

Church Girl

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A Gospel Vision to Encourage and
Challenge Black Christian Women

Sarita T. Lyons

Foreword by Jackie Hill Perry





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WaterBrook

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In loving memory of the Church Girl who raised me,

Etta Mae King Taylor.

Mommy, it breaks my heart that you won't ever
hold this book in your hands, yet your fingerprints
are all over it. I couldn't have done this without you.

I'll see you soon in glory.

To the Church Girls I'm raising:

Sophia, Olivia, and Gabriella.

I love you. This is for you and the
generations that will follow.

FOREWORD

There's a diversity of bullets for which the Black Church Girl is obligated to duck. There are no hands behind the trigger, but worldly belief systems are being shot at us daily. The finger is a metaphor for the worldviews reflective of a society that is godless. The shooter is still flesh. The frameworks shot our way are fundamentally theological in the way they claim to tell us who God is. If God is the creator of all things, then the woman is his idea. And she is a good one at that. But look around for a moment at a movie, a social media clip, or the quips of a fool with a podcast mic and you'd think the female body belonged to everyone else. And that it is good only insofar as it is useful. To be a woman at all is to be a resource and a reflection. The Black woman is made in God's image, so she is helpful, resourceful, administrative, productive, etc. But she is also more than what she gives; she is worthy to be given to. This woman is an image, a testimony, a witness to the Creator God, and because of this, we are all obligated to give her, her flowers. And that's not in the form of undue praise and superficial flattery but of dignity. In this we say, in word and deed, "I must honor what God himself has made."

Now back to the bullets.

The first woman put us all into a situation that only deliverance can fix because she chose to think independently of God. In that garden, in front of that tree, looking at that fruit, listening to that demon, Eve got us into some mess. And technically Adam did as the head of humanity, but either way, here we are. All of us are born using our eyes, bodies, hands, thoughts, and mouths to replicate the lie that we belong to ourselves only. Eve bit the bullet, and we're born dead in sin because of it. And before we start putting a little too much blame on Eve for our own behavior, let's fast-forward to Jesus. That God took on that flesh and went to that cross, taking the weight of our sin, absorbing God's wrath,

removing our shame, and giving us his righteousness, so truth be told—there's no such thing as a Church Girl without the cross.

Being commanded to carry our own now, we still bear the marks of the battle between the world, the flesh, and the devil, primarily in the kind of life we live after removing the shrapnel. We are still dying but in a different way now. And the way I see it, Miss Dr. Sarita Lyons has given us a work that functions as an avenue for resurrection to all who know or want to know what it's like to leave the grave. Whether it's a conversation about pain, healing, rest, godliness, or community, Dr. Sarita is trying to teach Black Church Girls how to duck. Because when the pain hits, by way of church or society, from bullets aimed at the brown of your body, the curl in your crown, the simplicity of your speech, and the commitment to your Christ, do you know where your armor is? When your work or your school or your family creates an environment that feels more like Babylon than heaven, can you find your passport? Do you know where home is and how it's not made with human hands?

Remember when I talked about the flowers these women deserve? Something happens to a woman who doesn't know what she costs: She's easily deceived. The false teachers of our day exploit this shame by centering self more than Jesus, and when they do, can you smell the lie and call it by name? It's our duty, as women made to reflect the beauty of our Savior, to learn how to live on this side of heaven with sober minds and soft hearts. As the bullets of pain, bad preaching, fear, failure, and everything else fly above us, grazing our skin but not stealing our souls, we will remember the one who made us and made us again.

New creatures we are indeed, and that's why I'm not lying to you when I say you need this book. You need the theology, the wisdom, the instructions, the exhortations, and the challenges. You need the quick pop upside the head and the hug that follows it. It's all love when a Black mama does this, and I truly believe that for Dr. Sarita to give us this work in your hands, she obviously must love us Black Church Girls to death.

—Jackie Hill Perry

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INTRODUCTION

There Is Good News from God for Black Women

Writing a book is a calling and is so personal, and that has been my experience with *Church Girl*. This book is birthed out of my desire to help Black women see that there is no better option for life than what Jesus provides. I want you to see your identity, beauty, worth, significance, power, and purpose through God's eyes. I want you to live well and heal from the attacks on your heart and mind that might often cause you to question, *Is God real? And if he's real, is he good? And if he's good, is he good enough for me?* I want you to be discerning about the schemes of the devil to entrap you in emotional and spiritual bondage. I know what it's like to be sinking in life and reach out for help, only to be rescued by a lifeboat that turns out to be lifeless, realizing I've grabbed hold of an illusion of truth and identity that overpromises love, healing, power, control, enlightenment, and freedom but grossly underdelivers.¹ I also know what it's like to feel strong, competent, beautiful, smart, and successful but be impotent and full of more self-deception and pride than Holy Ghost power.

This book is my love letter to Black women. Church Girls, you who follow Christ and want to take your faith seriously, this is my clarion call to you. In these pages, I offer you a relatable, biblical guide that invites

1. Many lifeboats are only illusions of help and rescue for Black women. They can't ultimately rescue us because of the holes in their theology, ideologies, and solutions that cause us to sink. These holes are distortions of God's Word, rejection of his will, and fantasies of counterfeit freedom, but we can't always easily see them because we aren't familiar with God's Word and we're doing whatever we can to keep our heads above water.

you to turn to the Lord, to see the majesty of Christ, to see yourself through his Word, and to celebrate with other Black women this blessed gospel vision that is the better way.

I'm a proud Church Girl today, but I haven't always lived like one. I grew up in the church and was raised by Christian parents, but there was a time in my life when I drifted from the faith and walked away from the church. This Church Girl, who almost got suspended from public school for passing out Bible tracts and having Bible study during recess, went to college and became lost in the sauce of demonic oppression and deception.



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and successful but
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self-deception and
pride than Holy
Ghost power.**

I cherish the years I spent attending a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). I have so many treasured memories, including lifelong friendships I made, and I know the experience helped shape me into the Black woman I am today. This was an unforgettable time in my life that I wouldn't trade for anything, but it was also

a dark and difficult season I went through. It was during these college years that I began to question everything about my faith and relationship with Christ. I've often looked back since that time and wondered how I got there. But with the clarity I've gained over the years, it's my hope that my story, along with the biblical wisdom and encouragement I share throughout *Church Girl*, will help you in your faith.

In college, I had a deep desire to connect more with my cultural identity, especially as a Black woman. In my search for information and a feeling of empowerment, I became ensnared by Kemetite and Yoruba spirituality. While at first I tried to blend my Christian beliefs with these teachings and practices, combining them into a sort of syncretism, soon this newer belief system took over.

I attended lectures on ancient Africa, the New World Order, and

various philosophies associated with the Black Conscious Community. I took African dance classes, engaged in meditation, and did Kundalini yoga on Sundays instead of going to church. I was reading books that rejected the legitimacy of Christ and called Black people to throw off a mind enslaved to “white Jesus” by returning to our roots and Afrocentric thinking and spirituality.

What I’ve discovered about deception is that there is always at least a grain of truth mixed with the lies. What is more confusing is that sometimes there may be a lot of truth with just a speck of poison, which is still lethal. I was ingesting so much new and unfamiliar information that I was initially fascinated and disoriented. Though I tried to defend the merits of my faith, I could not answer the sarcastic interrogations about the history of Christianity and the formation of the Bible from the teachers in this community. Not only did I have a shaky belief foundation, but also those I encountered were well studied, and in all honesty, the introduction to the Yoruba orisha was attractive. I didn’t share what was going on with my parents; I didn’t seek out a Christian friend or church leader to discuss what I was learning. I just kept diving deeper, thinking I could handle what I was being exposed to without Christian community and discipleship. My biblical illiteracy and pride fell victim to confident and well-articulated lies. Instead of being built up in my faith in Christ, I allowed the teaching about Yoruba deities to give me a sense of identity and empowerment. I was told that my male and female deities were Ogun and Oshun, and I began to put my femininity on a pedestal.

It felt amazing at the time. I thought I was so powerful, enlightened, and beautiful. And I began to believe that my Christian parents, who introduced me to Jesus, had the right intentions but incomplete information.

I realized, later on, that I was deeply mistaken and tricked. It didn’t help that I was in a very vulnerable state as well. Before this period of my life, I’d had a painful church experience with male leadership that I never told anyone about, a recent breakup, and a void of not knowing my heritage very well. I felt like this new group of people understood

and fulfilled my needs. Biblical illiteracy, loneliness, and pride were like doors left open to the thief's lies.² I was in a community of poets, artists, entrepreneurs, and friends whom I laughed with, cried with, and talked about anything and everything with, except the God of the Bible. Most of the time our fellowship was not anti-Jesus, unless I attempted to interject talk of the God of the Bible. Over time I knew that if I wanted to spend time with them, Jesus was not welcomed.

The people I was spending time with and being influenced by seemed to respect each other, both men and women. We called each other brothers, sistahs, kings, and queens. They showed me ways to naturally care for my body, dress in African garb, eat more healthily, and smudge away negativity with sage. I dabbled with tarot cards and cowrie shells. We built altars to the ancestors, bathed in honey, put a cake in a river, and buried meat in the ground as offerings to the gods. There was a lot of community, but there was no Christ. I was no match for people who rejected the Bible yet seemed to have more head knowledge about it and

Christianity than I did at the time. I realize now I was in one of those lifeless lifeboats and didn't know it. And I thank God that my story didn't end with me drowning in a sea of heresy. Though I was sinking, help was on the way.

One evening, while I had a spoken-word hangout at my apartment, my father called my phone, as he had so many times before to leave long prayers for my deliverance. This evening, I walked to my bedroom to take his call, but he hung up before I answered. While I was in my room, I heard someone say from the living

room, "F— Jesus." It's difficult for me to recount the exact timeline and events for the rest of the night, but what I do remember is that a righ-



God sees you, loves you, wants relationship with you, and has a gospel vision for your life that the world's offerings can't rival.

2. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10, ESV).

teous indignation filled me and I started screaming, “Get out! Get out!” and proceeded to kick everyone out of my apartment. It was like a whirlwind. I wasn’t thinking or feeling. I was just acting as I now believe the Holy Spirit was directing me. I grabbed a large green trash bag and started dismantling the altar for ancestor worship that I had in my room. I threw away everything that was used for demonic activity. I threw away my tarot cards, sage, candles, books, carved images, beads, jewelry, and anything else connected to witchcraft. I became sick and eventually passed out or fell asleep on my bathroom floor.

When I woke up, I could see my bed from the bathroom doorway. Under it was a New King James Version of the Bible—a Bible that I still have today—tattered, worn, and soaked with many tears. I grabbed it but didn’t know what to read. I hadn’t read the Bible in almost two years. I closed my eyes and flipped through pages. I guess I was praying the Lord would supernaturally allow me to land on something to help me, and boy, did he do just that. I read:

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Go and cry in the hearing of Jerusalem, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD:

*“I remember you,
The kindness of your youth,
The love of your betrothal,
When you went after Me in the wilderness,
In a land not sown.”*” (Jeremiah 2:1–2, NKJV)

I immediately had flashbacks of me as a young Church Girl, leading Bible study, passing out Bible tracts, singing in the choir, ushering in my white nurse’s outfit, attending Vacation Bible School, playing Mary in the Christmas play, praying, taking communion, sitting among the saints in the congregation, and coming out of the water feeling light shining on my face when I was baptized.

The tears began to flow. That night, I read the entire book of Jeremiah, weeping and saying sorry to God. Through Jeremiah, the Lord convicted me of my sin—my idolatry and my spiritual adultery—

but he also wooed me back to himself. He comforted me with the assurance that if I just returned to him, he would forgive and restore me.³ I remember looking in the mirror with a mix of tears and mascara running down my face, asking for forgiveness. I also said to the Lord, “I will go wherever you want me to go, I will do whatever you want me to do, and I will say whatever you want me to say. I just ask to know you, God, like I’ve never known you before.” The intention of my entire life was revealed and confessed in the mirror that day: I will go wherever, do whatever, and say whatever for Christ’s glory. This is why you are reading *Church Girl* right now. And God has been faithfully answering my prayer to know him and fulfill my call to help others *know* him too.

I freely admit that I was the backslider, the adulterer, the silly woman, the harlot, the haughty woman, the prodigal daughter, and the fool that we hear about in Scripture. But today I am redeemed, holy, set apart, and set free by the greatest emancipator and freedom fighter in the world. The life I now have—the peace, joy, clarity about my identity, and power I received—was so simple: I just had to turn back to God. Though the specifics of my story may not be your experience, you may be able to relate to having your faith challenged and being in a vulnerable place that made you more susceptible to deception. Whether you’ve been affected by racism, sexism, relational disappointment, grief, or the stress and trauma of living as a Black woman in the world, I believe you, too, may have been tempted to question the relevance and necessity of trusting in an invisible God who at times feels distant and uninterested in your life. You may have at one point felt close to God, but a series of choices, concessions, and compromises left you one day looking at your life, wondering how you managed to drift so far from him. Like me, you may have experienced hurt that enticed you to look for identity, belonging, love, power, and significance outside Christ. No matter what your story is, I want you to know God sees you, loves you, wants relationship with you, and has a gospel vision for your life that the world’s offerings can’t rival.

3. Jeremiah 4:1–4.

Church Girl is the book I wish I had in college. Back then, I needed the truth and hope I'm determined to share with you that helped me weather the storms of confusion and heartache. I needed *Church Girl* to help stabilize me in a shifting secular culture and to help root my identity as a Black woman in the truth of God's Word. I needed *Church Girl* because I was unprepared to counter opposition to my faith. I needed help so that I could deal with the hurt instead of being imprisoned by the hurt. I needed the courage and conviction to stand unapologetically as a Christian when it was more popular and advantageous to follow the crowd and philosophies of the world. I needed *Church Girl* to point me to Jesus when everything around me was capturing my attention and affections.

I didn't have *Church Girl* as a resource in college, but I did have a loving God who pursued me and a family who prayed for me even when I thought their faith was antiquated and whitewashed. And I had the body of Christ—often just faithful strangers who didn't have a clue about what I was going through. God used their witness and intellectual defense of Christianity as a way to provide living water to erode my calloused heart and confused mind.

I write this book from a place of love, empathy, and urgency for Black women. The devil doesn't want you to see Jesus correctly, divide the Word rightly,⁴ and embrace yourself fully as a daughter of the Most High God. There is an attack on Black women's identity, purpose, rest, hearts, and commitment to Christ. The devil's goal is to rob God of glory, and he wants to confuse you, frustrate you, and weaken you so that you won't trust God's Word or obey his will, thus getting you to forfeit the blessings of the abundant life in Christ that is your inheritance.⁵ Maybe you can relate to wrestling with your faith or being overwhelmed by the weight of your sin, tempted to give



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identity, purpose,
rest, hearts, and
commitment to
Christ.**

4. 2 Timothy 2:15, NKJV.

5. John 10:10; 17:3.

up on God, confused by the lies of Satan, weary with the evil of the world, hurt by the church, unsure of your purpose, or in need of encouragement as a Black Christian woman to keep on keeping on. If that is you, you are in good company. I pray the Lord will draw you back to himself and to the community of faith or fortify your faith and give you endurance so that you can grow, “walk worthy of the calling” (Ephesians 4:1), and experience the love, joy, peace, and strength that are part of your birthright as a new creation in Christ.⁶



What is meant by “a *gospel* vision”? I want you as a Black woman to know that there is *good news* from God for your life. My sister, putting your faith in Jesus makes everything about your life better, as you now are set apart for his kingdom purposes and are the recipient of his kingdom promises and privileges. If you yield to the transforming work of the gospel, it will influence how you think, treat your neighbors, love your friends, parent, walk in your singleness or marriage, and work, and it will improve your perspective on everything. A gospel vision for Black women guarantees that you will have the resources of heaven for a blessed, joyous, content, anointed, and sacrificial life—a life that endures and remains faithful despite the suffering and challenges that will undoubtedly come. A gospel vision for Black women says, “Don’t give up, because Jesus already did the heavy lifting on the cross,” and “Don’t see yourself as less than, because you are a daughter of the King.” A gospel vision says, “Don’t be afraid to be strong as you serve the Lord in every area of life, because it’s his energy that empowers you,”⁷ and “Don’t be afraid to be weak, because in your weakness his strength is made perfect.”⁸

I believe there are three areas we can focus on as believers when we are looking to live with gospel vision: light, lens, and love. Understanding the three will help you process the themes in each chapter as you go through this book.

6. Isaiah 41:10; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 5:22.

7. Colossians 1:29.

8. 2 Corinthians 12:9.

Light

Research reveals that, of our five senses, most people (70 percent) would miss their sight the most.⁹ Even more than seeing physically, God wants us to see spiritually. He provided a way for us to have spiritual sight through Christ. In Scripture, light is associated with life. When speaking of Jesus, John said, “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. That light shines in the darkness, and yet the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:4–5). We need light from a new life in Christ to have accurate vision for our lives.

Apart from salvation, which comes only through faith in Christ, we are in a state of spiritual blindness because we can’t see Christ accurately, and not seeing Christ means we can’t see God.¹⁰ When we are spiritually blind, we can’t see God or learn optimally from his Word, and we ultimately reject Christ.¹¹ The main consequence of spiritual blindness is that people are lost and perishing.¹²

This light and spiritual sight give us wisdom. Without them, our understanding of spiritual things is compromised. Spiritual things will often look strange or be misunderstood if we still have scales on our eyes in an unredeemed state. Being saved from our sins by the work of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection is how we get this life and light we desperately need. As physical light first split the darkness at creation, so spiritual light is the only thing that can penetrate the darkness of human understanding that is obscured by sin.¹³ Light is essential for



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9. Hoang Nguyen, “Of the Five Senses, a Majority Would Miss Sight the Most,” YouGov, July 25, 2018, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/health/articles-reports/2018/07/25/five-senses-majority-would-miss-sight-most>.

10. Colossians 1:15–16.

11. Romans 2:8; 2 Thessalonians 2:12.

12. 2 Corinthians 4:3–4.

13. 2 Corinthians 4:6.

our ability to accurately see anything, including God's vision for us as women.

Lens

God also cares about the lens through which we see. Our lens is our worldview. A worldview can be thought of as the comprehensive interpretive lens through which we look to understand ourselves, others, the world, and God. A worldview provides the rules we apply to make sense of what we see so we can respond accordingly. When we have a Christian worldview, we look through a Christianity-informed lens so we can see things as God intends. The primary resource that we are called to use to inform our Christian worldview is the Bible. If you go to a 3D movie, you are given special glasses to clearly view it. If you try to watch it with your 3D lenses off, you can still see, but the image on the screen isn't clear. That's what it's like to see the world, others, God, and ourselves without a biblical lens, or a Christian worldview: We can see, but things aren't clear.

There are many consequences of looking at everything through an unbiblical lens. However, when you have accurate vision, you will be able to discern truth from error,¹⁴ you will have a clear understanding of your identity and calling,¹⁵ you will walk in wisdom,¹⁶ you will have a healthy fear of the Lord,¹⁷ you won't easily be deceived,¹⁸ and you will be more sensitive to the activity of the devil and better equipped for spiritual warfare.¹⁹ When you have accurate vision, you will be more deeply connected to Christ's mission;²⁰ you will be able to suffer

14. 1 John 4:1.

15. Proverbs 3:1–6:35.

16. Hosea 14:9; James 1:5.

17. Psalm 111:10.

18. Matthew 24:24.

19. Matthew 10:16; 2 Corinthians 11:13–15; 2 Timothy 3:6–7.

20. Matthew 16:22–24.

well,²¹ love well,²² make wise choices,²³ perceive the will of God,²⁴ and recognize the voice of God;²⁵ and you will have greater confidence and trust in the Bible as the primary instruction for life.²⁶ Seeing through a biblical lens motivates you to pursue Christian community and discipleship, walk in the joy and peace that are found in Christ, and live more committed to God than to your personal agenda.

We need the help of the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us into all truth. Other lenses are also influencing our vision. Location, education, gender, presuppositions, culture, privilege, and pain are lenses through which we see, even if we aren't aware they are influencing our sight.

At times these lenses help us see what God wants us to see in a special and unique way that is biblically faithful. For instance, as a Black woman who is the descendant of slaves and who has experienced racism and various other forms of discrimination, like my ancestors I can read the Exodus story and clearly see that God is a just and on-time liberator, waymaker, fighter, and deliverer for me just as he was for his people when they cried out to him. Conversely, if pain and trauma become the dominant lens through which someone reads the text, that person could read the Exodus story and see God as cruel for even allowing his people to be enslaved to the Egyptians and unloving for allowing them to wander in the wilderness for forty years and giving them only manna and quail to eat. We all see through lenses. For the Christian, the goal is to have a humble awareness that we all have limitations to our lenses. My hope is that this book will provide you with helpful insights, encouragement, and tools as you continue to develop and utilize your Christian worldview in everyday life.

21. 2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Peter 4:12–19.

22. 1 Corinthians 13.

23. Ezekiel 44:23.

24. Romans 12:2.

25. John 10:27.

26. 2 Timothy 3:15–17.

Love

We also need love to see. God wants his perfect and unfailing love for us to be the tint on our lens, coloring everything we see. Whatever vision we have for ourselves must be a by-product of his love. God doesn't do anything that isn't rooted in love, as we see in Jesus's ultimate sacrifice.²⁷ But God doesn't just love us (action); he is love (being).²⁸

Many truths, commands, and narratives throughout Scripture are hard to understand and accept if we view them apart from the tint of God's love. How do we read difficult passages of Scripture—or, as Phyllis Tribble called them, “texts of terror”²⁹—where women get brutally raped and killed, and still see a God we can serve and trust? How do we feel valued by God and equal to men if Scripture says, “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:22)? The tint of God's love brings clarity and joy to passages that often make Christian women bristle. Seeing Scripture with the tint of God's love helps you presuppose his goodness, even when reading descriptive passages that reveal the evil of humanity or prescriptive passages that at first glance feel unfair.

If we are going to see correctly, if we are going to have reliable vision, we need light, the right lens, and love. We need life in Christ, we need a Christian way of seeing things as God prescribes, and we need the tint of God's love to understand that his very nature is just, perfect, and loving—which motivates all he says, does, and requires of us.

We need light, the right lens, and love to have a gospel vision for everything, including ourselves as Black women. After each chapter, I include discussion questions so you can dig deeper into these themes, whether you study on your own or in a group.

27. John 3:16.

28. 1 John 4:16.

29. Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984).

Rise Up, Church Girl

A Church Girl is a disciple of Jesus who has received salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.³⁰ A Church Girl has been saved from the penalty and power of sin³¹—and will one day be saved from the presence of sin³²—because of the finished work of Jesus Christ. A Church Girl is more than a woman who attends church services; rather, she is a member of the body of Christ who has been restored to relationship with God.³³

We aren't just Church Girls in name, because our God has also called us to duty. We have been called to unashamedly represent Christ in the world and proclaim the gospel.³⁴ Church Girls talk back to the culture; we aren't afraid of the culture. Church Girls should feel righteous indignation when someone misrepresents God and his bride. Church Girls don't scroll dismissively past false teaching. We don't take kindly to anyone coming for the church Christ died for. We cast down strongholds. We fight with spiritual weapons.³⁵ We are relentless truth tellers. We love our neighbors. We fight for the marginalized. We hold up the bloodstained banner. We are clothed with strength and dignity and laugh with no fear of the future; wisdom is in our mouths, and the



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30. John 3:13, 36; 12:26; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 2:4–8.

31. Romans 3:24; 4:5; 5:1, 9; 8:1; 1 Corinthians 6:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 3:18.

32. Romans 8:16–18; Hebrews 1:14; 1 John 3:2.

33. Acts 20:28; Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:27; 2 Corinthians 5:18–20; Ephesians 5:25–27; Titus 2:14.

34. Romans 1:16.

35. 2 Corinthians 10:3–4.

law of kindness on our lips.³⁶ We aren't afraid of cancel culture, because who can cancel what God has called? We run our race with endurance, "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2, NKJV). We bow in prayer and lift our voices in worship of the one true living God. Church Girls die daily so that we may live for Christ. Church Girls know that we are like John the Baptist and our greatest calling is to be "a voice"³⁷ crying out in the culture, preparing the way for the Lord. We evangelize the lost because we know we have good news to share. We aren't perfect, but we serve a God who is perfect, and we strive in his strength as we are conformed to the image of Christ.

Rise up, Church Girl, and with dignity, bear the image of our God. To do this, we must get back to the fundamentals of our faith, and we must encourage other Christian women to do the same.

The gospel makes it possible for us to have a vision of ourselves as Black women the way Christ intended. We can now . . .

See ourselves as chosen.
See ourselves as saved.
See ourselves as free.
See ourselves as restored.
See ourselves as at peace.
See ourselves as respected.
See ourselves as protected.
See ourselves as holy.
See ourselves as hopeful.
See ourselves as healthy.
See ourselves as empowered.
See ourselves as commissioned.
See ourselves as beautiful.
See ourselves as worthy.
See ourselves as loved.
See ourselves proclaiming.

36. Proverbs 31:25, NLT; Proverbs 31:26.

37. John 1:23.

See ourselves leading.
See ourselves teaching.
See ourselves thriving.
See ourselves discipling.
See ourselves healing.
See ourselves serving.
See ourselves preaching.
See ourselves prophesying.
See ourselves resting.
See ourselves worshipping.
See ourselves glorifying.
See ourselves being exactly who God wants us to be.

I'm excited to go on a journey with you from the Garden of Eden, where the first woman was created, to Golgotha, where Christ died so any woman can become a new creation. I invite you to see God's vision for your life in six specific areas:

1. Identity
2. Purpose
3. Healing
4. Resting
5. Flourishing
6. Rescuing

I conclude *Church Girl* with a love letter to the Black Church that you may be able to relate to. Undoubtedly, the Black Church raised this Church Girl, and I wanted to invite you into a celebration of the institution that has survived, thrived, and shaped so many of our Church Girl lives.

This book isn't meant to give an exhaustive answer for every concern in a Black woman's life, but prayerfully, *Church Girl* will serve as a guide

to help you learn to use your gospel light, lens, and love to have a comprehensive vision for every area of your life. You may not know every detail, but you can trust that God has a plan for you. It's a good plan, Sis. It's a good gospel vision, and I'm excited to share it with you.

When there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint,
but blessed is he who keeps the law.

—Proverbs 29:18, ESV

CHAPTER 1

Know Thyself

A Gospel Vision for Black Women's Identity

*God created man
in his own image;
he created him in the image of God;
he created them male and female.*
—Genesis 1:27

Greek philosopher Socrates is widely credited for the maxim “Know thyself,” which is inscribed on the Temple of Apollo in Delphi. On its face, that maxim seems good, speaking about an important kind of knowledge to have—the knowledge of the self. Many people argue that Socrates believed knowing yourself is the source of freedom, happiness, virtue, and self-improvement and is the beginning of wisdom.¹ However, that runs counter to what we are taught in Scripture: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Proverbs 9:10). This fundamentally teaches that the fear of God² is the starting point for true wisdom and that to know God is true understanding. All other types of learning and knowledge (including the knowledge of yourself) are worthless unless they are

1. Nicholas D. Smith, *Socrates on Self-Improvement: Knowledge, Virtue, and Happiness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

2. “To fear the Lord is to stand in awe of his majesty, power, wisdom, justice and mercy, especially in Christ—in his life, death and resurrection—that is, to have an exalted view of God. To see God in all his glory and then respond to him appropriately. To humble ourselves before him. To adore him.” Mark Altrogge, “What Does It Mean to Fear God?,” Bible Study Tools, April 20, 2017, www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/what-does-it-mean-to-fear-god.html.

first built on knowledge of God. It's vital for us as Black Christian women to have an accurate understanding of our identity. Just like the



A gospel vision for Black women's identity is a call to stand on the firm foundation of Christ and discover why God made us, how he defined us, and what he has declared about us in his Word.

hymn many of us have sung in church proclaims, "On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand: all other ground is sinking sand."³ How we see ourselves as Black women must be rooted in God. We don't start a quest to know ourselves with the self—we start with God. A gospel vision for Black women's identity is a call to stand on the firm foundation of Christ and discover why God made us, how he defined us, and what he has declared about us in his Word.

Everyone has an opinion about Black women—who we are, what we can do, where our place is, what we should look like, and how we should show up or disappear in the world. Lessons on who we are have been taught by or caught from colo-

nizers; culture; men; our mamas, aunties, and grandmothers; and our own grand imaginations. Some of these messages are helpful, but many are downright damaging. Throughout history, Black women have been under the proverbial microscope, being labeled, branded, classified, dissected, and defined in an attempt to erase, enslave, and at times empower us.

Historically, Black women have been assigned disrespectful and demeaning stereotypes that added to our oppression dating back to slavery, such as Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire.⁴ Then there are more contemporary stereotypes like welfare queen, baby mama, and the angry Black woman. Some labels and identities given to Black women, on the face,

3. Edward Mote, "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less," Hymnary.org, accessed March 2, 2024, https://hymnary.org/text/my_hope_is_built_on_nothing_less.

4. Carolyn M. West, "Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Their Homegirls: Developing an 'Oppositional Gaze' Toward the Images of Black Women," in *Lectures on the Psychology of Women*, ed. Joan C. Chrisler, Carla Golden, and Patricia D. Rozee, 4th ed. (Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland, 2012), 286–99.

appear to be celebratory but have proved dangerous for us to adopt. Labels such as “the strong Black woman” or “superwoman” are unhealthy. These identities teach us to grin and bear the pain of life and carry the weight of the world on our backs without showing signs of weakness or vulnerability. These supposed strength-focused identities have kept us in bondage to pretending to be okay when we aren’t. “The Strong Black Woman Syndrome, which requires that Black women perpetually present an image of control and strength, is [an automatic] response to combination of daily pressures and systemic racist assaults.”⁵ While being called “superwoman” appears to be complimentary, it does more harm than good. For instance, when we are ascribed superhuman qualities, it encourages us to define weakness and fatigue as shameful, things to be rejected and ignored rather than embraced as symptoms and realities of the human experience. It encourages us as Black women to forfeit help and rest, two things we most need God to supply. Projecting superhuman qualities onto us as Black women invites us to see ourselves more like God than the dust he made us from. Our limitations aren’t a liability; rather, they remind us to stay dependent on a gracious God.

These exaggerated and unrealistic identities have left us exhausted, ignored, used, and celebrated only for our self-sacrifice and unnecessary savior behavior. We have also adopted new ways of naming ourselves, creating identities to rewrite and more accurately retell history. In the 1960s, to beat back harmful narratives about Black people, Black women and men identified with the statement “Black is beautiful.” When we were told by James Brown to “say it loud,” we shouted back with cultural pride, “I’m Black and I’m proud.” Black women haven’t stopped listening to our elders, and thanks to Representative Maxine Waters, affectionately called “Auntie Maxine” by millennials, Black women are now unapologetically “reclaiming our time.” When Black women exceed everyone’s expectations in sports, academics, and entertainment, we remind the world that “Black Girls Rock!”⁶ We wink at a world that

5. Marita Golden, *The Strong Black Woman: How a Myth Endangers the Physical and Mental Health of Black Women* (Coral Gables, Fla.: Mango, 2021), 37.

6. Black Girls Rock! (BGR) is the unapologetic mantra and movement given to all Black girls and women by its founder, Beverly Bond. In 2006, Beverly Bond, a DJ, philanthropist, and author,

wonders how we do what we do amid the many injustices we face and call the mystery of our thriving “Black Girl Magic.” Black women have called themselves boss chicks or corporate baddies to honor the way they have worked to pursue entrepreneurial passions, be leaders in their industry, and use their gifts to build a table of economic empowerment and freedom in a society that seems to hand them only disrespect.



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Black women have called themselves sistahs, aunties, and mothers to emphasize the importance of extended family, and we call ourselves queens in a world that often saw us as slaves. Now more than ever, social media has been a vehicle for us to celebrate living life as Black women. With

hashtags and groups—everything from Black Girls Run, Black women walk (GirlTrek), Black women read, Black women lift weights, Black women lose weight, Black women write, and Black women go to therapy (Therapy for Black Girls) to Black women (you fill in the blank)—we are unapologetically showing up for ourselves and one another. It's nearly impossible to harness a comprehensive and worthy description of what it means to be a Black woman. How do you capture what is as numerous and as individual as snowflakes and yet as wild and untamable as the wind? What do we make of the buffet of characterizations for Black womanhood?

Have you ever considered how you should define your identity as a Black woman? One thing is certain: As Black women, we have been told who we are much more than we have been asked. Let me give you the honor and favor of asking you directly: *How do you define your identity as a Black woman, and most importantly, where did you get your answer?*

By the end of this chapter, you will have a deeper understanding and

created BGR “to showcase empowering images of women of color.” In 2010, she partnered with Black Entertainment Television (BET) to create the BGR Awards show, aimed at honoring and celebrating Black women and girls. See “About Black Girls Rock!,” BGR! Network, accessed February 8, 2024, <https://blackgirlsrock.com/about>.

a more God-empowered answer. Our identity is the foundation of who we are, and it has a direct impact on how we think, feel, and choose to live. There is trustworthy foundational truth about womanhood, an identity bestowed by God, from which we can construct and express the diversity, beauty, and uniqueness of what it means to be Black Christian women. God didn't make us unique the way he did for us to live as if all women are the same in every way. Christ is the ultimate unifier of all Christians (Black, white, Brown, or otherwise), and as believers, we certainly should stay on brand as disciples of Jesus Christ.⁷ However, God made each one of us unique, and that uniqueness provides an opportunity to show off something special about him. "Everyone who bears my name . . . is created for my glory. I have formed them; indeed, I have made them" (Isaiah 43:7).

Understanding Your Identity as a Black Christian Woman

As Black women, we aren't a monolith, and the variance within our group is special and important to God. Around his throne in heaven, with every tribe and nation, there will be Black women from Philly, Atlanta, D.C., Detroit, Dallas, Baltimore, Jacksonville, Columbus, New Orleans, Newark, Tulsa, Birmingham, New York, Chicago, California, Indianapolis, Houston, Mississippi, Charleston, London, Canada, the Caribbean, the Continent, and everywhere else around the globe. We will all be crying, "Holy, holy, holy," some with a southern twang, others with an up-north heaviness, but we will all be there in our Blackness, giving praise to God.

Toni Morrison wrote, "Cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation's literature."⁸ If this is true, how much more, then, should the Christian woman have her identity shaped by the literature of God's kingdom—the Bible? For Black Christian women, the culture can't be the progenitor of our identity. God is the giver of a kingdom woman's

7. Ephesians 4:5–13.

8. Toni Morrison, "Black Matter(s)," in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 148.

identity, and he communicates his will in his Word.⁹ This isn't to suggest that it's wrong to identify with other positive descriptors that have been curated within culture, but it's imperative that the Church Girl discerns the insufficiency and harm of any attempt to define her identity outside of God. Any positive identity or cultural nomenclature aimed at your uplifting serves only as an exclamation mark for who God declared you to be and should never contradict the blessed identity you are called to live out through Christ.

For example, no matter how well-meaning she is, it's inconsistent for a Black Christian woman to label herself as a god or goddess, because this identity is incompatible with the reality that God alone is God. While

“the Black woman is God” ideology¹⁰ is a cultural creation aimed at celebrating and elevating our gender and Blackness to divinity status to dignify and restore Black female identity, which has suffered under racist and sexist oppression, it's important to remember that though created in the image of God, we aren't God or gods. We are created, and God is the creator.¹¹ The same can be said for identities that, on the surface, aren't harmful. Take *boss chick*. It's perfectly fine to call yourself a boss chick when your business goals and decisions make room for Christ to be the Lord over your life. However, if being a boss chick means you are conducting your life and

business on your terms, only occasionally consulting God like he's your business strategist but not your sovereign king, then the boss chick identity has moved from motivational to incompatible with being a Christian.



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9. Joshua 1:8–9; Psalm 119:5, 11; Matthew 4:4; John 17:17; Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:19–21.

10. This ideology traces back to Merlin Stone's book *When God Was a Woman: The Landmark Exploration of the Ancient Worship of the Great Goddess and the Eventual Suppression of Women's Rites* (New York: Harcourt, 1976).

11. Genesis 1:1, 26–27.

To understand our identity is to know that our Blackness and womanhood matter to God and aren't incidental. In America, we've been implicitly—and at times explicitly—taught to funnel our existence and experiences through whiteness as the normative paradigm. We've often had to translate the Christian experience for ourselves as we read books not written by us, to us, or about us. We've had to ingest teachings, illustrations, discipleship, and community in ways that haven't always been relatable to Black women. It doesn't mean that those Christian teachings or practices weren't biblical or even that they were done with malicious intent, but the testimony of many Black women is that church life hasn't always been contextualized so we feel seen, known, valued, and loved.

We've always faced our circumstances with faith in a God who loves us and brings deliverance wherever we need it in our lives. Our survival and thriving have always depended on Church Girls holding on to these truths: God made the Black woman. God died for you, redeemed you, and endowed you with power and purpose. God gave you an identity that only he could give, and you are called to show off the glory of Christ by showing up in life fully as a Black woman. Church Girl, you are just as much blessed and highly favored as anyone else in the body of Christ. It's our honorable task as Church Girls to humbly and passionately search out and celebrate our identity, which undoubtedly dignifies us and glorifies God.

Going Back to the Beginning for a Gospel Vision of Our Identity

Who am I? When Black women have attempted to give an honest answer, our own disorientation in the West, far from our original homeland, has rendered us much like someone recovering from a brain injury. As Black women, our long-term memory is damaged, and we are fighting to make sense of fractured family trees while still charting a course forward with courage and joy. But is our disconnection from Africa the only cause of our inability to confidently answer this question about our identity?

All identity questions force us to consider who we are and who made us. Black women are known for proudly naming the women who came before us. I love to say I am the great-granddaughter of Carrie Davis, Ruby King, and Emaline Cobbs. I love to say I am the granddaughter of



**We honor the
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and mothered us in
the faith.**

Blanche Virginia King and Ruby Taylor. I am grateful to be the daughter of Etta Mae King Taylor. Connection to our maternal ancestors fills us with delight, and the farther we can go back, the more we stick out our chests with pride. These names also provide clues about our identity. We are blessed if we have in our possession pictures and details of their lives. We love to search old photographs of our foremothers, staring into their faces, picking out their noses, their eyes, their profiles, and the unique way they hold their hands, and matching those characteristics to ours. We love to see ourselves in them, but make no mistake—if they are living, it brings them great joy to see themselves in you. Even if you are adopted or have difficulty tracing your biological maternal roots, you can name the women who were like mothers, who raised you, cared for you, combed your hair, bought you clothes, fed you, and told you that you were beautiful and could be anything you wanted to be. We honor the women who discipled us, pointed us to Jesus, and mothered us in the faith. We all can name a mother who was integral in our natural and spiritual identity formation, and if you walked closely with them for some time, I'm sure some of their spiritual DNA and personality has rubbed off on you.

You are their legacy. You are the evidence that their lives mattered, that they survived and had an impact that in some beautiful way will persist even after they take their last breaths. Bearing witness to those women gives us strength and endurance for the journey of life. If they could make it through slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, the Freedom Rides, and domestic work, we can make it too. If they could survive the abuse, abandonment, glass ceilings, and single parenting, we can survive

too. But for the Black Christian woman, does our road map to identity stop there, with our ancestors?

The Black Conscious Community has told Black people that to know ourselves, we must *Sankofa*¹²—that is, we must go back and get the truth of who we are. We are encouraged to go back to our roots, go back to the wisdom, spirituality, teaching, and ways of being of our ancestors and indigenous tribes in Africa for insight into the self. To understand the self, we must in a way *Sankofa*, but for Black Christian women to truly understand our identity, we should go back further than the world encourages us to travel. We must journey back further than southern plantations lined with weeping willows stained with the blood of strange fruit. We must go back further than the Caribbean islands where sand beaches and sugarcane plantations tell the story of our resistance. If we want to understand our identity, we must go back further than the pyramids or the University of Sankoré. We must go back further than the shores of Gorée Island before so many of us were stolen from African nations where we once ruled as kings and queens. If we want to know our identity as Black Christian women, we must *Sankofa* as far back as the Garden of Eden, where a woman named Eve was made by God.

Only God can solve the mystery of identity. Only God can authoritatively and perfectly tell us who we are and how we should live. Our ability to see and receive his divine plan for our lives is the springboard from which we can safely launch into the world, knowing who we are. From there, we can confidently clothe ourselves with the colorful and textured layers of identity and personality that rightfully belong to us. Formation at creation instructs our destination. It's in the garden that we see God do something amazing with dirt and a rib that was the genesis of who we are.

12. *Sankofa*, meaning “go back and fetch it,” is Twi from the Akan people in Ghana and is used in the proverb “It is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind.” This is often symbolized by a bird turning its head backward. The word refers to African people going back to the beginning for the truth. It's broken down as *san* (“return”), *ko* (“go”), *fa* (“look, seek, and take”). See “Sankofa: Embracing Past Lessons for a Brighter Future,” Ayeeko, October 24, 2022, <https://ayeeko.africa/blogs/blog/sankofa-sankofa-symbol-and-meaning>; “About Sankofa,” Stockton University, accessed February 8, 2024, www.stockton.edu/sankofa/about.html.



**Identity formation
must start with
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when, and why
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first woman.**

If you want to truly know yourself, if you want to discern your purpose, you must first go to the garden, the womb of human creation, the original meeting place between God and humanity. What happened in that garden has had life-and-death implications not only for Black women but also for all humankind. Identity formation must start with discovering where, when, and why God formed the first woman. It's this woman, who would be expelled from

the garden with the name Eve, that is our first mother, and she has a lot to teach us if we have ears to hear.

The Creation of Woman

Perhaps you've never heard the details of the creation story, or you've caught bits and pieces of the Eden account but are still unfamiliar with how they relate to Black women's identity. Maybe you know the Genesis story backward and forward but have missed an array of identity implications for your life. I pray I can tell it in a way that is faithful, fresh, and maybe even a little funny—Lord knows we could all use a good laugh, especially because this garden story gets downright frightful real quick. But the treasures we can mine about our identity are incalculable and foundational for how we see ourselves.

Eve spent her entire sinless life being called “woman” and is introduced to us in the second chapter of Genesis as God's good solution to man's aloneness. After God created the entire world by the words of his mouth, he then got close and personal to form his human creation, which would be the *imago Dei*.¹³ Adam had been formed by God out of the dust of the ground and became a living being when God literally “breathed the breath of life into his nostrils” (Genesis 2:7). Ladies, can we just take a moment to imagine what manner of man Adam must have been since

13. Genesis 1:26–27.

he was formed from the ground by God? Let me be honest—I always pictured Adam as Philip Michael Thomas from the 1980s show *Miami Vice*. Surely God didn't sculpt him sloppily, and can we agree Adam was probably fine? I can't imagine that this man would have been inarticulate or fearful. To say he was strong and brilliant is an understatement. He had to be organized, meticulous, and creative, especially given all the naming of animals and stewarding of creation God called him to do.

Yet no matter how handsome and genius you can imagine Adam to have been, when God saw him working, God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper corresponding [suitable] to him" (verse 18). God saw a need in the man, and his loving and wise response was to meet that need without a conversation with Adam. God didn't say to him, "It looks like you could use some help. I'm thinking about making a woman. How do you feel about that?" God didn't ask him for input: "Do you want a blonde or a brunette? Would you like her to be tall or short? Do you want a woman who is good with numbers, or would you prefer a reader? Do you want a woman who has great domestic skills, or would you like her to be artsy and able to sing you to sleep? Or would you like a woman to stimulate your mind with her poetry? Do you want a talkative woman or a subdued, mysterious woman? An adventurous, extroverted woman who says everything that's on her mind or an introvert whose social battery runs low but who will keep you on your toes?"

That's how amazing God is—he knew man. God knew what man needed. God didn't engage Adam to build a woman in the garden like children build a bear at the mall. God fashioned the woman based on his sovereignty. Although Adam was created by God, he was insufficient in his ability to even recognize his need for help, nor did he have the capability to dream up a reasonable request to meet his own need. Church Girl, one of the treasured aspects of your existence is that you were God's idea, God's creation, and God's design and made for God's purpose. He made you to bring goodness and completeness to humanity. He wants you to remember that he is the author, builder, and sustainer of your life.

Then God just knocked the man out and went to work. God performed the first surgical procedure in the middle of a garden, removing

one of Adam's ribs, the very substance that covered and protected the delicate life-sustaining organs of man (lungs and heart). Adam unknowingly contributed (a rib), but he didn't create. From man's rib, God formed someone like him but distinct from him, who would be another glorious image bearer called to rule and reign.¹⁴ God didn't give us too many details, but we do know that when Adam woke up from his divine anesthesia, standing right before his eyes was someone unlike anything else God had created. Can't you picture Adam wiping the sleep from his eyes while trying to make sense of something he didn't recognize?



**You, woman of God,
are a solution, a
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answered prayer,
even to some
unprayed prayers.**

Maybe he was drowsy from surgery and initially thought it was another animal that God wanted him to name, but at some point, she came into clear view, and what Adam beheld was far from an animal but not exactly like him. She was softer than Adam, she was more beautiful than Adam, and she was shaped significantly different from how he was shaped (*amen*, somebody). Did he see a woman that looked like Pam Grier, Beverly Crawford, or Grace Jones? Did she look like Lupita Nyong'o, Viola Davis, Halle Berry, Halle Bailey, or Adut

Akech? Or did she look like you? Can you imagine your first mother? You should try, because it's important for you to see her and see yourself in her.

Then, before this woman had a chance to utter one word to reveal her brilliance, before she could lift one finger to aid him in the stewardship of the garden, before she proved why she would be the glorious means through which Adam would be fruitful and multiply, Adam knew he had been blessed by God! Adam had to have been blown away by this woman, who was the answer to a prayer he hadn't even had the wisdom to pray. Adam never knew he needed anyone, yet he responded to seeing this woman as if he had longed for her from the beginning.

14. Genesis 1:26–27; 2:21–22.

Do you see what this story is saying? You, woman of God, are a solution, a need, a helper, a miracle, an answered prayer, even to some unprayed prayers. God, in his infinite wisdom and benevolence, created because he knew a man needed, a world needed, a generation needed, a church needed, *you*. God knows the worth of your identity because he alone gave it to you. You didn't even earn it yourself; your value can't depreciate with time or circumstances; you are marked with the image of God and were born because he wanted you born. The hope is that people around you, like Adam, will recognize your beauty and worth, too, but regardless, my sister, know it for yourself!

Notice what happened next in the creation story. Upon gazing at this masterpiece from God, Adam cleared his throat and prophetically declared (cue Etta James), "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." The text continues on to tell us, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:23–24, ESV).

Adam was in the Spirit! He saw this woman and began to prophesy. Prior to this, at no other point in his existence had we heard him say anything. We can reasonably assume that he had said something since creation, but in the first two chapters of Genesis, we see only God speaking to Adam and Adam responding to God through actions of obedience. Yet in this passage we have the first recorded words of Adam that God wanted us to hear. They are poetic and prophetic in response to the arrival of this amazing woman. Do you see the impact this woman had on Adam? God made the entire ocean, and you never hear Adam saying anything about its massiveness. God made mountains and lightning, tigers and lions, the sun and moon, yet we don't get one quote from Adam about the beauty and magnificence of those things. God even gave Adam life-and-death instructions about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,¹⁵ and even then, there isn't one record of Adam asking a follow-up question or commenting on the gravity of such a command. But now we hear him talking! He was saying, "She is different from me

15. Genesis 2:15–17.

but from me; I will name her woman.” Knowing, understanding, and relating to the first woman are critical for us because her life prior to sin is the direct expression of God’s desire and created intention for all women. Don’t miss that. Whether married, single, widowed, divorced, with child, or never having birthed a child, we all are inextricably connected to this woman. She is one of our mothers. We have in Genesis 2 the template, the blueprint, the picture, for womanhood. Through the first woman, we are to understand the most important aspects of our identity—that we are needed, wonderfully and specially created, called to kingdom duty, and equal with man in the eyes of the Lord.

You Were Created to Have Equality with Men

Women and men are image bearers of God.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness.” . . .

So God created man
in his own image;
he created him in the image of God;
he created them male and female. (Genesis 1:26–27)¹⁶

These two verses make up one of the most humbling passages in Scripture to me, especially given what we now know about how man and woman failed the temptation in the garden and the blood sacrifice Jesus would pay for our redemption. The idea that the Godhead (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) would decide to make humankind in their image and likeness is mind blowing. To be an image bearer of God is to uniquely and profoundly resemble him in nature, character, and spirit, so much so that when we encounter people, they see and experience something about God. He gave us the ability to show up in the world and show him off.

When I was growing up, people would see me and say, “I see your

16. *Man* in this context means *mankind*, both woman and man.

mother and father in you,” because I looked like them and because I came from them, but I wasn’t either of them. I am me. At the moment of salvation, you received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who helps you in your sanctification. With sanctification, you are becoming more than an image bearer; you are embarking on the lifelong process of looking less like your natural self and beginning to look (act) more like Jesus.

The Bible teaches us that God gave the man and woman he created not only the glorious gift of being his image bearers but also a blessing to ensure they could fulfill the other callings he had in store for them. God called both man and woman to be fruitful, to multiply, and to fill and have dominion over the earth.¹⁷ Not only do we see male and female image bearers as having equal value and worth, but also this subsequent call reveals equality between the man and woman as they co-rule the earth.

A clear picture of equality doesn’t end there. God’s choice to form the woman from man’s rib is theologically important. To emphasize this point, one commentator said of the material used in the creation of woman, “[she was] not made out of his head to top him, not out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.”¹⁸ The woman is built by God with the same bone and flesh of Adam, which persuades Adam to rightly identify their equality—“Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh”—but also to notice and honor their undeniable differences by calling her “woman” (Genesis 2:23).¹⁹

You Were Created to Be a Helper²⁰

In Genesis 2:18, we learn the important reason God created woman and her unique identity in relation to man: “The LORD God said, ‘It is not

17. Genesis 1:28.

18. Quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004), 60.

19. Parts of this section are informed by a chapter I wrote in Eric Mason’s *Urban Apologetics*. For further reading, see Sarita T. Lyons, “Black Women and the Appeal of the Black Conscious Community and Feminism,” in *Urban Apologetics: Restoring Black Dignity with the Gospel*, ed. Eric Mason (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Reflective, 2021).

20. Significant portions of this section were taken from Lyons, “Black Women,” 144–45.

good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper corresponding to him.”

Of all the callings God gave women, one of the most unwelcomed and unappreciated is the distinction of being called a “helper.” Christian women often cringe when they read that woman was specifically created to be a help to man, as if we are mere slaves or seasonings for their lives. But my sister, to loathe this calling only proves ignorance to the beauty and power we are called to walk in.

In verse 18, God decided to make a necessary companion for man, but the next verses don’t detail the creation of woman; rather, they describe how God brought all the animals to Adam so he could name them. Andreas and Margaret Köstenberger reflected on the intention behind this order of events:

What’s going on here? Most likely, God is leading the man through a process of understanding, helping him to realize that he needs a counterpart, human but different, with whom he shares the image of God and can exercise representative rule through the procreation of offspring. In verse 20, then, the same phrase recurs once again: “no suitable helper was found for him.”²¹

Through Adam’s naming of the animals, God “led the man to see that none of the animals could meet his need for companionship. What is more, we see that the woman’s creation isn’t man’s idea; it’s an act of divine grace.”²²

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *ezer* (“helper”) appears twenty-one times. Twice in reference to Eve (Genesis 2:18, 20), three times in reference to Israel’s appeal for military help (Isaiah 30:5; Ezekiel 12:14; Daniel 11:34), but the other sixteen times, it’s referring to God himself.²³ There is no inferiority in the term *ezer*. It shows us wom-

21. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Margaret E. Köstenberger, *God’s Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical-Theological Survey* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2014), 33–34.

22. Köstenberger and Köstenberger, *God’s Design*, 34.

23. The sixteen references to God as the helper of his people are in Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:7, 26, 29; Psalm 20:2; 33:20; 70:5; 89:19; 115:9–11; 121:1–2; 124:8; 146:5; Hosea 13:9.

an's ability to help the way God does, contribute with military-like strength, and be a rescuer. What a powerful piece of our identity! We can draw strength from the matriarchs in the faith and use them as examples of how to live out this powerful calling.

As I shared in the chapter I wrote in *Urban Apologetics*, here are examples of *ezer* women from the Old and New Testaments:

- Midwives Shiphrah and Puah defied the order of Pharaoh and refused to kill the baby boys born to Hebrew women (Exodus 1:15–21).
- Jochebed put her son Moses in a basket on the riverbank to save his life (Exodus 2:3–4).
- Zipporah, the wife of Moses, performed a circumcision (male duty) to save her husband from God's wrath (Exodus 4:24–26).
- The daughters of Zelophehad appealed to Moses to receive their father's inheritance. Their appeal benefited other women and changed the law of the nation (Numbers 26:33; 27:1–11).
- Rahab, a known prostitute, strategically helped the Israelite spies by hiding them in her home. She also used her negotiation skills to help save her family (Joshua 2:1–21; 6:17, 25).
- Deborah was an influential woman. She was used by God as a prophet, judge, and military strategist who organized the battle plan against Sisera and took the honored place beside the military leader Barak in battle. Deborah was also the wife of Lappidoth (Judges 4:1–14).
- Ruth, a widow and pagan woman, refused to leave her mother-in-law Naomi and instead cared for her and took her God as her own. She was a diligent worker and had noble character that caught the attention of Boaz (Ruth 1–4).
- Abigail, wife of Nabal, intervened to save her household from being killed by David and his men because of her foolish husband's actions (1 Samuel 25:3–35).

- Huldah, a prophet, was asked to interpret the book of the law by the high priest Hilkiah and King Josiah. Her interpretation led to religious reform in Judah (2 Kings 22:11–23:25).
- Joanna, Susanna, Mary Magdalene, and many other women helped Jesus’s ministry by giving financially (Luke 8:2–3).
- Mary Magdalene was the first person Jesus called to proclaim the good news of his resurrection to the other disciples (John 20:16–18).
- Lydia was a businesswoman who provided a meeting place in her home and gave money for the new Christian church in Philippi (Acts 16:11–15, 40).
- Priscilla and her husband, Aquila, were tentmakers and co-workers in ministry with Paul, planting churches. The church in Ephesus met in their house, and she and her husband taught Apollos and corrected his doctrine. They also risked their lives for Paul and experienced persecution (Acts 18:24–26; Romans 16:3–5).
- Phoebe was a deacon and benefactor for gospel ministry. She was trusted by Paul to deliver his letter to the church in Rome (Romans 16:1–2).
- Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis were Paul’s helpers and co-laborers in ministry. They were described as women who “worked very hard in the Lord” (Romans 16:6, 12).
- Junia, who co-labored with Paul in ministry, was imprisoned for the Gospel and commended among the apostles for her faithfulness and character (Romans 16:7). She and her husband Andronicus “were among the first generation of Christian apostolic leaders.”²⁴

24. Nijay K. Gupta, “Junia, the Female Apostle Imprisoned for the Gospel,” *Christianity Today*, March 23, 2023, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/march-web-only/junia-female-apostle-paul-fellow-prisoner-preaching-gospel.html.

- Euodia and Syntyche were co-workers in ministry with Paul who were commended for contending for the gospel (Philippians 4:2–3).
- Lois and Eunice, Timothy’s grandmother and mother, taught Timothy the ways of the sacred scriptures and were known for their great faith (2 Timothy 1:5, 3:14–15).²⁵

You Were Created to Have Influence for Good, Not Evil (Genesis 3:6)²⁶

One of the ways *Merriam-Webster* defines influence is “the power or capacity of causing an effect in indirect or intangible ways.”²⁷ As women, we can use our influence for good—to support and encourage our husbands, friends, and faith leaders; spread the gospel; and point people to God. How you steward your influence can be a type of help.

It is undeniable that the first example in Scripture of a woman’s influence is a negative expression. However, it nonetheless shows just how powerful her influence is. Despite the clear command that God gave Adam about not eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the Bible tells us that after the woman listened to the counsel of the serpent, she ate the fruit and then gave it to her husband, and he ate it.²⁸ Can you believe that? Adam said nothing. There was no rebuke, no rejection, and no running by Adam. Instead of spiritual leadership, Adam was eating the fruit too. She gave him the fruit and he ate it. We cannot deny that it reveals God gave woman influential power. What should we take from this? Church Girl, you have power, but how are you going to use it?

We often talk about who has power and who doesn’t, but we rarely discuss how to wield it. Power in the hands of the wise and godly is good; power in the hands of the fool and ungodly is not—they’re bound to

25. Lyons, “Black Women,” 144–45.

26. Significant portions of this section were taken from Lyons, “Black Women,” 145–46.

27. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “influence,” accessed February 29, 2024, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/influence.

28. Genesis 3:6.

misuse and abuse it. How can we steward the gift of power responsibly? I believe we can learn important lessons from some of our favorite superhero movies. In these movies, when the hero first discovers their powers and is learning to use them, we often see the inadvertent chaos the person causes, a lot of times involving destruction of property. But then they find a mentor who understands their powers and can help them learn ways to use these powers for good.²⁹

That's what Church Girls need: mature women in the faith guiding us on stewarding this power of influence well. I believe the church and other Christian woman have misunderstood and misused the power of influence God gave us. Perhaps this has resulted in men in the church making unfair conclusions about women. Having power is a weighty responsibility, and both men and women in various contexts have access to power and are capable of misusing and abusing it.

The question we must ask ourselves is *What am I filled with?* Or another way of saying it is *What am I under the influence of?* When a person drives drunk, they are charged with a DUI. This is a very serious crime because it puts the driver and everyone else on the road at risk. When we are filled with alcohol, our reflexes are diminished, and our abilities to think clearly, steer straight, and focus are worsened. As we seek to steward our superpower of influence, it's imperative we remember that whatever fills us controls us. God tells us to not be drunk with wine, and to apply this to our lives more broadly, anything that fills, intoxicates, dominates, and controls us can be substituted for wine: a substance, a state of mind, information, an ideology, a belief, an emotion. Church Girl, are you being filled with God's Spirit, or are you being filled with false teaching, anger, hopelessness, the love of money, foolishness, carnality, bitterness, fear, or pride? When we are filled with God's Spirit, we can all be found guilty of an LUI—living under the influence of God.

How do we ensure that we are being filled with the Holy Spirit? We have to draw near to God, get in the presence of the Spirit through our worship, get in community where the Spirit is being exalted, get in the Word of God, sit under sound biblical teaching, listen to music that ush-

29. Lyons, "Black Women," 146.

ers us into worship, pray, confess and repent of our sins, and, most importantly, surrender and submit to what God has called us to do. We must do this over and over again, because we can't be filled with one "spiritual sip." I mention these things not as legalistic practices or a rigid spiritual checklist but rather as some of the daily habits of grace that the disciple of Jesus Christ is called to. This is the life of the Church Girl who walks in step with the Spirit. While the Holy Spirit dwells within every believer, he can be grieved when we rebel against God,³⁰ and his activity and productivity within our lives can be quenched.³¹ As women, if we allow this to take place, we forfeit experiencing the fullness of the Spirit's work and power in and through us and limit our ability to be women with godly influence. When filled with the Spirit, we allow him to fully occupy and control every area of our lives so that our actions are fruitful, our thoughts are sound, our motives are pure, and our influence as women glorifies God.

Eve's ultimate redemption reminds me of a scripture God used to comfort my heart during a very difficult season of illness I suffered as a result of some of my own poor lifestyle choices: "I will not die, but I will live and proclaim what the LORD has done. The LORD disciplined me severely but did not give me over to death" (Psalm 118:17-18). You may be able to recall times when you experienced the discipline of God for your own unhealthy or disobedient decisions. But Eve's ability to be used by God wasn't destroyed, and neither is yours.

Those who are redeemed by Christ inherit the right to eternal life. Our unrighteousness is cleansed by the blood of Jesus, and we are made holy through his perfection.



As we seek to steward our superpower of influence, it's imperative we remember that whatever fills us controls us.

30. Ephesians 4:30.

31. 1 Thessalonians 5:19.

Thankfully, the first misuse of a woman's influential power was not where the story ended for her. That's good news for you, Church Girl. We all sin and at times struggle to steward the gifts and callings God has given us, but that doesn't have to be the end of our stories. Misusing our influence doesn't disqualify us from being used by God in the future, because he is faithful to forgive us if we repent. We must humble ourselves and be teachable under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit and Christian discipleship so that we can effectively walk in our "superpower." Just like superheroes in movies, we must be trained to steward our influence well. In Hebrews 12:11, the writer tells us, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (NIV).

The woman's story did not end when sin entered the world. God had a plan for her to produce a blessed harvest of righteousness by calling her to be a life giver even after she was a co-conspirator in death entering the world. God wants to do the same through you! Church Girl, your power of influence is an important tool in God's redemption plan. I ask you: What harvest of righteousness will you allow God to produce through you, as you use your influence for his honor and glory?³²

You Were Created to Be Free

We see that, from the beginning, woman was created and defined by God. She was created to be an image bearer of God, have equality and co-rule with man as they filled the earth, be a helper, and use her influence for good. Woman is God's idea. Woman is God's creation. From the beginning, woman was declared "very good" by God (Genesis 1:31). Woman was made for a specific purpose, without any design input or negotiation from man. Woman was created as the solution for the lack of human community,³³ and she was the inspiration for the first recorded

32. Lyons, "Black Women," 147.

33. Genesis 2:18–22, 24.

human speech.³⁴ It's in this fundamental identity that God has called you and me to find joy and mission and to agree with him that we are very good.

But here is the tricky part. Even with all we know about the importance of the first woman, we must face the reality that she wasn't immune to the serpent. The woman was given many identity markers, and one of them was freedom. The highest expression of love is the ability to be free to choose, even to choose wrongly. God's love frees you to reject and hate him while he keeps on loving you. In fact, our first mother is the only woman who ever walked the earth free from sin. Though Eve listened to the serpent, disobeyed God, and fell with the man,³⁵ she wasn't created fallen; she was created free. *Free* is a beautiful God-given identity for women—one that he wanted us to have in the garden and one that he still wants us to have today. The gospel message is that, through a relationship with Christ, we can walk in our God-designed identity as free women.



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There is so much talk of freedom in our culture because Black women haven't always been free. When it comes to fighting for the rights of women—or even when it comes to the culture's philosophies about self-actualization and autonomy—it seems the highest aim of life is to be free. There are so many marches, books, and lectures on how unfree women are and how to fight for freedom. Being unfree is a painful product of the Fall, but the truth is, the woman God made was free from the beginning. Freedom for women isn't a feminist idea; it's God's idea. The world wants you to believe that true freedom is living however you

34. Genesis 2:23.

35. Genesis 3:1–7.

want, while living according to God's standards is considered bondage. However, sin, not God, puts us in bondage.³⁶ The Lord *made* the first woman—as he makes all women who are in Christ—free.³⁷

The one critical difference between a biblical view of freedom and the world's definition of freedom is that our freedom is a call to live on God's terms, not our own.³⁸ Freedom for the Christian woman is gained, first, through a relationship with Christ and, second, through submission to the perfect lordship of a loving, just God. Man and woman were free in the garden, but they had boundaries established by God. God wants you to know that your identity as a free woman is actualized in your willingness to honor his boundaries and commands. My sister, you are truly free when you obey him.



God wants you to know that your identity as a free woman is actualized in your willingness to honor his boundaries and commands.

The first woman's identity was free. The woman had a mind to think, emotions to feel, a heart to contemplate, a will to choose, and ears to hear. She was so free she could hear a voice that wasn't God's and follow it. While our first mother used her freedom to disobey God and brought sin into the world, through Christ and the help of the Holy Spirit, we can make another choice every day. The great gift of freedom must be handled responsibly. The good news is that if we obey God, live for

him, and allow him to rule and reign in our lives, we will get the blessed opportunity to feel the peace and power of what it really means to be a free woman and share it with other women. Free women free women.³⁹ We can become great emancipators in the earth. We will, both socially and spiritually, like Harriet Tubman, lead other women through under-

36. John 8:34.

37. John 8:36; Romans 6:6–7.

38. Titus 2:11–12; 1 John 3:4–10.

39. Adapted from Pricelis Perreux-Dominguez of Full Collective, where she sold merchandise that read “Free people free people.” See “Our Mission + Vision,” Full Collective, <https://wearefullcollective.com/about-full-collective>.

ground railroads, fighting the ungodly oppression of women in the world and fighting demonic oppression by pointing people to Christ, the greatest liberator.

If the Son sets you free, you really will be free. (John 8:36)

A Gospel Vision for Your Identity

Having a gospel vision for your identity starts with knowing and accepting that God made you and therefore he alone has the right to tell you who you are. You can't know yourself apart from knowing God. He first established your identity at creation, and he gave you some similar traits and callings to those of men, but you also have some traits that are unique. Like your first mother in the garden, you are uniquely created to be a helper, an influencer for good, and free within the boundaries God established. The creation of woman—and of your life—was not an afterthought but a needed and beautiful addition to bring balance to the world and to show off something special about God's glory. Even after sin, God had a plan to redeem humanity and use you and all women to be a witness for Christ who brings restoration to the fallen world.

Discussion Questions



LIGHT: God made you and gave you your identity at creation.

1. Why is it important whom we allow to define us as Black women?
2. Who or what has most shaped your identity as a Black Christian woman?
3. Why does God have the ultimate right and authority to give us our identity? How satisfied are you with what God said from the beginning? What is a struggle to embrace, and what do you joyously embrace?

4. What is one area of God's unique design of woman discussed in this chapter that you want to lean into more as you walk out your identity as a Church Girl?



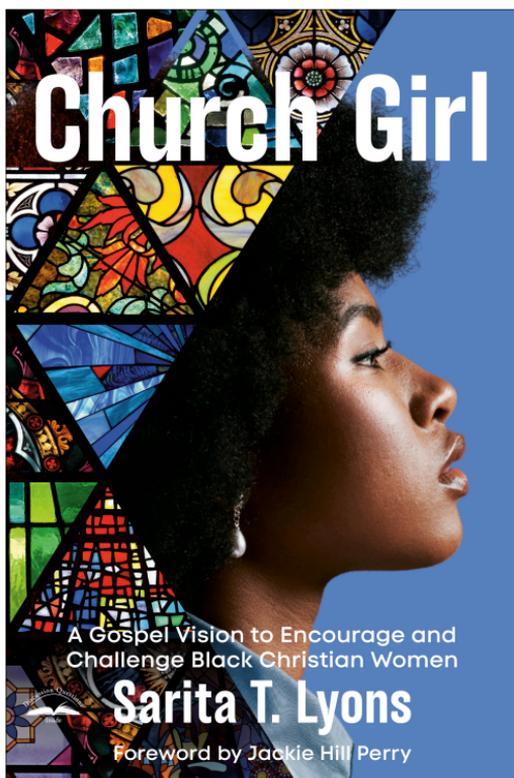
LENS: The Bible should be the lens through which we fundamentally understand our identity.

1. Have you ever imagined yourself or another Black woman as a daughter of Eve? Why or why not? What influence does your answer have on how you identify with God's vision for womanhood from the beginning?
2. How does the biblical account of the creation of woman not align with some of the world's narratives of Black women's identity?



LOVE: God's love for you is evidenced by his care in creating woman.

1. How is God's love for you on display in how he made woman?
2. What are some things you now love more about yourself and other Black women after thinking about God's intention for women?



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