago

About the author

After working for some years as a nurse, Claire Smith spent many years at Moore Theological College closely studying the Bible, completing a BTh, an MA (Theology), and a PhD in New Testament. These days she spends her time writing and teaching women the Bible at conferences. Some of her favourite things are word puzzles, Beethoven, talking theology with her husband, Rob, and visiting their son and daughter-in-law, who live overseas. She will also happily watch any sport on TV (especially rugby and cricket).

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Is it possible to say anything fresh or new about Christian feminism and Christian complementarianism? Not only has the debate been thrashed out in countless essays and books that begin to sound painfully predictable, but each 'side' is convinced it has 'won'. Into this maelstrom of publications, Claire Smith's little book comes with a refreshing sanity, a happy eagerness to let Scripture speak, and a simple style that will frustrate the pundits and make many ordinary Christian readers rejoice over this breath of fresh air, this godly and biblically faithful call to rejoice in *God's Good Design*.

DA Carson

*Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical
Divinity School, Deerfield*

Claire Smith tackles passages that some have claimed are 'too hard', and she does this with the clear conviction that this is God's good word to us. This is a helpful resource for the church because it works through the Bible passages verse by verse, letting them set the agenda for the ministry of men and women, rather than simply making assertions from elsewhere. It is evident throughout the book that Claire has been working on these texts for many years. She writes so plainly and clearly, and she addresses common objections and pastoral issues. This clarity makes the book widely accessible.

Jane M Tooher

*Director of The Priscilla and Aquila Centre, Moore College,
Sydney*

Gallons of ink have been spilt over issues of male and female roles in church leadership and the home. Few authors have provided such a careful, accurate and convincing treatment of the biblical texts involved. This outstanding book is comprehensive, thoroughly readable, full of useful application and apologetic, and will provide us with a magnificent resource for our churches for many years to come. I could not commend it more highly!

William Taylor

Rector of St Helen's Bishopsgate, London

This book is a welcome addition to the 'gender' landscape. Claire Smith's careful and meticulous attention to the biblical text is of immense service to those who are not afraid to dig deep below the surface in order to fathom truth. This book is thorough, comprehensive and scholarly. I wholeheartedly recommend it to men and women who yearn to live within God's good design for relationships in church and family.

Lesley C Ramsay

Evangelist and Bible teacher, Sydney

This is a most loving contribution to the gender discussions of today. And we who follow Christ cannot afford to pretend the Bible is too difficult or debatable on these matters without losing traction on many others.

Claire Smith walks us through the biblical texts so intelligibly, winsomely, pertinently and persuasively that we have fresh cause to thank God and put his wise ways into practice.

Simon Manchester

Rector of St Thomas', North Sydney

Claire Smith's thoughtful, careful work deserves a full read from beginning to end. She aims not to advance an argument but to listen well to God's word about men and women and their relationships with each other. This book models some of the most important exegetical principles: close attention to the Bible's words; study of texts in their immediate and full contexts; consistent effort to say no more or less than the Bible says; and personal humility and joy in receiving God's word. I commend this book not as a checklist for a view but as a worthy guide along the path of listening well to God's voice in Scripture.

Kathleen B Nielson

Author and conference speaker, Georgia

God's Good Design stands alone as a succinct yet comprehensive exploration of the Bible's teaching on men and women. Claire Smith's attention to detail and ability to apply God's word to our lives means this book will sharpen our thinking and enrich the lives of men and women regardless of age, stage in life or cultural background. Without hesitation, I recommend *God's Good Design* as a 'must read' for every Christian.

Carmelina Read

Chair of EQUIP Ministry Women conference, Sydney

Claire Smith's fine scholarship makes her an excellent guide to the teaching of Scripture on the subject of men and women. She has a desire to be true to God's word and to show how God's word enhances human life. This is no abstract discussion—Claire has a rich and thoughtful experience of what she writes about. This is a book worth reading!

Peter Jensen

Anglican Archbishop of Sydney

This is a great book that systematically lays out all God says on this important issue. It is thorough, comprehensive, accessible and compelling. It avoids the trap of saying more than God has said, but carefully says no less. It therefore confronts men as well as women and calls us back to God's good design.

And it's helpful to have an author who can so sensitively engage with such depth on so profound a topic in the context of truly knowing the pain and gain of wrestling with these things! Read the last chapter first. It helps to keep in mind who it is that writes.

I'll be one of the first to stock this important, relevant and careful book in our church bookshop.

Andrew Heard

Lead Pastor, EV Church, Erina

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CLAIRE SMITH

God's Good Design

Second edition

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To my dear husband, Rob

PREFACE

ANYONE VAGUELY FAMILIAR with the question of the roles and relationships of men and women in the church and in marriage will know there is already no shortage of books on the subject. So why the need for another?

The answer is that this book is not focused on arguing one side or the other of an *issue*—like women’s ordination or women’s ministry or the best model for modern marriages. I will address these matters, of course, but they are not the main focus.

The main focus is the *Bible passages* that should determine these issues. This book is a text-by-text, verse-by-verse, and sometimes word-by-word look at passages that many of us have put in the ‘too hard basket’ or made up our minds about years ago and not revisited since. It is the sort of close Bible study we must do if we are to know and love the wisdom of God’s purposes for men and women.

For the most part, the book represents a series of talks on the key Bible texts, given over many years at ‘EQUIP women’, a large annual women’s conference in Sydney. Some of the material on Genesis was prepared and delivered at the Katoomba Women’s Convention in 2009. I am grateful to the EQUIP committee and the Katoomba Women’s Convention committee for the

opportunity to work so closely on this material and to share God's word with thousands of women over more than a decade. It has been a rich blessing to me, and under God's hand, I trust, to others as well. The chapter on domestic abuse is based on lectures I delivered in the 'Ministry Training for Women' course at the Presbyterian Theological Centre in Sydney.

My main aim in all that follows is to hear God's word clearly, and obey well, so that we can say with the psalmist:

I have stored up your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against you ...
I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word. (PS 119:11, 16)

1 | THE FINE DUST OF FEMINISM

ON WEDNESDAY 23 SEPTEMBER 2009, Sydney woke to a storm of red dust. For a day, the world changed. The air was thick and red. Planes were diverted. Ferries were cancelled. Traffic slowed to a crawl. Emergency departments filled with breathless casualties. Even the birds seemed mute. And while even the secular press wondered aloud if this was the end of the world, by the next day, the sky had miraculously cleared and all apocalyptic fears had been forgotten. The only reminders were hauntingly beautiful photographs, and a sepia blanket that covered every surface of the city—including every nook and cranny inside my house!

It reminded me of the impact of feminism. When feminism hit in the early 60s, the world and how we saw it changed. Some feared it was the end of the world. It was certainly the end of the world as we knew it. And there were casualties. But despite the hazards, it was intoxicating and seductively beautiful. And although the storm has now passed and the sky seems clear, the dust of feminism has reached into every part of our identity and lives. Unlike the red dust, we may not be able to see or taste it, but it is part of the cultural air we breathe.

The ‘Women’s Lib’ movement, as it was called, swept through

Australia in my early teens. It changed beyond recognition the identity, dreams, expectations and occupations of my mother and many of her contemporaries. The tide turned against men. It was a storm of social and personal change, which was paraded and debated each night on TV, and lived out in families across the Western world. It was a bumpy ride.

You do not have to be a crack social commentator to know that since then, feminism has brought huge and radical cultural change. It is difficult to think of an element of society or our lives that has been immune from it. Everything has changed: the workforce, the family, our laws, medical practices, social etiquette, creative arts, even the games children play and the names people take. And that is just the beginning.

Feminism is now an accepted part of our society. It is unremarkable. It no longer needs to be argued as truth. It is the status quo. Those of us who might want to question some of its tenets or 'achievements' are questioning an ideology that is no longer open to question. And so our critique is dismissed as revealing more about us than about the merits of feminism.

But for those with the courage and eyes to see it, not everything feminism has brought is good, and this is nowhere more the case than in the head-on confrontation of feminism with the Christian God and with his purposes for men and women as *men* and *women*.

The dust of feminism has settled on the pages of our Bibles and obscured God's word. What the Bible once said clearly about men and women is no longer clear to us. The plain meaning of texts no longer seems plain. Some would tell us these texts mean something very different now from when they were written. Others would say that feminism has made some texts unsellable and unbelievable. In the face of these objections, and like the all-pervasive red dust, feminism has reached into every corner of Christian truth. Even God has had a feminist makeover.

But the problem is not really with God or his word.

The problem is with us. The difficulties we have with those texts that deal with the responsibilities of men and women lie in us—not in the clarity or goodness of God’s word. We can expect God’s word to speak clearly. And it does.

We can also expect it to mean what it says. Why would God’s word say one thing and yet mean the opposite? This is, in fact, what the various ‘egalitarian’ interpretations do. They claim to be uncovering the true meanings of these texts, and yet their conclusions fly in the face of the words themselves. There is a gap between what the text says and what these interpretations propose it means. So for us the warning ‘Mind the gap’ is apt!

As in all things, our views on this matter must be based first and foremost on the actual text of Scripture. If God has chosen to speak to us in his word about his design for men and women, and he has given us his Spirit so that we might understand his word, then his word is where we must start.

To return to the dust analogy: if we want to know the true colours and contours of God’s will for the roles and relationships of men and women, we must first see and study it *sans* dust!

But first, let me digress for a very brief history lesson to help us identify and understand the spread and impact of feminism.

A (really) brief history lesson

The history books tell us that feminism has had three ‘waves’, and is now having a fourth. The first wave came out of the intellectual movement of the 18th century called the Enlightenment, which also spawned the French and American revolutions and their respective declarations of ‘the rights of man’ (that is, ‘people’). The key ideals were human autonomy and freedom (especially from dogma and God); the supremacy and power of human reason; and government of the people by the people and for the people.

It is little surprise then that one of the first goals of the first feminists was women's suffrage and the right to participate in democracies. In Australia, non-indigenous women have been able to vote and allowed to stand for election since Federation in 1901. It is to our shame that it took until 1962 before all our indigenous countrymen and women were allowed to do the same.

The second wave of feminism is what I grew up with in the 60s and 70s, when the women's lib movement was headline news. Each night on TV we saw women on university campuses burning their bras, waving placards, filling the streets in huge demonstrations, and going head to head against suited men in acrimonious public debates. My mother was a mature-aged university student at the time, and she and her friends were at the forefront of women who left the kitchen for the challenge and satisfaction of university and a career.

At its most benign, the goal was equality with men—but that often meant independence and freedom from men, and freedom from a woman's biology (possible for the first time with the new oral contraceptive pill). At the extreme end of second-wave feminism, men were to blame for the world's ills, and it was not equality with men that was sought but a reversal of order so that women would rule where men once did.

Third-wave feminism began in the early 1990s. It has many expressions and even contradictions, as do the other 'isms' currently shaping our cultural landscape (post-modernism, relativism and pluralism). For example, some third-wavers think it is empowering for women to be sex workers and pose for pornography, while others see it as the commodification of women for the pleasure of men, destroying the dignity and rights of women (I think they're right!). Significantly, third-wave theory is more about the *ambiguity* of gender and sexuality than the *rights* or *identity* of either sex, and it consciously seeks to embrace marginalized groups like women

of colour, lesbians, bisexual women, trans-women, women from the two-thirds world, and so on. It is concerned with ‘privilege’ and ‘power’, and the compounding effect of belonging to several minority groups at once (like being female and black and immigrant and gay), in what’s called ‘intersectionality’.

Since about 2012, we have seen the rise of a fourth wave of feminism. It uses the power and reach of the internet to campaign on matters like safety for women from sexual harassment and violence (especially on university campuses and social media), and other emblematic issues such as domestic violence and female genital mutilation. The #MeToo and ‘Time’s Up’ movements are two high-profile examples of fourth-wave feminism.

The good, the bad, and the ugly

Let me say up-front that I do not think feminism is to blame for everything that is wrong with the world. In fact, I do not think feminism itself is *all* bad. The gender-based inequality that feminism in its most basic form seeks to correct is contrary to God’s purposes. So although we might not agree with the diagnosis or treatment that feminism prescribes, the symptoms or problems it identifies are often real. And feminism has brought some change for the good: women can now vote, own property, have bank accounts and an unrestricted education, and sit at board tables; rape in marriage is now a criminal offence; violence against women is now a community concern; fathers are now more involved with their children; and so on. It is a shame it was left to the feminists to force these changes, but they are good changes that sit well with God’s love for justice and for all those he has made.

However, we cannot make the mistake of thinking that *only* feminism could have brought these gains. The good of feminism is entirely dependent on its reform agenda being consistent with God’s reform agenda. Where it seeks to correct things that are contrary to

God's good purposes—and that are due to the sin of *both* men and women—then, without intending to do so, feminism can advance God's plans for justice, peace and his glory. It has been, and can be, a tool in God's hand for advancing his good purposes, and for human flourishing.

The flipside of this is that where the agenda of feminism is *different* from God's agenda (which is most of the time), it is working against God's purposes and can bring only misery—if not in the short term then most certainly in the long term.

The other thing to remember is that society and culture are mixing pots, and feminism is not the only agent of change. There are political, economic, ideological and technological factors that all feed into each other, and it is impossible to isolate the effect of any one agent of change. So, while the rise of the 'working mother' in Western societies is undoubtedly due to feminism, it has also happened in economies with enough jobs for women to fill, and which assume and now require that households will have two incomes; and it has happened because technological advances have made it easier for women to participate in the workforce from home, and given us appliances that do with the press of a button what was once a full day's hard labour!

It should be obvious that what I have sketched here is not a detailed history or analysis of feminism or even of its effect on the church.¹ Rather, it is a broad-brushstroke picture of feminism that is both selective in what it deals with, and general in the way it deals with it. It is a shorthand introduction to one of the background 'characters' of this book.

As another background 'character' in this book, I should say that nothing surprises me more than the fact that I am its author. I am a

1 For more detailed discussions of the history and effects of feminism and its relation to Christianity, see Kirsten Birkett, *The Essence of Feminism*, Matthias Media, Sydney, 2000; and Mary Kassian, *The Feminist Mistake*, Crossway, Wheaton, 2005.

child of my times. I was a young adult when I became a Christian, and my faith was nurtured in a tradition that valued free exercise of the gifts of the Spirit over any limitations given in the written word of God. I must have read the passages that are the focus of this book, but somehow for many years I did not notice them. My first real encounter with them was as a student at theological college in the late 80s.

Since then, the demands of life and ministry have made these Bible texts the subject of much study, which under God has produced more change in my heart and life than I ever thought possible. What is more, the more I study these texts, the more convinced I am that *the historical understanding is right*—and the more I read the new ‘egalitarian’ arguments against the historical understanding, the more convinced I am that the historical understanding is right. I am not saying this journey has always been smooth sailing, but it has all been in the same direction and, I believe, propelled by the wind of the Spirit.

Given the complex and all-pervasive nature of feminism, and the huge impact it has had on us all, it is little wonder that trying to understand and accept God’s purposes for men and women requires some hard work. It is like trying to read a serious book when the TV is blaring. There is just too much noise going on for us to hear clearly what God is saying—noise which is often cultural and *personal*.

To complicate things even further, sometimes this noise comes from Christian brothers and sisters who at other times have been beloved and reliable teachers and shepherds in their sermons and books. But now they tell us that these words of Scripture cannot be taken literally, or that they no longer apply today, or that the evangelistic turn-off of these texts is baggage the church cannot afford to carry and that being missional means moving with the times and fitting in with our culture.

Some of these arguments are compelling. Who among us has not been the target of jokes and jibes about the church's view on women? It would be nice to have a way out! And besides, if even the great ones cannot agree on whether and how these texts apply today, then perhaps the texts really are not clear, and the whole matter is one of wisdom and not godliness—a case of each person doing what is right in their own eyes, and giving up on ever finding *the* truth.

But when God says, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:9), he is not telling us that knowing his thoughts and ways is impossible. On the contrary, it is our privilege and task as his children to know his will and to do it.

This is why he has given us his word. Better still, he has ensured that in his written word we have all that is necessary for eternal life and faithful living (2 Pet 1:3). God's words are not just words on paper (or stone or scrolls or papyrus or whatever) but also *living* words inspired and spoken by him—and not to read on our own, but with the help of his Spirit to lead us into all truth (Heb 4:12; 2 Tim 3:16-17; John 16:13).

With such resources at our fingertips and in our hearts, our task is to sit under God's word and have it critique our culture, our lives, our relationships, our prejudices and our fears. Not vice versa. And when we do that, we find it speaks clearly and truthfully—even about the vexed issue of gender relationships, which our world has got so messed up.

This means that instead of doing what we are tempted to do—that is, assume we know what the Bible says and do our thinking with our Bibles closed—we need to go back to our Bibles, and take a closer look at these passages.

That is what this book is about. It is an opportunity to look closely at the passages that set out the nature, beauty and purpose of the relationship between men and women. And when I say

‘closely’, I mean text by text, verse by verse and sometimes even word by word.

The book itself falls into two parts. The first looks at those texts that deal with the roles and relationships of women and men when Christians gather together for what we call ‘church.’ The second section of the book focuses on their relationships within marriage, and in God’s original design for creation. Each chapter is written as a discrete unit dealing with a particular text, and so can be read on its own or as part of the whole.

Perhaps studying the Bible in such a close and focused way is a new thing for you. It may even sound like hard work. I guess in some ways it is! This is no Dan Brown page-turner. That is not to say it is not exciting, but that Dan Brown page-turners are only good for a weekend—while the Bible is good for the rest of our lives, and into eternity. Also, unlike Dan Brown’s books, God’s word rewards our closest attention and we will never exhaust its riches.

So it is time to roll up our sleeves, open our Bibles, and pray for God’s wisdom, as we turn first to consider 1 Timothy 2.

Your hands have made and fashioned me;
give me understanding that I may learn your
commandments. (PS 119:73)