When God launches a mission, one thing’s for certain. He’ll get where He’s going every time, right? Hey, He’s God. Maker of Mars and Venus and the whole rest of the universe. Let’s say His mission is to create something—planets, people, new life, new civilizations, whatever. The result will always be the same. When the mission is over, and He pulls back to size up His work, He will be a satisfied Creator. It’s all going to be there, everything in working order, no missing parts. Everything.

Everything? Why don’t we check the master plan and find out?

The Bible is the log of God’s eternal mission, and the Creation account is His first entry. Captain’s log, Genesis, chapter 1. Five brief paragraphs record the events. Leave it to the Maker of heaven and earth to reduce the creation of the universe to so few words. Like any log, the events are recorded with utmost efficiency, which means any words that are repeated immediately attract your attention. As you read these five entries, notice the evaluation at the end of each day:

*God called the dry land earth, and the gathering of the waters He called seas; and God saw that it was good.* (Genesis 1:10, emphasis added)
DIFFERENT by DESIGN

The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit with seed in them, after their kind; and God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1:12, emphasis added)

God made the two great lights . . . to govern the day, and . . . the night. . . . And God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1:16, 18, emphasis added)

God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves . . . and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1:21, emphasis added)

God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1:25, emphasis added)

So far, so good. The creation mission was off to a great start. All systems go. But then something changed. The Scripture log rewinds and zooms in on the action, giving us something like an instant replay. To this point, it was good at the end of each day’s work. Five times those words were repeated. But now we read:

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.” (Genesis 2:18, emphasis added)

Come again? This sounds strangely similar to, “Houston, we have a problem.” But wasn’t this God’s mission? Yes, it was. And for the first time the Creator was dissatisfied with His work. Something was missing. By this time God had made Mars and Venus . . . and Adam, the first male, but it became quickly apparent that it was “not good for man to be alone.” Naturally, God had a solution.

The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones,  
And flesh of my flesh;  
She shall be called Woman,  
Because she was taken out of Man.”
—Genesis 2:22–23
When Adam first laid eyes on Eve, a rough paraphrase of his sentiments might be, “Wow! Look at this creature! She’s incredible! Lions and tigers and bears . . . oh my, they’re OK, but she’s something special. She’s . . . like me. Then again, she’s different too. Wow!” OK, maybe this is a stretch, but Adam definitely liked what he saw. And his thumbs-up response leads to the final conclusion:

_God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good._ (Genesis 1:31, emphasis added)

Even with the momentary glitch, it was a great beginning. Man and woman were now both on the scene, inhabitants of planet Earth. They may not have come from Mars and Venus, but their arrival was no less spectacular. And from the Creator’s log, we can make two important observations. The first is this:

**Men and women are the same,** _equally honored_ **by God.**

This equality shows up in three areas. **Men and women are equally honored in creation.** This is how Genesis records it: “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (1:27). There is no hint here that women are anything but equal to men. Eve was nothing like all those lions and tigers and bears, oh my, not to mention the thousands of other animals Adam had just spent so much time naming. Not even close. To his credit, he saw right off that, like him, she was unique in all creation. She alone shared with him the distinction of being created in God’s image. She obviously shared God’s blessing as well, and Adam picked up on this blessing. When he said that she was “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23), he was elevating and praising Eve for who she alone was—his equal in the eyes of their Maker.

It’s important to notice here that there is no hint of female inferiority in the Creation account. Eve was made of the same stuff as Adam. The right stuff. They were _both_ unique among all of God’s creation, made in the very image of God Himself. They were spirit beings with eternal souls who were designed to relate in a beautiful way to the eternal God of creation.
Notice too that the primary focus wasn’t then, and isn’t today, one of physical appearance. God is spirit, not flesh, as Jesus declared:

*God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.* (John 4:24, emphasis added)

The apostle Paul concurred:

*The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.* (Romans 8:16, emphasis added)

The point is, men and women are absolutely in a category of their own on planet Earth and throughout the universe. They are, from Creation, born with a calling to relate, to know and love their Creator, and to reflect His image.

Yes, we have sinned and are fallen and that image is therefore marred. But we are still the pinnacle of God’s creation: Eve at the side of Adam, man and woman, both as eternal spiritual beings who bear the image of God. The implications of this fact on how we treat one another will be explored throughout this book. For now, though, just log this truth away: Men and women are equal in creation.

This notion should strike citizens of the United States of America as, well, self-evident, just as it did those who founded this nation. Listen to the opening words of our own Declaration of Independence.

*When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.*

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

Do you get the picture? As the Founding Fathers recognized, we’re all “created equal.”
Men and women are equally honored in Christ. If you jump to the New Testament, you’ll find these words from the apostle Paul:

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27–28)

Paul’s words are crystal. Like God the Father, as far as Christ is concerned, men and women are equal. No, this doesn’t mean that at times in the life of the church, for example, or in the home, male and female roles won’t be different. (We’ll talk more about this later on.) Paul wasn’t talking about assuming the same roles; he was talking about assuming the same identity. Male or female, we are Christians—both highly valued, divinely chosen, significantly gifted children of the King! When it comes to gender, there are no second-class citizens in the kingdom.

One common error in the logic of our culture is the assumption that role distinctions among men and women must imply inequality. Don’t buy it. Different roles on a team do not mean that teammates are unequal. To say that would be as absurd as suggesting that the man on a mixed-doubles tennis team is more important than the woman. As on the tennis court, the roles or responsibilities God calls us to as men and women are often the same. In fact, the vast majority of God’s plan for us is directed to all, both men and women. As children of God, we are assured that He values both daughter and son alike. The fact, which we will study later, that God also has a unique calling for men as husbands and women as wives should never call into question the core value of men or women in Christ. In the Savior, as His children, we are one, equally gifted and valued. In both creation and in Christ, men and women are equal—but there’s more.

Men and women are equally honored with the riches of God’s grace. Peter put it like this when addressing husbands: “And show her [your wife] honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life” (1 Peter 3:7).

We need to recognize what a radical cultural shift this view represented for Peter, Paul, and the other apostles. To say that women shared in the riches that we inherit meant that women
were equally gifted, equally honored, equally prepared to live for God and walk with Him. To understand how at odds this view was with the culture, look at these words of Aristotle, one of the great influences on Greek thinkers of that day.

A female is a deformed male. The male seed, implanted in the female, will produce male offspring unless the seed is defective or affected negatively by an external influence such as a south wind which is moist.

Talk about gender issues. All it takes, according to the prevailing wisdom of the ancient Greek world, is a moist south wind and you’re in trouble. Not a very esteeming view of women, was it? But the Greeks weren’t alone. In that day there was also a common Jewish daily prayer that said, “I thank my Lord that I am not a Gentile nor a woman.” This is the culture out of which Paul came and to which he wrote, “[In Christ] there is neither male nor female” (Galatians 3:28). It is to this culture that Paul said, “You [Christians] are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28), and to which Peter said, “You [Christian] husbands” show your wives “honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life” (1 Peter 3:7).

Our differences are obvious, but when it comes to our standing before God, women and men are the same, equally honored by Him. It’s important that we get this straight if we’re going to build healthy relationships. How important?

This is ground zero. This is where healthy relationships are launched. Unfortunately, the pendulum has swung too far in both directions over the years. For centuries, feminine traits were denigrated and women were underappreciated and often oppressed. Women were often treated as second-class citizens of God’s kingdom. They were relegated to rolling bandages for the missionaries, running the nursery, or keeping those potlucks hot and tasty. In the home, they were to fulfill their support role faithfully while being careful to stay in their places. Husbands seldom consulted with their wives, leading their families as if the wives were simply silent, live-in servants.

I do not mean to imply that all churches operated this way, but far too often this was the case. Women truly were viewed and therefore treated as inferior to men. Masculinity was strong and esteemed. Femininity was weak and devalued. For this abuse of
Off to a (Somewhat) Heavenly Start

God’s Word and the women and wives of His kingdom we as men must say “We’re sorry.” We must value women as the gifts and strengths of God’s creation that they are. But as is often true, in its zealous attempt at a course correction, our culture has driven us too far off course in the other direction. A brutal bumper sticker I saw the other day underscores how far this shift has taken us. It read: “Women who want to be equal to men lack ambition.”

In today’s world, it is now fashionable to bash both men and many things we call masculine. A quick review of sitcoms displays a long line of males portrayed as insensitive, immature misfits who are emotional and marital cripples. From the Archie Bunkers of an earlier generation to Bart Simpson today, the message of the media too often is that men are miserable excuses for partners in this grand adventure called marriage.

Perhaps the worst example appeared in an otherwise hilarious and popular program that topped the ratings for the better part of its ten-year run on prime-time television. I’m talking about the character George Costanza in the sitcom Seinfeld. Frankly, none of the guys on the show, including the star, could have won awards for sensitivity to women. But there was one guy who thought of nothing but women and whose every thought of them or word to them was either selfish or demeaning or downright demented. The sad part is that, like most good comedy, this character’s weird ways with women were funny because there was just enough truth in them.

Somewhere between these extremes is where we find the truth, that God has created men and women as different, but no less equal. Masculinity and femininity are both good, both valuable and equally essential for healthy friendships or families. If God thought we needed a world of just men, He would have provided Adam with an Eddie, not an Eve. If He only valued a feminine touch, He could have created Adam with a strictly softer, sensitive side. The truth is, though, that the beauty and diversity of our Creator is best displayed in Adam and Eve as a team. The best of all we call feminine—tenderness, gentleness, mercy—flows from the image of God. Likewise, those qualities deemed more masculine—toughness, strength, courage—spring from our God who represents all of these.

I am not implying that men don’t need to nurture that softer side. Nor would I suggest that women cannot nor should not dis-
play strength, toughness, or fortitude. God calls both men and women, husbands and wives, to be tough and tender, people of justice and mercy, "full of grace and truth" as we imitate Jesus. But most would agree the evidence is undeniable that as male and female we start from different points. And my point, which I believe is God's point, is that that's OK. It's just the way He planned it.

But this is only half the story. The next point is that the Bible also makes something else clear, which is our second major observation:

Men and women are different, uniquely and wonderfully fashioned by God.

This begins to come clear when God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18).

A helper suitable for him. To get the picture here, you need to understand two words. The Hebrew word for "helper" means to be a support, one who comes alongside to encourage and assist you, to complete you. It obviously refers to someone who is different. Down through history, this text has often been wrongly used to teach that women, the helpers, are inferior to men, that their role is one of subservience. This view misses the mark by more than a few light-years. This same word is used nineteen times in other Genesis passages; sixteen times it refers to how God, or Yahweh, is the helper of Israel...the helper for us. Do you see the significance? This term is used to describe God! There's no way it implies inferiority. The helper is different, yes. Distinctly different. But as we learned earlier, no less equal.

The helper completes, assists, fills in the gaps. God did just that for Israel and continues to be a "helper" to us today. Dare I imply that as my "help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16) He is inferior to me? No way! However, for God to truly help me, He must be different from me. It's the same for my wife. Just as a puzzle is not made up of identical pieces, neither is a marriage, which is the emphasis of the second key word.

That word is the term suitable, and it is a particularly interesting word. It's from a Hebrew word most commonly translated "in front of." It’s also translated sixteen times in the Old
Testament as “opposite.” God was saying, “I will make you a helper opposite you, or in front of you.” I think the essence of what He was saying is, “I want to make one who will complement you, but this person is not going to be exactly like you.” The last thing any of us needs is someone exactly like us.

A suitable helper. One who will complement another. One who will complete the other. God is talking about women being similar to but different from men for good reason. How different? Just stop by a local park during baseball season and you’ll find out.

I’m talking about the difference between a guys’ little league game and a girls’ softball game. To the casual observer, baseball and softball are pretty much alike. Pitch. Hit. Catch. Throw. But the similarities end right there. I realized this a couple of years ago as I watched our son’s little league games and our daughter’s softball games. Let’s say the girls are up to bat first. Here’s the typical routine:

Coach gathers the team in a circle and they all join hands.
Everybody (enthusiastically and often with a touch of choreography): “With a B-B-B and an A-A-A and an L-L-L, hit the ball!”
The circle breaks and they all pile into the dugout as if they’re boarding a bus for Disneyland.

If the guys bat first, things start differently:

Coach (gruffly): “OK, everybody in here!”
The players bunch up in a circle and stick their hands in the middle.
Players (in monotone unison): “Hunh!” (This is guy talk for: “With a B-B-B and an A-A-A and an L-L-L, hit the ball!”)
The guys walk quietly, in manly fashion, to the dugout, sit down, put on their game faces, and spit every once in a while.

Throughout their respective games, the differences between boys and girls are glaring. On the field, the guys are all business, grunting occasional one-liner baseball clichés like “Hey, batter, batter, batter” or “Hum babe, fire hard” (guy talk for “Throw a
fastball”). Of course they’re having fun, but it’s not cool to show it. When the game’s over there are the mumbled obligatory chants for the winners and a few tough-guy high fives all around—and then the players head to the car. The losers have it written all over their faces.

Meanwhile, over on the softball diamond, a carnival atmosphere prevails. On the field, the girls are singing. Smiling. Laughing. Obviously having fun. In the dugout, every player not batting is busy cheering. Hit, walk, or strikeout, no matter. The bench is on your side. In fact, they get everybody on your side. While the guys sit stoically when they’re in the dugout, the girls all hop on the bench, spin around to face the crowd, and lead a cheer (all accompanied by a well-rehearsed dance routine in the dugout): “Stand up! Clap your hands! Get some spirit in the stands!”

After the game, it’s join hands time again around the pitcher’s mound for the winners to give their opponents another specially choreographed cheer, then rush over to their dugout and form a human tunnel for them to run through, cheering all the way. During postgame snack time, don’t bother asking who won the game. They’re just all glad to be together. One big happy team. For them, it’s not about winning or losing. It’s about relating.

Same game. But depending on who’s playing, it’s a very different game. Why? Because of the way God made them.

In an earlier day, women may have been criticized for not being competitive enough, for lacking that killer instinct to put away the enemy (make that “opponent”), and today, our girls are getting tougher. Now the boys are viewed as inferior because they lack sensitivity. So society continues to try and make its men more tender and its women tougher. Is this a bad idea? Of course not. God wants men and women, boys and girls to mature toward Christlikeness, toward godliness. But let’s not forget that these differences are also part of God’s original design so that we can compete in life, not with one another. It’s not male versus female, but together, as a team it’s male and female versus life.

So what have we learned? Here are three tips to get us started as a team. Think of them as a review of all we’ve said so far. Accept, appreciate, and think team.

1. Men and women were different from day one, so accept their differences. There’s been a tendency in our culture to view
some of the attributes of women as inferior. Feminine attributes like nurturing or deep caring or emotional sensitivity have sometimes been portrayed as weaknesses. That is not the biblical view. Then again, as the pendulum has swung the other way in recent years, it’s become politically correct for women to bash males and ridicule their masculinity. Actually, the pendulum started swinging as far back as the 1970s. What was that fill-in-the-blank line Gloria Steinem came up with? “A woman without a man is like a fish without ________.” Her answer: a bicycle. It’s funny, but it’s out of balance too. God’s Word says our differences are intentional, and we should both accept them.

After Becky and I were married, we had to face the fact that we handle conflict differently. I’m a quick closer. I hate unresolved tension. When I know I’ve blown it, I’m eager to confess, kiss, and make up—now! Becky agrees with one-third of my approach. She’s eager for me to confess, but the kissing and making up parts come a little slower for her. She needs time to process the hurt I’ve caused. She needs cooldown time. I’m like the gas jets on a stovetop. When you turn them off, they’re off. Becky’s more like an electric range. She can turn off the juice to the burner, but it stays hot to the touch for a while. So I need to give her some time to cool off. And that’s OK. We both need to deal with it quickly, but how quickly can vary from one person to another.

2. Men and women are uniquely designed by God, so appreciate them. God is the One who thought these two creatures up, men and women. God designed them, differences and all, and it’s normal to appreciate, even be attracted by, these differences. I like the way one researcher put it. After surveying nearly twenty-five thousand couples, this is what he discovered:

The strange and beautiful Venuses were a mysterious attraction to the Martians. Their differences especially attracted the Martians. Where the Martians were hard, the Venuses were soft. Where the Martians were angular, the Venuses were round. Where the Martians were cool, the Venuses were warm. In a magical and perfect way their differences seemed to complement each other.1

That’s reality. Appreciate the differences. To make this insight really practical, I’d suggest that you make a list of the top five differences between yourself and your wife
or husband. Begin to pray and thank God for those differences. Ask Him to help you see how they add strength to the fabric of your marriage.

To get a picture of how these complementary differences can create strength, take a close look at a piece of plywood. You’ll see that that remarkably sturdy sheet of building material is comprised of surprisingly flimsy layers of wood. But when those layers are glued together at perpendicular angles, the resulting product is so strong that it was used in the construction of the first airplanes and is a mainstay of the construction industry today. Note, too, how plywood’s strength in turn brings resilience to whatever it is used to construct. Similarly, a strong relationship can be a source of stability to those who are associated with it.

So, instead of sweating the differences, talk about the advantages of being different. Some of the very qualities that cause you friction can become reasons to celebrate.

3. Finally, men and women are designed to support each other, so think team! God wants us to work together, to use our differences to make us both stronger. The best teams are always built on common goals and values, yet different skills and strengths are needed to balance each other out. It’s interesting that most couples are attracted, initially, to areas of common interest. But then real love, especially romantic love, is often cemented by an appreciation of our differences.

A number of years ago, I met a couple who illustrated this perfectly. I’ll call them Jack and Jill. They were college students attending my church. They were the ideal couple. Both were involved in the same Christian organization. They had the same values. Similar life goals drew them together. They fell in love, were soon married after some premarital counseling by yours truly, and their marriage got off to a great start. But it wasn’t long before increasing friction began to heat up their relationship. In no time, they went from being madly in love to being just . . . mad.

Jill was especially mad as, on the brink of divorce, they came to talk with me. I remember asking her, “What was it, Jill, that drew you to Jack?”

“You know what attracted me to Jack?” she asked in reply. “I always admired his temperament. He was steady and solid. Nothing ever rattled him. And when I blew it, like I did a lot with
my quick temper, he wouldn’t react to my anger. He kept his cool and forgave me.”

“Well then, what’s the problem?” I probed.

“The problem is I’m trying to get us to deal with our issues,” she said, “but he won’t get off his duff. He’s so blasted steady and solid it’s like he’s planted in cement! And if I get mad and yell at him, it doesn’t do any good. Do you know what he does? He forgives me!”

She was serious. The very things that had attracted her to Jack were repulsive now that she lived with him every day.

The mission men and women face every day is not only how to live with our differences but, once we get into relationships, to figure out how to turn them into strengths. We really seem to be from different worlds. So did God make a “mistake” by creating us so different? I don’t think so. Remember, He said it was very good. You see, God had a plan for bringing these two worlds together. The two really can become one.

But how? As we’re about to discover, no relationship is a better proving ground for this all-important assignment than marriage.

NOTE