

KRISTIN L. KELLEN



COUNSELING WOMEN

Biblical Wisdom for Life's Battles

“Kristin Kellen exemplifies the best of a biblically centered, clinically informed model in this volume. Those from a robust theological background will learn much to enhance their counseling skill, and those from a skilled clinical background will learn much to grow their theological depth. The end result? Read this volume, and no matter where you’re starting from, you’ll emerge better equipped to care for God’s people.”

—**Nate Brooks**, assistant professor of Christian counseling,
Reformed Theological Seminary—Charlotte

“Counseling takes place in many settings and between many different combinations of people. Dr. Kellen helps us think through counseling from one woman to another in a ministry context. There is great power in these caring relationships within a redemptive community. Dr. Kellen helps us ensure that this power is used for healing. I am grateful for and commend her work. I hope it will be read not only by women who want to be equipped to counsel, but also by pastors who want to be more effective shepherds for their entire congregation.”

—**Brad Hambrick**, pastor of counseling,
The Summit Church, Durham, NC

“Time and time again I have been asked by women’s ministry leaders if there is a resource to help them minister to women in crisis. I’m thankful I can now recommend this book. Not only does Kristin Kellen provide a biblical framework for counseling, but she has also given the reader practical helps for specific issues common to women. This is a must-have resource for the library of any leader who wants to be better equipped for meeting with women who are wrestling with difficult situations.”

—**Kelly D. King**, women’s ministry specialist,
Lifeway Christian Resources

“Kristin Kellen starts with a theology of womanhood as the basis of understanding counseling topics related to women. I appreciate Kristin’s desire to help women think biblically about their problems and circumstances. Displaying years of counseling experience, Kristin shows an awareness of sensitive issues for women that strengthens the practical suggestions at the end of each chapter.”

—**Lilly Park**, associate professor of biblical counseling,
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Providing valuable foundational principles, *Counseling Women* is accessible, helpful, and profoundly practical. Kristin gives us a researched overview of each counseling issue. Yet, she wisely reminds us to seek to know each person and [her] unique struggles. A particular strength is the theological perspectives Kristin offers for each issue, helping orient counselors to understand the problems biblically while assisting them in setting a trajectory for counseling.”

—**Darby A Strickland**, faculty and counselor,
Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation

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KRISTIN L. KELLEN

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To my mom, my first counselor and teacher

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Preface

As a professor of biblical counseling at a large Southern Baptist seminary, and one of very few female counseling professors among our sister seminaries, I am often asked to speak to the unique needs of women in counseling. The task is both exciting and gives some pause. I am excited because people recognize there are unique needs, but it gives me pause because I am a firm believer that women and men are more alike than they are different. We are both image bearers of God, sinners in need of grace, and called to follow Christ and his Word. And yet, we as women have unique roles and functions, ones that complement our brothers so together we can more beautifully image God.

The aim of this text, then, is threefold: first, it presents a counseling approach that considers women as the unique beings they are. The counseling issues addressed are nuanced specifically for women and the counselor is assumed to be a woman as well. And yet, the principles included are not exclusive; they are certainly useful for either men counseling women or for counseling men. The aim is to be widely applicable while still considering how women are unique in how God made them.

Second, the aim of this text is to provide a basic understanding of counseling issues that are common for women. No text can be exhaustive, so the

aim of this book is to help readers get a foundational understanding of both counseling proper and a handful of common issues. It provides a list of additional resources for the reader to explore for more information or further study on any topic of interest.

Finally, it is the aim of this text to provide a healthy balance between biblical counseling (as it has traditionally been done) and clinical practice. The reality is that many in clinical settings simply cannot have overt spiritual conversations as they might in ministry settings. The goal here is to provide both sides of the equation, a clinical understanding that may be necessary in those sorts of settings, but also clear biblical teaching from a biblical-counseling perspective to establish a solid framework for Christians who find themselves in secular clinical settings.

This book is arranged in two main parts. The first section, chapters 1 through 6, provides foundational teaching for counseling from a biblical perspective. Chapter 1 explores who we are as humans and, more specifically, who women are as we walk through Genesis 1–2. Chapter 2 focuses on the reality of sin, exploring Genesis 3. Chapter 3 discusses a woman's context, those voices that speak to her life and influence the decisions she makes. Chapter 4 establishes the necessity of God's Word speaking in the lives of our counselees and how the Bible provides a framework for counseling. Chapter 5 proposes a simple methodology of counseling, and chapter 6 concludes this section with an exploration of a woman's life stages. The second section of the book systematically walks through various topics that tend to present in a woman's life. This section cannot cover everything, but it provides a foundation for the reader to get started.

Writing this book has been a journey, and in many ways I stand on the shoulders of other women and men who have written about these same life struggles. As one who teaches courses on counseling women, I am very much aware of resources that are specific to this topic. Many other women have written solid texts that I have used in my own education and as I've written this book. I hope this book provides up-to-date guidance for counseling women and balances the biblical teaching well with formal counseling practice.

It is my hope that each reader walks away from this text more prepared to serve our sisters and encourage them in ways that honor the Lord. But it is also my hope that each reader worships the Lord for his provision through trials and that each reader is challenged to apply God's Word to their own life when they encounter these struggles. God's Word is rich with wisdom, we need only apply it rightly.

SECTION ONE



*A Framework for
Understanding Women*

1



Woman as God Made Her: A Theology of Womanhood

Before we can hope to counsel a woman, we must understand her well. A significant part of understanding women is knowing who God created her to be: her uniqueness as an image bearer of a perfect and holy God. We must know both universals (what is true about all women) and specifics (her unique situation). And we must have a proper point of reference as we seek to understand her as sinner, sufferer, and saint.

This chapter walks through Genesis 1 and 2, drawing out key components of who each woman was created to be. Much will be drawn from universal truths about both men and women. Men and women have a lot in common. But women are also unique: they have different roles and different tendencies. We will explore these areas of overlap and distinction in our discussion below, weaving through some connections to counseling practice.

GENESIS 1:26–31; 2:7, 20, 23–25

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image,¹ according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth.” So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth.” God also said, “Look, I have given you every seed-bearing plant on the surface of the entire earth and every tree whose fruit contains seed. This will be food for you, for all the wild-life of the earth, for every bird of the sky, and for every creature that crawls on the earth—everything having the breath of life in it—I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good indeed. Evening came and then morning: the sixth day. . . . Then the LORD God formed the man out of the dust from the ground and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living being. . . . The man gave names to all the livestock, to the birds of the sky, and to every wild animal; but for the man no helper was found corresponding to him. . . . [After the creation of Eve] And the man said: This one, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; this one will be called “woman,” for she was taken from man. This is why a man leaves his father and mother and bonds with his wife, and they become one flesh. Both the man and his wife were naked, yet felt no shame.

Woman as God Made Her***Women as Created Beings (Gen 1:26)***

After God created the earth and all the other creatures, on the sixth day he created man and woman. This is a point we must not miss: we are created

beings. We did not create ourselves; it was our Creator God who intentionally set out to make us. From this reality come two important truths.

First, the creation of man and woman was planned. It was intentional. God was not responding to some lack in his creation, rather he determined it would be good that there would be those like him (more to come below). We aren't some afterthought to God, but planned and purposed.

Second, as created beings we are dependent on God. He defines our purpose, roles, and functions and he retains authority as our Creator over each of these things. All of Scripture points to humans' need of God for everything: food, work, propagation of the species, deliverance from sin and death, and, ultimately, re-creation back into what God had originally established. Man, and all of creation, is fully dependent on God for continued life (1 Tim 6:13).

This reality was true in the garden even before the fall; it is not the result of sin. God's first five days of creation work demonstrate what humans needed to survive, all of which came from God. Even in the garden, God provided food, companionship, opportunities to exercise dominion, and the capacity to bear children and continue the growth of the community.

Psalms 139 is a helpful commentary that teaches an important lesson related to humans as created beings: we are intimately connected to and known by God. By the very act of being created by him, we are also *known* by him. He knit us together in our mother's womb (Ps 139:13) and he knew us as we were being formed in secret (v. 15). He knows everything about us precisely because he created us.

As counselors, we see it is imperative that we recognize counseling cannot be done independently of the Creator. We must acknowledge human persons as dependent beings, rather than independent and self-directive, lest we risk believing we alone are able to discern the need for change and capable within ourselves to move toward that change. In recognizing our Creator, we establish that we are fully reliant on him to determine our need for change and for the strength to carry it out. We must recognize that we are intimately known by and connected to our Maker.

Women as Having Dominion (Gen 1:26, 28)

In both Gen 1:26 and 28, God says that people are to “rule” over his creation. The first example comes soon after, when Adam has the task of naming the animals. But it is essential to note that this is a *delegated* dominion; human beings do not have absolute rule over God’s creation. Instead, we are stewards over what God has placed under us, with great responsibilities.

Further, men and women are to exercise care over God’s creation. As the writer of Genesis notes in 2:15, we are to “work it and watch over it.” All creation, from the tiniest ant to the most precious child, should matter to us. We are to protect and cultivate God’s creation to help it function as it was created to function, rather than squander it or misuse it. It should flourish like it did for Adam and Eve.

In having dominion, we ought to treat creation as God would; we are to act as his representatives on earth. When we exercise power over creation, we are to reflect God’s character. In Luke 12, we see a picture of how God cares for his creation: he feeds the birds of the air and clothes the grass, though they are temporal and soon to pass. He cares for even the smallest of his creation, the parts that we might dismiss without concern. As his representatives, we are to care for his creation as he does, working toward its flourishing. This comes with great reward but also great responsibility.

Women as Image Bearers (Gen 1:26–27)

Three times in these two verses, the Bible says God created mankind “in his image.” There are myriad interpretations of what “image of God” means; one basic definition indicates that man and woman were intentionally created to be like God and represent him in creation. Genesis 1–3 indicates several ways Adam and Eve bore God’s image:

- ✿ They were delegated to have dominion over God’s creation (1:26), beginning with Adam naming the animals (2:19).

- ✧ They were told to be fruitful and multiply (1:28; 4:1–2), just as God increased his family and community by creating a man and a woman.
- ✧ They had a spirit (2:7).
- ✧ They had choices to make (2:15–17; 3:6).
- ✧ They were created in relationship with God and with one another (2:18–23; 3:8).
- ✧ They had no shame because they were holy and sinless before the fall (2:25).

Only humans bear God's image. We are set apart from the rest of God's creation, intentionally made by God for a specific purpose. This means, first, that we are inescapably connected to God; any conversation about a person is insufficient if it fails to understand them in relation to their Maker. Therefore, the primary concern we should have about our counselee is the vitality of her relationship with God. Second, since each person bears the image of the Most High God, each person must be treated with dignity, honor, and respect. Regardless of race, age, gender, status, or capacity, we should highly value each person and speak to each person congruent with that value (Jas 3:9). Third, a violation against an image bearer is a violation against the Creator (Gen 9:6). As counselors, we will hear about tremendous violations against people; we will rightly grieve those offenses, in part because they are violations against the One who created the image bearers.

Women as Female (Gen 1:27)

This text in Genesis notes a few things that distinguish between male and female. First, God intended to create the distinction and did so out of his perfect wisdom. Gen 1:27 specifically says that God made them "male and female." Our observation of society affirms this reality. God established the differences in the genders. It was purposeful. As Creator, God exercised his authority over the organization of his creation to create a distinction between the image bearers he created.

The text notes that women were created to be both like men and, at the same time, different from them. Genesis 2:20 says that “no helper was found *corresponding to him*” (emphasis added). Unlike the animals, Adam was alone; there were no others like him. God then deemed (it was not Adam’s assertion) it was “not good for the man to be alone” (Gen 2:18). Just as God existed in relationship with himself as the Trinity, so should man exist with others like him. So, God created someone else to “correspond” to Adam, and though they were quite similar, the reality that God created women as distinct from men should not be overlooked. Men and women have many similar purposes, like loving God and imaging him to his creation. They also have distinct roles and functions; for example, women as helpers, which we explore later in this chapter. These distinctions should be celebrated.

In our current western society, several distortions of the male-female distinction have taken place. While men and women were created as equal before God (Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 12:13), their roles are distinct.² There is no need for competition between male and female; there should be cooperation between them. And we must uphold the God-given distinctions, even down to biological distinctions, because it was the authoritative, wise God who established them.

Women as Blessed (Gen 1:28)

Right before God gave man and woman their first command, Gen 1:28 simply says, “God blessed them.” What does that mean? The idea of “blessing” is repeated several times in Genesis alone (for instance, to Noah and to Abraham). We often associate blessing with the idea of prosperity; this is somewhat correct, but incomplete.

We find clues in the Genesis text to what being blessed by God means; immediately following the statement that he blessed them, God commands: “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it.” God’s blessing is that man and woman can live out their God-given purposes and flourish within God’s creation. First, he commands them to be fruitful; this isn’t simply biological reproduction, it is a command to mature, to bear fruit. They are to grow as

human beings in relation to God, one another, and his creation, producing fruit in each of those arenas. Second, he commands them to “multiply, fill the earth.” While a simple understanding of this command is that it refers to a biological process (i.e., have children), most scholars would contend there is a spiritual meaning as well. In his Great Commission (Matt 28:19–20), Jesus instructed his disciples to multiply spiritually, bringing others into fruitfulness with God. Last, God commands man and woman to subdue the earth, to have dominion over it.

By doing all these things, humans will be blessed with the fullness of what they need in the presence of God and in his creation. Women participate in this blessing, even after the fall. As we fulfill God’s purposes for our lives—to be fruitful, multiply, and subdue the earth—we flourish and are blessed.

Women as Multipliers (Gen 1:28)

There is often confusion or misunderstanding about the idea of women as multipliers. There is a biological reality that we must multiply to sustain humanity, but the concept of multiplication means much more than that. Women (alongside men), biologically, bear children and physically can multiply. A woman pours a great deal into the multiplication of humanity: it is quite a task to bear and raise children.

And yet, we see an important shift happen in Scripture from the Old to New Testaments that expounds on this idea of multiplication. In the Old Testament, the concept of “family” was primarily biological or cultural (i.e., belonging to Israel and therefore to God). But in the New Testament, terms like “brother,” “sister,” “father,” and “mother” come to primarily represent one’s spiritual family. After Christ, the focus becomes the family of God rather than the family of man. This is not to say the biological family is no longer important—there are numerous commands to care for one’s own family—but the picture of the early church, particularly in Acts and Paul’s teachings, gives us a different idea of multiplication. Pair this with the command in Matt 28:19 to “go and make disciples,” and our idea of multiplication is expanded.

While the responsibility to multiply certainly falls on both male and female, in practice this looks a little different for women. For instance, women and men have different roles as mother and father. But roles look different within the church as well. Women can certainly minister to and share the gospel with men, but there are clear instructions that women are at least to minister to other women (Titus 2:3–5). Their connection by gender, which includes their roles and common struggles, is significant.

Women as (Created) Very Good (Gen 1:31)

In Gen 1:31, we're told "God saw all that he had made [including woman], and it was very good indeed." God's creation, in that moment, was perfect and complete. Everything was as it should be; everything, including woman, was at peace with God and living in a way that aligned with his purposes. There was no sin.

This verse stands in slight contrast to the parallel verses before it (vv. 4, 12, 21, and 25), in which God declared what he had created "good." Here, it is described as "very good indeed." The creation of man and woman went above and beyond the rest of his creation, because man and woman bore his image. They were reflective of their Creator in a unique way.

Creation was good because the Creator was good. God created, perfectly, what he desired to create to reflect his own goodness. And at the end of those six days, upon creating man and woman, everything was flawless. Like God, it was without error. Woman, with the rest of what God had made, was beautiful, functioned flawlessly, had purpose, and had potential. It was as it ought to be: very good.

Women as Both Physical and Nonphysical Beings (Gen 2:7)

Genesis 2 tells more about Adam and Eve and how they were created: "Then the LORD God formed the man out of the dust from the ground and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living being"

(Gen 2:7). Here, God physically forms Adam's body from a physical substance (the earth) and breaths life (spirit) into his formed body. The Hebrew term used here for breath, *ruach*, is the same word used for spirit in other places in Genesis (like Gen 1:2). In other words, once God formed Adam's body, he "spirited" life into him. Adam had life that was both body (physical) and soul/spirit (nonphysical), and Eve was made to be like Adam.

There is abundant biblical teaching to demonstrate this duality,³ and the implications are significant. As women, and especially as counselors, we must acknowledge the dual nature of the women around us. Each woman has a physical body that impacts her reality: she is physically bound, perhaps with physical limitations, and her body can be used as an instrument of either righteousness or unrighteousness (Rom 6:12–13).

However, each woman we encounter also has a soul/spirit. This defines much of who she is, and Scripture tells us her soul/spirit drives what she does: her heart, her mind, her emotions, her thoughts, and her choices. These nonphysical aspects of who she is are vital for us as counselors to understand.

Further, we know the heart and body are intricately connected: each one affects the other. For instance, a physical ailment or developmental limitation has the potential to impact (and yet not cause) choices that are made. At the same time, internal struggles like anxiety may have physical manifestations like pain or an increased heart rate. Furthermore, our behaviors (physical) come out of what is in our hearts (nonphysical).⁴

The women we care for are holistic beings, and we must treat them as such. We must not neglect either their body or soul. In considering many of the struggles discussed later in this text, we'll see that care for women must be holistic in nature, addressing sin and the effects of sin on the whole person and not just one part of her.

Women as Helpers (Gen 2:18–23)

Genesis 2 gives us a picture of God's creation of woman after man, in particular his reasons for doing so. Gen 2:20 tells us, "The man gave names to all the

livestock, to the birds of the sky, and to every wild animal; but for the man no helper was found corresponding to him.” Subsequently, God causes Adam to fall asleep, takes one of his ribs, and forms Eve to be that helper. She was created, in large part, to fill a role alongside her husband.

Eve was created to be like Adam in many ways (image bearer, relational, having dominion, etc.) but was created differently and fulfilled a different role. Adam was commanded to work the ground and watch over it (Gen 2:15). But in v. 18, it is God who says, “I will make a helper corresponding to him.” This new creation, Eve, corresponded to Adam, in that she was like him, but God calls out that she is the helper. She is to come alongside him and assist him in fulfilling the command God gave him. This is a slight nuance, perhaps, but significant. Being a helper is an important part of who women were created to be, but not all of it. Further, becoming a helper teaches us something very important: we are to be both hearers and doers. We do not simply hear God’s Word and do nothing; we were created to respond in obedience, to do what he has instructed us to do.

Women in the Context of Relationships (Gen 2:23–24)

As image bearers of God, we were also created to be in relationship. We were created in vertical relationship with God, but we also exist in horizontal relationship with others. A woman’s relationships, both in marriage and with others, are meant to mirror the relationship that has always existed between the Father, Son, and Spirit. If she is a believing woman, her marriage relationship is also meant to mirror Christ and the church (Eph 5:30–32) and her family to be a picture of her own adoption into the family of God (Eph 1:3–6).

In his creation of man and woman, God saw that just as he existed in horizontal relationship with himself, so should people. Therefore, God created Eve to form community among his image bearers.

How does this relational aspect direct our counseling? First, we were created to express love within both our vertical and horizontal relationships. Primarily, we are to love God, but we are also to love our neighbor (Matt 22:35–40)—the two greatest commandments. Not only are we created to exist in relationship, as image bearers we should reflect our Maker within our relationships. Second, we should understand the importance of the relationships our counselees have with others. No person exists as an island; our counselees' relationships have real impact on them. We must seek to understand the relational context of the counselee, both with God and others (marriage, family, community, etc.). Third, we should pay attention to our relationship with our counselees inside the counseling room. How we relate to them and they relate to us are vital dynamics in the counseling process.

Women without Sin or Shame (Gen 2:25)

Genesis 2:25 tells us something of utmost importance about God's creation of men and women: "Both the man and his wife were naked, yet felt no shame." Adam and Eve were created perfect, complete and at peace with the rest of God's creation. Though the capacity for sin was present, and would soon be realized, sin had not yet entered the world. There was no embarrassment, no shame, and no fear. All was as it should be.

This perfection was short-lived. Adam and Eve did not remain sinless for long. When their disobedience led to the realization that they were naked, they ran from God and covered themselves (Gen 3:7–8). Their relationship with God was forever changed, to their detriment. (Chapter 2 will explore sin in more depth.)

And yet, we also know that one day restoration is coming. He will make all things new (Rev 21:5). We long for the day when that restoration comes. For today, we and our counselees live under the reality of sin and shame. We are faced with the real consequences of sin as we await redemption, hence our

need for counsel from the Word of God, just as Adam and Eve needed and received counsel from God.

Women as Individuals

Genesis 1 and 2 give us a picture of God's creation of only one man and one woman. Another key aspect of womanhood must be considered: she is an individual. No two women are alike, just as Adam and Eve were not alike. Though all women share the characteristics listed above, beyond that there is great diversity. Every woman has her own family and relationships, her own cultural realities, and her own experiences in life. She is unique.

As counselors of women, we must recognize the uniqueness of each counselee. We must love, listen to, learn about, and labor alongside *her* (more to come in chapter 5), rather than leading based on her struggle alone. Just as Jesus sought to know and respond to each person he encountered, we must acknowledge the unique needs of each woman we see. She is unique and we must treat her as such.

As counselors, we counsel *people*: women uniquely made in the image of God, created to have dominion over God's creation, made of body and soul, and having multiple roles (helper, multiplier, and in the context of relationships). Each of these matters significantly for counseling and we must not consider a woman as *just* her problems or struggles. We must first consider her as who she was created to be. Only once we understand who she is, can we rightly understand her struggle and how God's Word speaks to those struggles.