



**Instruction, encouragement,
and guidance regarding God's
unchanging truths as presented in**

*“Scriptural Principles of
Man and Woman Roles”*

Preface

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In [Ephesians 5](#), the Holy Spirit wraps instruction of his male and female design in beautiful gospel encouragement. In Paul's letter to the Colossians, the Holy Spirit makes some very direct statements and applications for husbands and wives according to his male and female design ([COLOSSIANS 3:18,19](#)), but he does so only after this compassionate encouragement:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. ([COLOSSIANS 3:12-17](#))

Emulating the Lord's love, we strive for the same expression of compassion, gentleness, unity, and peace when we speak of and live out God's male and female design. In this and in all matters, we seek to live according to the Spirit's instruction: "Let your gentleness be evident to all" ([PHILIPPIANS 4:5](#)).

In 1993, after years of Scriptural study, our synod in convention adopted the doctrinal statement *Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles*. Like all faithful doctrinal statements, it is an expression in time of God's timeless truths and remains our doctrinal confession of God's unchanging truth. To meet current needs in confessing and applying that unchanging truth, we offer this letter of pastoral instruction, encouragement, and guidance regarding God's gracious will in his design of and his purpose for men and women. Throughout the letter you'll find **Embrace Sections** offering encouragement toward a deeper embracing of a specific aspect of God's male and female design.

Summary of God's male and female design principle

God's male and female design is universal

God has designed males and females as complementary partners in service to him, to each other, and to his creation. In addition to obvious biological male and female differences, God gives further instruction regarding his design, always tying his instruction back to his *design of and purpose for* male and female. Because it is a principle connected to and flowing from God's natural law design for all human beings of all times, God's male and female design is recognized as universal or always operative, i.e., men are always men and women are always women.

God's universal design principle is vocationally applied

Vocation means *calling* and is a term that Christians have long used to emphasize that a person's different interpersonal relationships are opportunities into which God has placed or called that individual to serve God by serving others ([EPHESIANS 2:10](#), [ACTS 17:26](#), [COLOSSIANS 3:23](#)). In our various vocations we are privileged to serve God by serving others. Because men are always men and women are always women, God's male and female design is always operative and always a consideration in our vocations.

While universally operative, God's design principle operates in real relationships. The manner in which it is applied depends on the specific vocational relationship of the people involved. For example, the application of God's design principle in a husband-wife relationship will differ from its application in a father-daughter relationship or an employer-employee relationship; the difference centers in the vocations involved. *God's male and female design principle is a universal design principle that is vocationally applied.*

Scripture establishes God's male-female design principle

God created and redeemed two biological sexes

God has designed and created humans as body-and-soul creatures with two distinct biological sexes: male and female ([GENESIS 1:27](#), [MATTHEW 19:4](#)). In his beautiful and balanced design, God created both Adam and Eve in his image ([GENESIS 1:27](#)). The gift of God's image gave Adam and Eve equal status in their primary vocation as God's dearly loved children ([GALATIANS 3:26-29](#)). This gift also enabled Adam and Eve to share the responsibility of serving their Creator by caring for his world ([GENESIS 1:27,28](#)). When Adam and Eve sinned, the perfection and righteousness of God's image was lost ([GENESIS 3,5](#)). Jesus redeemed male and female, both body and soul ([1 PETER 1:18,19](#)). By the Spirit's power, God's children are being renewed in God's image ([COLOSSIANS 3:10](#)).

God created human beings in his image, the *imago Dei*

Broadly defined, "created in the image of God" means that God created Adam and Eve as a reflection of him and to be representatives of him ([GENESIS 1:26-28](#)). This image includes a personal existence that is conscious of self, God, and eternity and possesses personal moral accountability ([ROMANS 1:18-21,32](#); [ROMANS 2:14,15](#); [ECCLESIASTES 3:11](#)). For the work of representative dominion, God has crowned human beings created in his image with superlative gifts of reason, will, emotion, and creativity ([GENESIS 1:26-28](#); [GENESIS 2:15-25](#); [GENESIS 9:6](#); [JAMES 3:9](#)).

Narrowly defined, "created in the image of God" means that God created Adam and Eve as a perfect reflection of his own righteousness, in perfect communion with God, and with perfect conformity to his will ([EPHESIANS 4:24](#), [COLOSSIANS 3:10](#)). That image of God's righteousness and perfection was completely destroyed and entirely lost in the fall ([GENESIS 3](#)), leaving human beings naturally dead in sin ([EPHESIANS 2:1-3](#)) and enemies of God ([ROMANS 8:7](#)).

Every fallen human being has lost entirely the image of God in the narrow sense ([ROMANS 3:9-20](#), [EPHESIANS 2:1-3](#)). Every human being still retains the image of God in the broader sense.¹

¹ Confessional Lutherans have historically emphasized the narrow definition of *image of God* as a proper emphasis on fallen mankind's total moral depravity. We need to be aware that many Christians still use the term *image of God* properly in the broader sense. Both are true and useful. After the fall, humans remain humans, created to be God's representatives on earth. After the fall, naturally conceived humans are spiritually dead and enemies of God, having lost any natural reflection of God's righteousness and perfection.

God determined a person's biological sex

Our all-wise and loving Creator gives to each person the gift of biological maleness or biological femaleness ([JEREMIAH 1:4,5](#); [PSALM 139:13-18](#)).² An individual's biological sex is a good gift for God's glory, for the good of that person and for the good of others ([PSALM 145:9](#), [JAMES 1:17](#)).

EMBRACE GOD'S GIFT

Your biological sex is not the result of a random coin flip. It is a gift chosen for you by your heavenly Father. As with all God's gifts, it comes with blessings, responsibilities, and guidance from the Giver.³ As it does with all God's gifts, our fallen nature will misuse it, resulting in struggles against sin and other challenges.

Whatever struggles you or any human being may encounter in issues of sexuality, the God who loves you did not make a mistake. In eternity he knew how best to bless you in one of the most fundamental vocations of your life: your maleness or femaleness. In your first vocation as God's child, he wants you to love and serve him by loving and serving others and his creation. In another fundamental God-given vocation, he wants that service to be a blessing as his daughter or son.

Embrace this personal gift with its intentional design. It comes from your heavenly Father, who by the gift of his Son has proven he only wants the best for you.

God's design gives men and women different responsibilities

God designed males and females with both similarities⁴ and differences, which lead to some shared responsibilities in caring for his world but also some different responsibilities. Men and women carry out these different responsibilities as they partner in their vocations for the benefit of all people everywhere. The Holy Spirit emphasizes this as a creation design principle by foundationally connecting it to his *act of* and *purpose for* creating male and female in [Genesis 1 and 2](#) ([SEE ALSO 1 TIMOTHY 2:13; 1 CORINTHIANS 11:8-12; 1 CORINTHIANS 14:34,35](#)).

² There are rare congenital chromosomal and endocrinological abnormalities that result in intersex conditions in which there are difficulties in determining binary sex. See "Statement on Human Sexuality, Personhood, Identity, and the Historic Christian Faith - WELS Conference of Presidents," wels.net/human-sexuality-statement

³ "Statement on Human Sexuality, Personhood, Identity, and the Historic Christian Faith - WELS Conference of Presidents," wels.net/human-sexuality-statement

⁴ image of God *broadly* defined

EMBRACE GOD'S INTENTIONAL PURPOSE FOR MALE AND FEMALE

When discussing differences and unique functions for males and females, we are not primarily dealing with societally developed norms or arbitrarily assigned roles. Neither are we dealing with exclusively Christian guidelines. God's design *of* and his purpose *for* human beings are part of his creative design for his entire world.

God's male and female design falls under the theological study of anthropology. It is a reflection of natural law⁵ and the truth that "God has made me and all that exists; that he gave me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my mind and all my abilities."⁶

Because of sin, only in Christ can people realize the full beauty and purposes of God's male and female design. Nevertheless, it is part of natural law, which throughout history fallen mankind has recognized, respected, and appreciated, most notably for marriage, procreation, and the nurture of children. Even in a depraved world, the family is widely celebrated and considered to be the foundation of society.

Most cultures also have observed that this natural design has applications for society beyond the home that produce benefits for the community and nation. Although these applications differ across cultures, times, and places, they can be proper ways to honor God's male and female design as noted in [1 Corinthians 11](#). In society, sometimes those applications have been appreciated as beneficial, sometimes not.⁷ Without instruction from God's Word and motivation from the gospel, society has often wrongly made harsh or rigid applications. On the other extreme, our present culture widely assumes there is no cultural application because it wrongly assumes there is no divine design and no differences between men and women beyond sexual biology.

God's design: Better together

God's male and female design is both interdependent and complementary. His design is interdependent since God has created male and female to need each other ([GENESIS 2:18; 1 CORINTHIANS 11:11](#)).

His design is complementary since God has created males and females differently to complete, not duplicate, each other ([GENESIS 2:4-7, 18-22](#)).

⁵ Two aspects of natural law should be noted here. Natural law may refer to the laws of the natural universe ordained by God at creation: laws of physics, the law of gravity, natural processes governing reproduction, etc. Natural law may also refer to the unchanging moral principles hardwired by God into human beings at creation, guiding humans to function according to his moral will. God has written this natural law into human nature ([Romans 2:14,15](#)). It includes objectively identifiable universal truths still recognizable by fallen humans and only suppressed by intentional, sinful efforts to deny them ([Romans 1:18-20](#)). In [Romans 1:18-32](#), God affirms that his male-female design is part of natural law by connecting a denial of natural law to denial of him as Creator.

⁶ Luther's explanation of the First Article of the Apostles Creed.

⁷ This point is not made because we look to societal customs to affirm God's Word. Rather, we simply note that God's male and female design is part of natural law design and therefore, whether conscious of it or not, different cultures have recognized God's natural law design beyond the home in many ways. Two examples among many: Since women complement men by helping men better understand the world around them, our culture talks about the benefit of a *woman's perspective*. In a dangerous situation, God's male headship design for sacrificial service has been seen in the attitude "*Save the women and children first.*"

EMBRACE GOD'S INTERDEPENDENT AND COMPLEMENTARY DESIGN

By God's design, men and women are better together. We are better when we partner in service to Christ and each other. "It is not good for the man to be alone" ([GENESIS 2:18](#)). Part of what makes us better together is our God-designed differences with their countless contributions to God's world.

God's design: Different and equal

While his design creates males and females distinct from each other, God declares that this created difference is not a difference in value or status. To him all people, male and female, are precious. Jesus died for all ([ROMANS 3:23,24](#); [2 CORINTHIANS 5:14,15](#)).

EMBRACE YOUR EQUAL STATUS IN CHRIST

For believers, the Spirit affirms our equal status before God by proclaiming us all one in Christ. "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" ([GALATIANS 3:26-29](#)).

God's female design is *different from, not inferior to*, his male design. God's male design is *different from, not superior to*, his female design. He has designed both biological sexes as interdependent and complementary. Both are necessary to each other and to his creation. The same Creator who creates male and female to be distinct in design is the Creator who declares both to be equal in status and worth before him and before each other. He has designed male and female for *purposeful and equal* partnership. Men and women are partners, not rivals. Considering either male or female to be inferior or superior is contrary to God's design and his Word and therefore sinful.

God's head and helper design is for an entrusted partnership

God has designed males for headship ([1 CORINTHIANS 11:3](#)) and entrusts the headship role according to the vocations he assigns. God has designed females as helpers ([GENESIS 2:18](#)) and entrusts the helper role according to the vocations he assigns.

EMBRACE GOD'S DESIGN THAT ENTRUSTS THE ROLE OF HEAD

A body and a head need each other and complete each other. It comes as no surprise, then, that this is our Creator's imagery for the interdependent and complementary relationships he entrusts to men and women according to their vocations.

God has designed males for headship that represents God by meeting the needs of others through sacrificial service, leadership, responsibility, authority, and whatever else is needed to benefit them. With Christ-like love and sacrifice as its hallmarks, headship as God designs it is focused on serving others, not self ([EPHESIANS 5:22-30](#)).

God has designed males for headship. But God entrusts a headship relationship according to vocation. A man, simply because he is a man, is not in a headship relationship with any or every woman he encounters. *Male headship is part of God's male and female design that is vocationally entrusted and therefore vocationally applied.*⁸

EMBRACE GOD'S DESIGN THAT ENTRUSTS THE ROLE OF HELPER

God has nobly designed females as essential helpers, who complete men and humanity by supplying what males cannot. God's people embrace and cherish his female helper design. *Like headship, the helper role is entrusted and applied according to vocation.*

God has designed females as helpers. But God entrusts a helper relationship according to vocation. *The female helper role is part of God's male and female design that is vocationally entrusted and therefore vocationally applied.*

We see the nobility and importance of the role of helper, as God calls himself our helper ([PSALM 118:7](#)) and as Christ rejoices in his helper bride, the church ([EPHESIANS 5:25-27](#)). The church is passive in receiving from her head his grace, forgiveness, and salvation. Yet having received those gifts freely from Christ, his radiant bride is no longer passive but is an active helper in service to her Savior and all people ([EPHESIANS 4:15,16](#)).

So it is with a woman in a head and helper relationship. As a helper, she is an active, invested partner, complementing her head with all her gifts and efforts ([PROVERBS 31:10-31](#)).

⁸ The Spirit tells us that even within the relationship of the Father and the Son and within the mystery of the two natures of Christ, Jesus had headship entrusted to him according to his human nature. "No one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was. In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father' " ([Hebrews 5:4,5](#)). See also [Matthew 28:18](#); [John 5:22](#); [John 6:38,39](#); [John 10:31](#); [John 17:9](#); [Acts 3:20](#); [Acts 10:42](#); [Acts 17:31](#); [Ephesians 1:22,23](#); [Hebrews 1:2](#); [Hebrews 3:1,2](#); [Hebrews 8:3,6](#). All these passages speak of the Father entrusting, giving, appointing headship to Jesus as either the world's Savior or the church's head. When discussing how God's male and female design applies in the world beyond home and church, we often miss the primary example of such male headship: Jesus. He is the new head of our human race, the king of creation, the world's Savior.

God's design for marriage

God's male head and female helper relationship is seen most intimately in marriage's companionship, partnership, procreation, and nurture of children ([GENESIS 2:23-25](#), [EPHESIANS 5:22-33](#)). The vocations of husband, wife, father, and mother are foundational in God's purpose to bless and care for his creation ([GENESIS 1:28](#)).

EMBRACE GOD'S GIFT OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

With all the pressures of our 21st-century culture, there is the temptation to move too quickly past God's most obvious and beautiful male and female partnerships: husband and wife and father and mother. But it is impossible to overestimate God's intended impact on the entire world through his head and helper design for marriage and parenthood. They are essential to humanity.

God elevates the love, companionship, and fellowship of marriage by comparing it to Christ and his church. In fatherhood, God reflects his love and protection as our heavenly Father. In motherhood, God reflects his love and gives life, nurture, and devoted support of a child and a beautiful picture of his unending, tender compassion for us ([ISAIAH 49:15](#)).

God's design beyond the home

God's interdependent and complementary design of and purpose for men and women is inextricably rooted in anthropology and natural law and therefore, always present. Through his gift of maleness and femaleness God brings blessings to all people and his creation. *It is a universal design principle that is vocationally applied.*⁹

How does this universal design principle apply beyond the home? We sometimes jump to that question as if application in the home is easy and looks the same in every home. But applications in the home are not easy and may vary from one home to another, from one culture to another, and from one generation to the next. It is no surprise then that the same is true as we apply God's universal design principle to other vocations outside the home.

The vocations of friend, neighbor, congregation member, coworker, and citizen are different from each other and all very different from the vocations of husband and wife in marriage. Still, within these other vocations God's male and female design brings blessings as men and women partner in service to God and all.

⁹ Martin Luther's Table of Duties, often appended to his Small Catechism, reminds us how often Scripture speaks to our specific responsibilities to our neighbor according to our relationship with them.

EMBRACE GOD'S DESIGN BEYOND MARRIAGE AND CHILDREN

In everyday life, people observe general, complementary differences between male and female behaviors. These observations attest to God's male and female design. The whole human race recognizes many benefits from God's male and female design.

The blessings of God's male and female design are essential to humanity and extend beyond the vocations of marriage and parenthood. Our lives attest daily to the wisdom of God's declaration, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" ([GENESIS 2:18](#)). When we embrace God's design of this partnership, life becomes a joyful discovery of all the different ways this truth is experienced.

Children of God experience the blessings of God's male and female design in their various relationships. Husbands and wives discover these blessings in each unique marriage. Parents and children, brothers and sisters discover the blessings of God's design in each unique home. God's blessings reveal themselves at school, at play, in friendships, and at work. Once we have embraced the beautiful truth of God's design, the discoveries are endless.

Children naturally discover God's distinct male and female design at a young age. They learn that mom and dad are different, sisters and brothers are different, girl classmates are different from boy classmates. Puberty brings its own observations, with the need to embrace mightily God's Sixth Commandment will regarding these differences. Collaboration in the workplace brings more opportunity to appreciate the differences between men and women. Marriage brings the most intimate opportunity for understanding, appreciating, and growing in embracing the physical, psychological, communicational, and emotional differences between a man and a woman. Raising sons and daughters brings still more. Throughout life, each of us explores and embraces the blessings of God's design in our many relationships.

Some blessings of God's head and helper design are less obvious, making it impossible to dissect or debate every possible difference or application. Simply take God at his word. Embrace his design. Over a lifetime, discover all the different joys of God's male and female design. Discover the many opportunities for men to serve sacrificially as male heads. Marvel at how society and every aspect of life would be incomplete without God's essential female helpers.

EMBRACE OPPORTUNITIES BEYOND THE FAMILY

The unmarried apostle Paul served as a missionary, partnering with both men and women in his labors to spread the gospel. For decades after her husband's death, the prophetess Anna served in the temple courts, finally announcing the arrival of the Savior to all who were waiting for Israel's redemption. The human race's greatest work was accomplished by an unmarried man: Jesus, the God-man, lived, died, and rose for all. Embracing God's male and female design for our lives, it is proper for everyone to ask: How might I as a man or woman carry out my God-given vocations and be a blessing beyond the home? In my congregation? In my community?

We prayerfully consider all God's principles

God's gift of our biological male or female sex is always part of who we are and how we function. But as basic as God's male and female design principle is, it is not his only principle. Living for God and others involves applying all of God's principles. Sometimes our maleness or femaleness will be the key principle to consider. Sometimes it won't. As we embrace God's male and female design principle for our lives, we neither ignore it nor act like it is the only principle to consider.

EMBRACE YOUR VOCATIONS

Putting God's male and female design principle into practice in your unique vocations as a neighbor, friend, citizen, employee, or employer is something God has entrusted to you. In your vocations, God strengthens you with his gospel and guides you by his precepts to live in a way that honors God and reflects his will. Let your Christian light shine in all your callings, as you serve and sacrifice for others. Spend time daily in God's Word. Turn to him in prayer. Wrestle prayerfully with how to apply this or any of God's principles to your vocations in life. Seek the counsel of a trusted, mature Christian. Seek guidance from your pastor.

Christ is our perfection

Even as new creatures in Christ, we never make perfect applications. So we embrace Christ as our perfection. Imperfect in our own applications and needing Jesus every moment, we look to encourage, help, and show grace to others who are also wrestling with how to be faithful with everything entrusted to them ([1 THESSALONIANS 5:11](#), [GALATIANS 5:13](#)).

EMBRACE JESUS

As sinner-saints, we recognize that there's a difference between faithful and perfect. We strive to make faithful applications of all God's principles, including God's male and female design. But none of us makes perfect applications. So embrace Jesus and his principles. Embrace Jesus as your perfection before God. Freed by Christ from fear, prayerfully wrestle with how to faithfully serve him and then serve. Compelled by Christ's love, live boldly for him who lived, died, and rose for you ([2 CORINTHIANS 5:14,15](#)).

EMBRACE AND SERVE ONE ANOTHER

We serve Jesus and others, not self. As with all God's principles, in Christian love we remember that our applications of God's male and female design principle give testimony of Christ to others. When making decisions, we are deeply concerned about our neighbor.¹⁰

When we see how others seek to apply God's male and female design faithfully, Christian love compels us to remember that God has entrusted each person with his or her own unique, multifaceted vocational responsibilities. Love empathizes with the struggle of others to manage all life's complex relationships. Love knows there are no perfect applications and no perfect lives. Love takes to heart Jesus' words, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" ([MATTHEW 9:13, 12:7](#)). Love drives us to take our neighbors' words and actions in the kindest possible way.

God's design distorted

God's male and female design is beautiful, but because of sin, human beings distort that beauty, making it difficult to embrace God's design.

EMBRACE OUR NEED FOR FORGIVENESS

Since the fall into sin, men are by nature self-centered and self-serving. Men are not always ready and eager to serve women and children. When entrusted with headship, men often betray that trust by neglecting or abusing those whom they should serve ([GENESIS 3:1-7, 12; JUDGES 4:8,9](#)). Men distort God's gift and do harm to those entrusted to their care.

As fallen creatures, women are no less self-centered and self-serving. Women do not always appreciate and embrace God's noble role of helper and often seek to usurp roles given to men ([GENESIS 3:1-7](#)). Women rebel against God's gift and do harm to God's design. Women seek to step out of the helper role and exercise authority in ways that violate God's will.

¹⁰ "Pastoral Letter on Christian Freedom - WELS Conference of Presidents," wels.net/christian-freedom-letter

EMBRACE GOD'S FORGIVENESS

Because we have sinned against God, against ourselves, and against each other regarding God's male and female design, we flee for refuge to God's infinite mercy, and we find forgiveness in the gospel in Word and sacrament. Even with the peace of Jesus' complete forgiveness, we still feel the pain of our sins and the sins of others against us. The world deceitfully tells us to heal our pain by forgetting God's design and doing whatever feels right.

The real solution is to return to Jesus in contrition and repentance. In the comfort of his words of absolution, in the daily celebration of our Baptism, and in the feast of his Supper, we find peace. We run to him for forgiveness and for his careful, gentle instruction. Again and again, with his love and patient instruction, Jesus wins over our hearts and minds to his good principles for our lives. His loving care moves us to the same compassionate, patient care for each other when applying all his principles for our lives, including his male and female design.

The beauty of God's design is revealed in Christ

Only through the lens of Christ's redeeming love and in the Spirit's new life do we see fully the beauty of his male and female design for humanity ([EPHESIANS 5](#)). Only in Christ and his Spirit's work do we receive forgiveness, strength, and freedom to love God and joyfully serve our neighbor.

EMBRACE THE BEAUTY

Brothers, it is a beautiful and noble thing that God has designed you to be a walking, talking picture of Christ. Remember that whenever headship is entrusted you are to be a Christ-like, self-sacrificing servant for the good of others ([MATTHEW 20:28](#)), especially for your dear sisters in Christ and for the next generation ([EPHESIANS 5:25](#)). In Scripture, Christ repeatedly expresses his gospel love, reminding us how precious his church is to him ([EPHESIANS 1:22,23; 3:17-19; 5:29](#)). As Christ-like heads, follow his example. In your attitude, words, and actions, show your sisters in Christ how much they are valued by Jesus—and how much they are valued and needed by you. Your sisters in Christ, as the Spirit enables them, recognize the special gift Christ has made you and cherish you and all you do for Jesus and others.

Sisters, it is equally beautiful and noble that God has designed you to be a walking, talking picture of Christ's beloved church. Like the women who traveled with Jesus and selflessly helped him, you do the same for him as you help others ([MARK 15:41](#)). You influence with godly counsel, as Abigail counseled David ([1 SAMUEL 25](#)). Like the prophetess Anna, you serve with God's Word beyond marriage and home ([LUKE 2:36-38](#)). Like Priscilla, you partner with the Aquila in your life ([ACTS 18:26, ROMANS 16:3](#)). As God caused Lydia to open her heart, her home, and the first door to European mission work, God opens doors through your life

and witness to Jesus ([ACTS 16:11-15](#)). You are a model of the church's loving trust in Christ and selfless service to him. Your brothers in Christ, as the Spirit enables them, recognize the special gift Christ has made you and cherish you and all you do for Jesus and others.

Biblical definitions of words and concepts

As sin distorts God's design and past wounds still bring pain, certain aspects of God's male and female design deserve careful, gentle instruction. *Head, helper, authority, and submission* are biblical concepts that deserve such care. Their true biblical meanings can be distorted by cultural usage or negative personal experience. Care is needed when expressing these biblical concepts so God's intended beauty shines through, instead of something the Spirit never intended. Through the lens of Christ's redeeming love, we make every effort to let his love and our gentleness be evident to all ([PHILIPPIANS 4:5](#)).

HEAD AND HELPER

Summary terminology can be helpful in expressing biblical truths. When expressing God's male and female design, we have gravitated toward the biblical summary terms of *head* and *helper*, and properly understood they serve well. But this shorthand is only helpful when there is fuller biblical understanding.

Helper is how God first described woman as a necessary, corresponding complement to man ([GENESIS 2:18,20](#)). The emphasis is on how much men and women need each other. *Head* is the Spirit's often-used New Testament term that points men to Jesus as their ultimate example of male sacrificial service. But the corresponding biblical term for *head* is *body*, not *helper*. Like the term *helper*, the head and body picture describes a necessary partnership. *Head* always contains an authority aspect, but the emphasis is always on the necessary partnership between head and body, with headship's authority being used for the good of the body.

When we summarize by saying *head* and *helper*, is there potential for misunderstanding? Does our culture's use of *head* contain a greater emphasis on authority than the biblical head and body picture? Taken out of its [Genesis 2](#) context, can *helper* be misunderstood as secondary or inferior? With potentially wrong shadings of each term individually, could such misunderstanding be heightened when *head* and *helper* are used side by side? Yes, without proper understanding and frequent return to the original biblical context, we can quickly get disconnected from the intended essential partnership meanings of *head* and *helper*. It serves well to return frequently to the original biblical context of the terms to clarify all that is and isn't intended in words like *head* and *helper*.

AUTHORITY

Despite what we may have seen or experienced, godly authority is not an individual's right to do whatever he wants for whatever reason he wants. It is not something God intends to be used for self-interest or self-gain. It is certainly not the right to abuse and hurt others.

Authority is the entrusted responsibility to make a binding decision for the good of others. As God has all authority, human authority is something God entrusts to individuals or groups. Since human authority is subordinate to God's authority, it ought not compel anyone to disobey God ([ACTS 5:29](#)). An individual entrusted with authority over other people represents God by making decisions *for the good* of those people (see Luther's Small Catechism, Fourth Commandment¹¹).

We might use *headship* and *authority* as practically interchangeable terms, but *headship* and *authority* are not synonymous. Authority is an essential component of biblical headship, but headship is much more than mere authority. Godly headship is the exercise of love, leadership, responsibility, accountability, and authority—all carried out in the spirit of service and sacrifice for the body of Christ. The exercise of godly headship can often lead to a God-pleasing outcome without any exercise of binding authority.

The best instruction on authority comes from Jesus, the perfect head:

The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father. ([JOHN 10:17-19](#))

Jesus specifically teaches us to pattern our lives after his use of authority and not the world's:

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." ([MARK 10:42-45](#))

SUBMISSION

The basic definition of *submit* is the same in the Greek and English: *to place oneself under*. Negative connotations or bad experiences can immediately cloud the meaning, but ***godly submission is recognizing and placing yourself under the authority that God has entrusted to someone on your behalf for your good and for the good of others.*** Submission does not confer an inferior status. God's Son, born under the law,

¹¹ The Fourth Commandment: Honor your father and mother, that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God that we do not dishonor or anger our parents and others in authority, but honor, serve, and obey them, and give them love and respect.

willingly submitted to his earthly parents ([LUKE 2:51](#)). As our perfect Savior, Jesus ennobled submission with his entire life of service and sacrifice. He who is head of all things chose to be submissive to earthly authority.

Just as every male is not the head of every woman, so every female is not in a helper relationship with every man. Therefore, every woman is not in submission to every man. A head and helper partnership is entrusted through a vocational relationship. When God entrusts such a partnership, a female helper complements and supports with many gifts beyond submission's loving yielding.

A godly model of willing submission is the church's submission to Christ. The submission of our new self to Jesus is not coerced. Rather, he has won our hearts and given us every reason to follow him willingly. No head except Christ will make perfect use of sacrificial authority. No helper will offer perfectly willing submission. These things are difficult for sinner-saints. But in Christ we find our forgiveness and our motivation, striving with all his power to apply his good gifts to our lives.

In a specific head and helper relationship, God creates a partnership in which a woman complements a man, contributing gifts he cannot. One aspect of such a head and helper relationship is willing helper submission.

Like *authority* and *headship*, *submission* and the *helper role* are not synonymous. If used interchangeably we risk potential overemphasis of and overapplication of the *submission* aspect of God's helper design.

EMBRACE EACH OTHER WHILE EMBRACING THESE BIBLICAL CONCEPTS

Authority and submission are biblical concepts and gifts from God. Like all of God's gifts, they can be used for good or evil. Here the adage is applicable: *Abuse does not nullify use.*¹² The fact that God's good gifts have been abused is no reason to blame God's design or to reject outright his gifts of authority and submission.

Abuse of authority and submission does not nullify their use. But Christ-like compassion moves us to special sensitivity and gentle care as we carry each other's burdens ([GALATIANS 6:2](#), [PHILIPPIANS 4:5](#)). Many of us have been hurt by the abuse of authority. We know others who have been abused by people in authority. In light of such hurt, words like *authority* and *submission* can open old wounds. *May Jesus' healing mercy attend them! May Jesus make us part of that healing mercy!*

¹² *Abusus non tollit usum.*

Carrying each other's burdens, we want to be especially sensitive to how words like *authority* and *submission* may be perceived. As we speak, we remember our goal is not to win an argument. Our goal is to glorify God and serve our neighbor by honoring God's design, by speaking faithfully in agreement with Scripture, and by proclaiming our Savior. This goal moves us to embrace all of God's truth, as we speak of authority and submission with gentleness and respect.

Out of gentle and respectful care, some may choose to use different words or phrases to communicate the concepts of authority and submission, or other head and helper concepts, for example, "selfless leading" and "selfless yielding." Such terms are offered to express the same biblical meaning, while avoiding non-biblical, negative connotations.¹³ Whatever terminology is used, it will require careful, biblical explanation, so we don't inadvertently communicate something more or less than what the Spirit of God intends.

When confessing and teaching these truths, some may prefer using only traditional terms. Others may prefer using different terms to express the same biblical concepts. We judge proper proclamation by whether it is faithful to God's Word, not based on personal preference. At the same time, we benefit from a common vocabulary. We use common terms and phrases so we can communicate with others in our fellowship using mutually intelligible language to express concepts faithfully. Avoiding the biblical concepts expressed in the words *authority* and *submission* merely because they are unpopular is unfaithful to God's Word. In your speech, embrace Jesus and his truth, and encourage each other in proclaiming his truth faithfully. "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" ([EPHESIANS 4:2,3](#)).

Our Designer and Redeemer has told us: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" ([JOHN 13:35](#)). The world takes note of the way we Christians interact with one another as males and females. Take to heart the words of the apostle Peter: "Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. . . . But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" ([1 PETER 3:8,15,16](#)).¹⁴

¹³ In faithfulness, we will also avoid terms that false teachers have used to blur God's truth.

¹⁴ It's worthy of note: The Spirit gives us this encouragement right after speaking about God's male and female, head and helper design, including the topic of submission. See [1 Peter 3:1-7](#).

God's male and female design in the church

God's male and female design is an always-present principle that is applied according to vocation. Thus, it is no surprise that God applies his design principle to relationships in his church ([1 TIMOTHY 2](#); [1 CORINTHIANS 11](#); [1 CORINTHIANS 14](#)). As co-heirs with Christ and members of his royal priesthood, men and women partner together in his church ([GALATIANS 3:27-29](#), [1 PETER 2:9](#)). The partnership is for gospel proclamation to God's glory for the salvation of souls. Like the Christian home, it is a special, gospel-rich relationship in which we are free to work together under the truth of God's principles. It is a partnership in which brothers and sisters in Christ are fully involved, needing and complementing each other for the fullness of Christ's work.

God entrusts men in the church with headship, including its exercise of authority ([1 TIMOTHY 2:11-13](#)). As a reflection of his headship, Christ desires male headship to serve for the benefit of his body of believers ([EPHESIANS 5:23-30](#)).

We see application of male headship in Christ's calling of male apostles and the early church's appointment of male overseers. At least three times in the New Testament the Spirit gives a specific application of his male and female design for his body of believers ([1 TIMOTHY 2](#); [1 CORINTHIANS 11,14](#)). Each time he explicitly ties his application to his male and female creation design principle ([1 CORINTHIANS 11:7-12](#), [1 CORINTHIANS 14:34¹⁵](#), [1 TIMOTHY 2:13](#)).

The Spirit gives a key, but not exclusive, application of male headship authority in [1 Timothy 2](#), as he entrusts the authoritative teaching of his Word to men when that teaching is over men.¹⁶ The God of peace ties his male and female design to peaceful order in the church in [1 Corinthians 14](#). In [1 Corinthians 11](#), the Spirit reveals that even cultural customs, though they differ across cultures, times, and places, are important when they honor his male and female design.

We learn important lessons from these examples. [1 Corinthians 14](#) demonstrates that the same male and female design principle that operates in the home is operative in the church as part of God's universal design for order ([1 CORINTHIANS 14:33-35](#); [GENESIS 1,2](#)). [1 Timothy 2](#) focuses application on the proclamation of God's Word and the exercise of authority in the church. [1 Corinthians 11](#) shows how broadly God's male and female design operates in life and in the life of the church. While these examples teach us, the application of God's design principle is not limited to these biblical examples. As with all God's principles, there are countless faithful applications of the one male and female design principle. It is a universal principle that is vocationally applied.

¹⁵ The Law Paul refers to in [1 Corinthians 14:34](#) is best understood as the Torah, including the opening chapters of Genesis, which is where Paul connects his application three chapters earlier ([1 Corinthians 11](#)) and in [1 Timothy 2](#). See S. W. Becker, essays.wisluthsem.org/8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/310/Becker1Corinthians.pdf?sequence=1&isAll

¹⁶ To show that this teaching of the Word application of headship authority is not an exclusive application of headship authority or a new stand-alone instruction for the New Testament church, the Spirit connects it to his universal male and female design principle, which includes authority as an essential aspect of headship ([1 Timothy 2:13](#)).

EMBRACE GOD'S MALE AND FEMALE DESIGN IN CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

As we gather around God's Word to carry out Christ's mission, we find a unique opportunity to put his principles into full practice. This includes his male and female design as it applies to vocations in congregational membership. Embrace God's design. Don't look for loopholes or workarounds. Embrace it and seek to exemplify it. Look for ways to put God's wisdom and beauty on full display. Find ways for men and women to partner, love, and care for one another. As you do, remember Jesus' words: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" ([JOHN 13:34,35](#)).

There are different vocations within the church, all providing different opportunities for women and men to partner in Christ's mission. Men and women receive divine calls from Christ through his church to proclaim his Word. Jesus also gives men and women vocations that provide necessary support for the ministry. In all these vocations, God's male and female design gives women and men an interdependent and complementary partnership for the work of the church. In this partnership God's male and female design directs men to serve in any position that involves headship authority.

EMBRACE SERVICE TO ONE ANOTHER IN YOUR CONGREGATION

Brothers, in your congregation consider the opportunity to serve to be an undeserved privilege from Jesus. Do not abdicate the God-given responsibility laid upon you as a man and as a spiritual leader ([1 CORINTHIANS 4:12](#)). When asked to serve in a position of headship, serve willingly, joyfully, boldly, confidently, and humbly ([EPHESIANS 4:1-6](#)). Be a Christ-like sacrificial servant ([EPHESIANS 5:25](#), [MARK 10:45](#)). Recognize that you cannot serve your sisters well without actively engaging with them. Confess with us that often enough we have given more lip service than real effort to this kind of engagement. Intentionally involve your sisters in all aspects of ministry that are God-pleasing and in keeping with biblical principles. When planning and assessing, involve them, seek their wisdom and unique contributions. Look to build partnership and consensus long before there is a need for any binding, authoritative decision. Blessed by God's male and female design, our ministries will be stronger when men and women partner fully for Christ's mission.

Sisters, God has given you wonderful gifts for congregational ministry. By God's design your brothers need you and your gifts ([GENESIS 2:18](#)). There is a true male and female partnership in the work of Christ's church. Find joy in putting your gifts to service. Help and encourage the godly men in your life to step up as spiritual leaders. As fellow heirs of eternal life ([1 PETER 3:7](#)), honor and support your men, as you help them uphold a high standard of excellence in the church. Cherish the roles the Lord gives you and serve faithfully with all your heart. Help your Christian brothers by informing them and partnering with them to strengthen your gospel ministry.

Sisters, forgive your Christian brothers where they have failed in their Christian headship or neglected to fully value you, involve you, and encourage you to works of service. Brothers, forgive your Christian sisters where they have failed in their Christian helper role or neglected to fully value you and encourage you to works of service.

EMBRACE CHURCH GOVERNANCE THAT REFLECTS GOD’S DESIGN IN PRACTICE

“The church is the congregation of saints, in which the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered.”¹⁷ As Christ’s bride, we proclaim our Bridegroom’s gospel. We administer his sacraments. Through these means of grace, Jesus comes to the sinner with his forgiveness and life. For this mission God has not prescribed a specific church structure. Instead, as he does for our entire life, he gives beautiful principles to embrace for the work, including his male and female design principle.

Faithful and wise governance in our churches, schools, and affiliated ministries intentionally embraces everything God says about his design for men and women. Governance that simply directs men to fill leadership positions and make all decisions formally recognizes only half of God’s head and helper design. In such a structure women may still be actively involved in the life of the congregation, but they may not be involved as fully as they might be, according to God’s design. A ministry’s structure might easily communicate unintentionally that the full partnership of godly women is not valued or needed. God’s male and female design is for an active, intentional, purposeful partnership between men and women. Implement a ministry structure that intentionally engages women and their gifts and promotes true partnership, while still directing men to exercise headship and to make binding decisions when necessary.

DISTINGUISH BETWEEN HEADSHIP AND NON-HEADSHIP POSITIONS

Ministries have achieved a more robust male and female partnership by distinguishing clearly between positions that do or do not exercise headship. A non-headship level of ministry teams (or work groups) is a wonderful place for men and women to collaborate. It also creates a partnership between the decision-making headship level and its active teams, creating more interactions between sisters and brothers in Christ. A congregation may even consider minimizing the number of headship level groups and expanding the number of teams that are actively serving.

In faithfulness to God’s Word and in Jesus’ name, we encourage WELS congregations, schools, and affiliated ministries to embrace God’s head and helper principle in their ministries. To that end, clearly communicate and maintain a proper distinction between headship and non-headship positions, engaging our sisters in Christ in every biblically appropriate way.

¹⁷ *Augsburg Confession, Art. XII*

Some general applications for our WELS ministries

Voting in the church—An application, not the principle itself

Male voting in the church can be an appropriate application of the head and helper principle when a decision must be reached that binds the congregation to a course of action. But male binding voting is not the principle itself and certainly not the only application of male headship in the church.

Neither is every “show of hands” or preference written on a piece of paper an exercise of binding authority. Just as in a marriage a husband seeks the good counsel of his wife and a wife positively influences her husband, men and women do the same in a congregation. Non-binding polling can be part of that counsel and influence and valuable for gauging consensus. After information on any proposal has been presented and discussed, Christian leaders may poll their members to gain insight. As in a marriage, better communication and consensus building serve well.

No matter how consensus might be achieved for a congregation, decisions that bind the body of believers to a course of action will be necessary. When a binding decision is placed before a congregation, God has given men the responsibility to exercise authority for the good of the church.

For the sake of clarity, common terminology, and good order in our fellowship, we encourage reserving the term *vote* for resolutions enacting binding decisions and using the terms *poll* or *survey* when insights are being sought from the entire congregation.

Our WELS fellowship

As we walk together in our synod, we strive to walk together in doctrine and practice. Doctrine is God’s biblical teaching.¹⁸ By the Spirit’s grace we are united in our confession of God’s teaching as drawn from his Word. Practice is how we live out or put into practice God’s teaching. We are united in practice because practice flows by necessity from doctrine. This does not mean that all WELS congregational practices always look exactly the same. It does mean that every practice flows from true doctrine as a faithful reflection of doctrine. It is good to reinforce this understanding of the relationship between doctrine and practice as we consider applications of God’s male and female design in our lives.

¹⁸ *Revealed truth also includes his revealed will, which clarifies natural law, like his male and female design.*

While faithful practice does not always look exactly the same, as we walk together in our synod a certain degree of uniformity of practices is beneficial. We seek this through a balance of Christian liberty and Christian love, two virtues which always go hand in hand.¹⁹ We want to avoid legalism that binds consciences, while acknowledging headship decisions that benefit the body. We offer guidance and lay down parameters for the sake of decency and order in God's church ([1 CORINTHIANS 14:33](#)).

Responsibility for doctrine and practice in our synod has been entrusted to the Conference of Presidents (COP). In that role the COP has prepared this pastoral letter of instruction, guidance, and encouragement.

As some WELS congregations, schools, and affiliated ministries seek to implement different governance models, the COP is charged with the responsibility of providing guidance and direction. Some of this guidance will come in the form of new guidelines and suggestions for constitutions and bylaws to aid congregations, schools, affiliated ministries, and district constitutional committees. These materials will

- 1 offer opportunity to include sisters in Christ intentionally and fully;
- 2 uphold the exercise of biblically faithful male headship;
- 3 encourage the clear distinction between headship and non-headship ministry positions; and
- 4 provide flexibility of structural size and complexity, so ministries can best choose what serves in their context.

¹⁹ "Pastoral Letter on Christian Freedom - WELS Conference of Presidents," wels.net/christian-freedom-letter

Closing

As God's children, we cling to Christ, his Word, and all his patterns for our lives ([ROMANS 12:2](#)), including his male and female design. As we live for Jesus, we live for each other and all our neighbors. Like all aspects of our walk in Christ, following his male and female design will bring challenges for saints who are still sinners living in a fallen world. As is always the case until he brings us to heaven, Jesus will refresh and strengthen with his grace and keep us in step with his Spirit ([MATTHEW 11:28](#), [GALATIANS 5:25](#)).

Dear sisters and brothers, God bless you as you embrace Jesus, his Word, and each other in Christian love!
To him be all glory and praise, through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Conference of Presidents

Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod