

Stop Promoting Gendered Hierarchy!

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

This article is dedicated to two good men in my life, my father, Ken, and my husband, Luke. My father has always supported me, encouraged me, believed in me, loved me, and has never made me feel *lesser*. I wish there were more fathers like him. My husband's love and support mean the world to me. He has always treated me as an equal, affirmed my value in our marriage, and rejoiced in my worth as a fellow-worker in the ministry of Christ. I am thankful for them both. "A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children." (Proverbs 13:22)

One of the more detrimental teachings that I believe has defined the church throughout her history and which continues to exert influence today is the idea that God established some kind of hierarchy of men over women at creation. Hierarchy, it's claimed, was, one; either part of God's *original plan for humanity*, established *from the beginning* or, two; God's *prescriptive punishment* (primarily upon the woman), *because of sin*.

This hierarchy, if it *was* part of God's original plan, also then flows through into a church or spiritual context; God's arrangement for not just the first creation, but also the second (new) creation. While this 'divine order' or hierarchical structure might (seemingly) have been largely abandoned, particularly in our 21st-century, secular, western culture (it hasn't really), it should nevertheless continue to be taught and implemented (and in many places, still is) in the life and function of the church, and should inform our basic understanding of the relationship that exists between

men and women.

Off To A Bad Start

Most people would perhaps claim that they don't believe women are *lesser than men* in their *basic humanness* (although the history of female infanticide, particularly in countries such as China, India, and Pakistan would argue otherwise). Many people, particularly from a Judeo-Christian worldview, might affirm that men and women are *equal in worth and dignity* as fellow humans (all of us, individually, are still more important (if we're grading) than *animals*).

Nevertheless, in Christian circles, many would still point to the reality *that God made Adam first*.

Eve was created second, *as a helper* for Adam, and this fact – *the order of creation*, together with *the purpose for which each was created* proves some kind of divinely established hierarchy.

The bottom line: men were *made first, to image God*, and women were created *second to help men*.

It's somewhat painful to hear it explained, in vaguely apologetic tones, that Eve was perhaps not much more than an afterthought, created to assist with the collecting of firewood, the gathering of berries, and other mundane pre-history tasks that would prove to be all too much for Adam on his own. (God had hoped one of the animals might do the trick but, alas, no joy there...).

It's even more disappointing to see this perspective outworked in the church, resulting, in practical terms, in women being prevented in many places from contributing in any kind of meaningful ways, as they are gifted. Some hesitate at limiting a woman's contribution entirely (*soft complementarian*; we'll get to that term in a moment) and agree that women can bring their gifts and abilities *in a limited capacity* and as long as

it's *under the leadership of men*. However, hard complementarians are, in reality, hardly complementary in practice, allowing little to no contribution from women in the church.

Firstly, What Is Meant By 'Hierarchy'?

hierarchy

/'hi:əɹɑ:kɪ/

noun

- 1. a system in which people or things are arranged according to their importance:*
- 2. the people in the upper levels of an organisation who control it*
- 3. a system in which the people within a company or organisation are organised into levels according to the authority they have:*

*"Hierarchy describes a system that organises or ranks things, often according to **power or importance**. At school, the principal is at the top of the staff hierarchy, while the seniors rule the student hierarchy. Also known as a **pecking order** or **power structure**, a hierarchy is a formalised or simply implied understanding of **who's on top or what's most important**. All that sorting and ranking can be helpful if you're a business administrator, but if you find yourself arranging all the produce in your fridge according to a hierarchy of color, size, and expiration date, you might want to consider visiting a therapist." | [Vocabulary.com](https://www.vocabulary.com) (emphasis mine)*

Implicit in hierarchy are elements of *power, importance, or authority* (watch for these words later), none of which are necessarily wrong, in and of themselves, of course. For example, in a company or organisation, it may be appropriate and wise to confer more power or authority on someone with

greater experience or a higher level of qualification.

Items that are rare, antique, or highly sought after (gold!) are deemed to be more valuable or important than more common or mass-produced items.

And, interestingly, our basic human needs are often laid out by way of a hierarchial pyramid classification system, with our psychological needs at the bottom and our social and relational needs sitting nearer the top.

However, two historical systems of hierarchy that we would perhaps be familiar with whose negative influences can still be felt today are *patriarchy* and *colonialism*. It can be argued that the conferral of power and authority to certain persons or classes of persons within these systems was often disproportionate and unjustified.

While hierarchy, in some instances, makes sense as a means of classification, does scripture teach that such a hierarchy exists between the genders? Does a disproportionate ranking of power and importance really exist between men and women? Is this God-ordained and God-sanctioned?

Does scripture teach that men are *more important*, *more powerful*, or have *more authority* simply because they are men? Is this really what God designed for humanity *from the beginning*?

Hierarchy + Complementarian || Egalitarian

There are two Christian views put forward that endeavour to describe the nature of the relationship between men and women. These views are described as being either *Complementarian* or *Egalitarian*.

Christian Complementarianism is the **view that men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities in**

marriage, family life, and religious life, particularly in areas deemed as 'leadership'.

Christian Egalitarians *"believe that the Bible mandates gender equality, which implies equal authority and responsibility for the family and the ability for women to exercise spiritual authority as clergy."*

Both these views clearly offer biblical truths.

Men and women are different in many ways. These differences include both biological phenotypes and psychological traits. Some of these differences are influenced by environmental factors, yet there are also fundamental differences between the sexes that are rooted in biology.

The differences between the genders are unique and distinctive, designed to be this way by God. ([Titus 2:1-5](#), [1 Peter 3:7](#)) ([1 Timothy 3:1 - 4:16](#)). Both genders are intrinsically valuable and precious to God, and we see His characteristics displayed by the perfect merging of both masculine and feminine traits. These distinct genders are the fundamental building blocks of God's creation and are part of God's plan and purpose for His family. His definition of marriage ([Genesis 2:24](#)) and the procreation of the species ([Genesis 1:28](#)) is the natural outcome of the union of male and female and clearly supports the biological truth embedded in our DNA.

Yet men and women are also the same. Equal in value, dignity, responsibility, and relationship to one another (as we'll see later in this article).

We are the same. And we are different. We are both equal *and* complementary. It was God's intention that these differences exist, complementing one another, and the human race is better for the diversity between the two genders.

Both these factors are incredibly important in our

relationship with one another, within marriage, and within our wider communities, and are critical to embrace in a church context.

Complementarian Is Not Complimentary

The problem with complementarianism is that it's not truly *complementary in practice*. Rather, true complementarianism functions as a (sometimes softly packaged but) essentially male-dominated hierarchy. I say *true complementarianism* because many married Christian couples who identify as 'complementarian' actually function as equal partners – egalitarian in practice. Many churches that identify as *complementarian* actually function as mostly *egalitarian in practice*, often restricting only the role of elder or senior pastor to men.

And the reality is that many *true complementarian* leaders teach that male authority and female submission extend beyond marriage and the church into the rest of society. They believe that God really did instigate a male-dominated hierarchy at creation, that it was His original design for humanity, and that it extends into all spheres of life, including and not limited to the church.

For some, “the theology of complementarianism has become so deeply entrenched in evangelical belief that they have come to see it as an essential doctrine of the faith. That is to say, that it is a primary issue of salvation. For some evangelicals, complementarianism has become the benchmark of theological faithfulness, right alongside belief in God and acceptance of Jesus. As [\[John\] Piper said](#) in 2012, if people accept egalitarianism, sooner or later, they're going to get the Gospel wrong.” ([The Conversation](#))

Why Is Any Of This Important?

Well, I agree with John Piper in one respect: whichever

framework we believe exists in Genesis will impact the way we read the rest of scripture and, by implication, *the kind of gospel* we teach.

I personally believe this issue directly impacts the way in which we teach this gospel narrative and that it shapes the way we then see church life, our own identity in Christ, relationships between men and women, relationships in marriage, who we raise our sons and daughters to be, and how these different relationships function in healthy and holistic ways.

The framework of Genesis is deeply connected to the gospel story we tell, to our theology and reading of scripture, and our view of what God intends for all humanity, in the end.

Before we even reach the New Testament (and encounter the few verses that seem to support gendered hierarchy), *the way* we have read and interpreted Genesis will have *already determined* through which lens we then view other (NT) passages.

In that sense, it's of primary importance that we start from the correct foundations when building our theological house.

Setting Some Framework: Why Genesis 1-3 Is Foundational Theology

To try to prove that hierarchy is taught and embedded in the record of the creation of humanity and therefore also flows through into the church or a spiritual context, it's actually necessary to jump pretty quickly *away* from the record of Genesis and proponents of complementarism will often start in 1 Corinthians 11:3. This verse "*the head of the woman is the man*" (1 Corinthians 11:3) is often referenced as inarguable proof that hierarchy (authority over women by men) exists, and indeed, was part of the original order of creation.

One of the epistles to Timothy is also referenced (1 Timothy

2:11-15), together with a few verses about husbands and wives from Ephesians (Ephesians 5:22-24) and it's case closed. No qualifiers, no context, just a few proof-texts strung together and read back into the creation narrative.

1 Corinthians is an epistle written to **challenge believers to examine every area of life through the lens of the Gospel**. Paul specifically addresses issues such as divisions, food requirements, sexual integrity, worship gatherings, and the resurrection. 1 Timothy is another letter written by Paul, to **encourage and guide the new believers in the development of good leadership within the church**, not ego-driven or self-centered but governed by mutual submission to Christ ([Ephesians 5:21-22](#)). (Chapter 11 of Corinthians is actually considered to be one of the most obscure and difficult passages of scripture, and I talk more about this and the other 'tricky verses' [here](#).)

Certainly, the New Testament has some thoughts to offer in relation to the creation narrative, the relationship between men and women, and the relationship that exists between spouses.

But before heading to the New Testament, I believe it's important to set some framework around our interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis. We must read the New Testament through the lens of Genesis, not the other way around. And I think it's safe to say *that what existed before the fall was how God always intended things to be*.

As Genesis points out, everything that goes wrong occurs *after the fall*. Sin enters the world (not good news), death hard on the heels of sin (even worse news), and a disrupted relationship between God and humanity from that point onwards.

Additionally, the purpose of the book of Genesis is to illustrate God's relationship to creation and His intention of dwelling with us. ***"The whole purpose of Genesis 1 is to set***

the ideal human community – a place in which the image of God, or the imitation of God, is actually going to be realised. That, of course, gets distorted in Genesis 3 when humans disobey God. **But the first chapter is outlining the ideal.** The book of Genesis is therefore a means to a theological end.” (Professor C. John Collins) (emphasis mine).

So it seems logical to assert that whatever was instituted before the fall was *God’s original design for humanity*, was intended to be *normative and lifegiving* for the flourishing of humanity, and (because of the effects of the fall) is *restored and reinstated* through the redeeming work of Jesus (and we’d therefore expect to see this reflected in the life and activity of the new creation (the church)).

Genesis 1-3 clearly constitute foundational theology regarding God’s redemptive and restorative work in our world.

What Genesis Says

1. No Hierarchy In Our Humanity: The crowning glory of God’s creation was humanity, and Eve, the final masterstroke, the finishing touch of the Creator’s hand ([Genesis 2:22-24](#), [1 Corinthians 11:7](#)). Created from Adam’s side, her status was, like him, one *made in the image of God*, with all the promise and capability of reflecting God’s glory (Genesis 1:27).

*“Then God said, “Let us make **mankind** (Hebrew word Adam) in our image, in our likeness, so that **they** may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created **mankind** in His own image, in the image of God He created **them**; male and female He created **them**.” | Genesis 1:26-27 (NIV)*

The words used of Eve at her creation are the Hebrew words *ezer kanegdo*, translated rather unhappily as ‘helper’ and ‘meet for’ in English. Our understanding of *helper* falls far

short of the original sense of the word, which is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe God as a helper to His people or of a king to his subjects. The primary idea of the word lies in *'girding', 'surrounding, hence defending', to 'protect or aid'*.

A better translation of the word *kanegdo* is the word *'worthy'* or *'suitable for'*. The counterpart to the man, therefore, is *"a woman of valour, equal to the man in capacity and ability whose worth is incalculable"* ([Proverbs 31:10](#)). She is neither above man, nor beneath him, but stands confidently at his side, in protection and aid, as he does for her.

(The created order of man first, woman second, or the difference between the way each was created (man from the ground, woman from the side or part of the man), is often brought up in discussions about a supposed gendered hierarchy. Apart from the creation story in [Genesis 2](#), however, the created order is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and Jesus does not mention it, but it is mentioned in two passages in Paul's letters, as referred to above.

In [this article](#), author Marg Mowczko takes a brief look at these two passages and at the significance that Paul places on man being created first and woman second, which she contends does not support a gendered hierarchy.)

2. No Hierarchy In Our Responsibility: God blessed the man and woman and gave them the commission to 'be fruitful and multiply', both having rule and dominion over the earth and the animal kingdom ([Genesis 1:28](#)). Clearly, neither could undertake such a commission of fruitfulness or multiplying without the other.

They also share responsibility for the care of the inhabitants of this world and the stewardship of the earth and its resources. In fact, this is the first place that we see [God's sovereignty](#) enacted by His image-bearers and we later see this

commission echoed in the new creation, where both men and women disciples are entrusted with the responsibility and privilege of 'going into all the world and making disciples' ([Matthew 28:19](#), [2 Corinthians 5:19-20](#), [2 Corinthians 3:6](#)).

This stewardship and responsibility were given to humanity, men and women equally, without distinction. Men and women are both created as equals in their purpose and capacity to fill the earth and rule wisely over it on God's behalf and were both given the authority to do so from God Himself.

3. No Hierarchy In Our Conjuality: It's stating the obvious here, but not only were Adam and Eve the first man and woman of the human race, they were also the first married couple. Their status as equals is shown in not just their relationship to one another as fellow humans (as discussed above), but also in their relationship *with* each other as spouses.

The early chapters of Genesis (prior to the fall) initially seem to offer very little by way of commentary on the nature of marriage apart from this comment in Genesis 2:23-24 (added long after the events of Genesis 2 actually took place):

"The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." Genesis 2:23-24 (NIV)

However, in taking a closer look, Genesis 2 actually offers quite a lot.

The divine view of marriage (and the Bible's definition is that marriage is between a man and a woman), although only touched on very briefly in Genesis 2, is quite clear. It's a relationship defined by a commitment of two individuals (already demonstrated to be of equal worth and capability) to one another, which becomes preeminent to all other familial

relationships. Two individuals choose to leave their family of origin and form a new family with one another, united together as one in a full and cooperative partnership.

Taken from Adam's side, *Eve is made of the same stuff* as Adam. She shares a unique connection with Adam that the rest of the animal kingdom does not, having been created from his own body, *bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh*. There is a unique kinship that exists between them.

Why *did* God create Eve in this particular way, when He could have just created her from the ground, as He did Adam? Why did God create Adam first and Eve second? And why does Adam name Eve rather than God naming her?

These are really good questions to ask and it's important to understand what we are being told by this narrative (keeping in mind the foundational truth that the purpose of the book of Genesis *is to illustrate God's relationship to creation and His intention of dwelling with us.*)

Jesus + The Church

There are beautiful theological overtones hidden within this creation story in relation to marriage, which point to the redeeming work of Jesus and the [creation of the church](#), styled 'his bride' ([John 19:34](#), [Ephesians 5:25-27](#), [1 Corinthians 12:27](#)). Paul the Apostle actually tells us in Ephesians that the church wasn't modeled on the institution of marriage but rather, it was the other way around. "*The church came first, marriage second*", he comments.

This seems odd initially, given the church didn't exist until many thousands of years after the creation narrative, but it makes complete sense when we realise the Genesis narrative serves as a description of the blueprint for all that God has intended for humanity; God, in complete partnership with His people, to reflect His glory and purpose throughout the earth.

The redemption and restoration of humanity, through the sending of Jesus, was never the backup plan, *it was always the plan.*

The story of Adam and Eve's creation serves as a representation of *the real story* that would play out throughout humanity's history; the good news that in Jesus, who is both saviour and king, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose.

The church *only exists* because of the sacrificial death of Jesus, prefigured by the deep sleep that came upon Adam. Her entire identity is shaped by her *source*, in Eve's case, Adam, and in the church's case, Jesus. She, the church, *is made of the same stuff as him.*

We are to think of the church – this community of believers – as a woman, a woman whose very life and existence were framed by the death and resurrection of a man. Through this man's death and sacrifice, she is created and at his resurrection, she becomes a living creature.

Jesus says of the church (responding to Peter's affirmation in Matthew 16:18 that he is the Christ, the Son of the Living God), "upon *this rock*, I will build my church; and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Jesus identifies and names his bride, the *ekklesia*, who will be called out from among the nations, brought into existence from his own death and sacrifice, and part of his very essence as the [temple of the living God.](#)

Additionally, we know of Jesus that "he is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn of all creation*. For by him *all things were created*, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created *through him and for him*. He is *before all things*, and in him, all things hold

together. He is the *head (source) of the body, the church*; He is the beginning and firstborn from among the dead, so that in all things He may have the preeminence.” (Colossians 1:15-18)

God did it this way (in the order and way He chose to create Adam and Eve) precisely to shape our understanding of the more significant reality at work. The Genesis narrative teaches foundational theology about the church and her relationship to Jesus (and God’s ultimate redemption of humanity), long before she ever exists. (I talk more about the organic reality of the church as a woman of valour [here](#)).

Marriage, as depicted in Genesis 2, is a relationship defined by sacrifice, support, defence, commitment, and faithfulness; exactly the qualities we see at work in the relationship between Christ and his church.

Hierarchy: Things Go South

The purpose of the first few chapters of Genesis is to set the ideal human community; how things should have been before everything goes wrong. In essence, it describes *perfect kingdom living* and *perfect human existence*; what we hope to see completely restored at the end of all things (Revelation 21:1-4).

But things do go wrong. The first humans disobey God, sin enters the world, and *punishment* and *consequences* are set out.

Adam is told by God, “because of what you have done, *I will curse the ground (punishment) and through painful toil, you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return*” (consequence) (Genesis 3:17-19). The consequence of Adam’s disobedience, ultimately, is connected to the ground from

which he was taken, death, and how that relates to all humanity.

Eve is told by God *“I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children (punishment), your desire will be for (towards) your husband, and he will rule over you”* (consequence) (Genesis 3:16). The consequence of Eve’s disobedience, ultimately, is connected to the man from which she was taken, life, and how that relates to all humanity.

And this – the punishment and consequence – is where a final argument for the existence of a gendered hierarchy is made, but unfortunately, I believe, holds little weight.

It’s important to recognise the context in which the statements of Genesis 3:16 exists: *they occur after the fall*. As such, *they cannot be considered God’s original intention for humanity, at the very least*.

So is it merely *descriptive* or *prescriptive*? Is God simply confirming the dynamic of the relationship between men and women that will now exist, because of sin? Or has God had a change of heart regarding women’s previous status and position (demonstrated to be equal) and is now prescribing a hierarchy of all men, over all women, for all time?

I think, reading scripture as a whole, that we’re given a picture of redemption, renewal, and restoration. The new heavens and the new earth spoken of in Revelation show that God intends to restore all things, in short, to return creation to the state of *very good* as it first was in Eden. If this is biblical teaching, then we will see this reflected in the new creation, in the life of the early church.

And this is exactly what we do see. When looking through the lens of Genesis, we see the radical readjustment required and the challenges faced by the early Christians; where issues of race, class, social status, financial status, and gendered

hierarchy are realigned and brought under the scope of what God had designed all along in Genesis. I explore this in more detail in my article [Women In Ministry](#), which you can read [here](#).

When considering the life and function of the early church, which included women fully participating in ministry, there is a marked reversal or divergence from the culturally and historically established norms and that this new reality is God-endorsed. I would contend that if a gendered hierarchy exists, it is a terrible consequence of the fall and not as a God-given prescriptive for what is healthy and good for humanity, or, specifically in light of this article, for the church.

Where Have All The Good Men Gone?

Some may think that, in any event, this is not a primary issue, as relates to the gospel. I agree...and I disagree.

I agree, firstly, that it's a secondary issue in that I would still affirm those who hold to either view (*complementarian* or *egalitarian*) as Christians, fellow believers of the gospel of Christ. I don't think that believing either one perspective or the other determines *whether you are Christian or not*.

But I disagree it's not a primary issue. Where you land on this subject *directly impacts* the gospel narrative and shapes the way you will see church life, your own identity in Christ, your interpersonal relationships, marriage, and how these different relationships function in healthy and holistic ways.

As we move into the next generation of men and women, the story we tell our sons and daughters matters.

There are many good men who would possibly describe themselves as complementarian (essentially, proponents of a gendered hierarchy) but who also treat women with dignity and respect. While they may **believe** (or say they believe) that leadership

and authority are restricted to men in marriage and within the church, they arrive at this perspective with a genuine belief that this is what scripture teaches and they endeavor to outwork this with humility and gentleness. However, in reality, particularly in marriage, and often in the church, these kinds of good men rarely function as true complementarians. They are far more egalitarian in thought and practice.

And then there are other men, those who would also describe themselves as *complementarian*, who are *not good men*. They are abusive, controlling, authoritative, demeaning, violent, and entitled.

Sometimes this behaviour is only seen and experienced behind closed doors while a pristine public image is presented to others.

Other times, this behaviour is the same whether at home or in public, with the perpetrators using scriptural teachings on the sanctity of marriage, forgiveness, the submission of women, and male headship to justify their behaviour. Complementarian men are compared, and often compare themselves, to *Christ*, while women play the role of the church who *obeys and serves Christ*.

However, as author Rachel Held Evans comments, **“complementarianism doesn’t work—in marriages and in church leadership— because it’s not actually complementarianism; it’s patriarchy. And patriarchy doesn’t work because God created both men and women to reflect God’s character and God’s sovereignty over creation, as equal partners with equal value.”**

One of the most significant challenges Christian women face today is recognising and dealing with the abuse they experience, which is often carefully cloaked and ‘legitimised’ in biblical language – *obedience, submission, responsibility,*

leadership, authority, roles.

However, recognising abuse is one thing. Preventing it is another.

A horrifying statistic is that women inside the church are significantly more likely to have experienced abuse than those in the broader population. A [report](#) from the Anglican church found that despite some recent efforts and the fact that evidence of this has been reported on for years, many clergy remain in denial about it.

Many women do, in fact, recognise that they are the victims of abuse, that scripture is being weaponised and used against them to control and manipulate them, and yet are powerless to prevent it, change it, or speak out about it.

Scot McKnight, New Testament scholar, historian of early Christianity, theologian, and author has this to say:

“Complementarians teach biblical hierarchicalism and patriarchy and that men and women are equal, not in a substantive but spiritual sense. Their “role” language quickly morphs into power language. Hence, this hierarchy leads to entitlement and power and the requisite submission of the woman. There is a correlation between hierarchy and patriarchy and abuse by men of women. All abusive males are entitled, lash out in anger, seek control and demand submission. All abusive males think women are inferior.” | [Complementarianism And The Abusive Male](#)

There is no possible way that violence or abusive, controlling behaviours are justifiable from the text of the Bible. Perhaps this is most especially true of the few passages that so many abusers craftily and deceitfully employ.

“Males feeling entitled is a cultural product and complementarianism is such a culture that leads to such a

product. Males who seize that culture's control are more likely to abuse.

Two action steps: change the culture, change the males. (Scot McKnight)

In Conclusion

The gospel is the story *in all the Bible*. It's not just a message about our *own* personal salvation from sin but the story of what God has intended *for all His creation*. Its massive scope stretches from the first pages of Genesis through to the last book of the Bible, Revelation, and includes lofty themes such as the glory and sovereignty of God, the creation and capacity of humanity to image God's glory, the fall and redemption of humanity, the purpose and kingship of Jesus, the new creation of a resurrected community of image-bearers and, finally, the arrival of 'the new heavens and new earth', when God will be all-in-all and the gospel story will have reached its resolution.

God's original design for humanity was not built on a gendered hierarchy. Instead, it was built on equality, cooperation, respect, commitment, and support, with each gender bringing unique and valued differences to the partnership. This mutuality, this joint responsibility, warped and damaged because of the fall, is restored and championed in the new creation; by those who call themselves Christians and who belong to the organic reality called the Church.

We need to keep God's original intention for humanity (seen clearly in the first two chapters of Genesis) squarely in our sights when traversing the rest of scripture, particularly in light of *which gospel narrative we tell*.

Not only do I believe that gendered hierarchy doesn't fit the biblical gospel narrative, I believe it to be theologically unsound. I don't believe it's what Scripture teaches at all in

relation to the relationship between men and women, either naturally or spiritually.

Further, I believe that communities that engage in and promote the unequal distribution of power and authority between men and women – hallmarks of the complementarianism seen in many churches and Christian relationships – often result in cultures where abuses – emotional, spiritual, physical, sexual, psychological, and financial – can thrive and flourish beneath the surface. Not only is this obviously harmful to individuals, but it's also deeply damaging to the organic, corporate reality of the church and far from the abundant, flourishing life that God intended for all of humanity.

Stop promoting gendered hierarchy.

There is so much to read, watch, or listen to on this subject (including all the arguments presented for either a complementarian or egalitarian view). If you would like to read more on this subject by other authors, I'd recommend the following: *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision For Women* (Lucy Peppiatt), *Gender Roles And The People Of God* (Alice Matthews), *The Blue Parakeet* (Scot McKnight), *Man And Woman: One In Christ* (Philip B Payne), *Pagan Christianity* (Frank Viola), *Reimagining Church* (Frank Viola), and [this article](#) by Marg Mowckzo (mainly egalitarian writers).

I'd also recommend listening to the Kingdom Roots Podcast by Scot McKnight (there are over 200 episodes and he covers many topics, including the question of gender equality, so I've linked one specifically [here](#) to get you started.)

In The Shadow Of The Empire

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

Christianity in the first century was a spiritual explosion, fueled by the reality of the resurrection of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Unlike the Jewish community, who lived and worshipped largely by themselves, Christians were active evangelists, eager to share the good news about Jesus with all who would listen. They preached Jesus everywhere, not just as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, but as Lord, Saviour, and King; over and above Caesar.

Initially planted in the soil of Jerusalem, the gospel message soon spread rapidly beyond Israel; throughout Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the Mediterranean world. In as little as just over 10 years after Jesus' resurrection, Christianity had already reached as far as Rome itself. As Jesus had promised, his disciples were to be his witnesses, even to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8, Acts 2:41-47).

The area of [Asia Minor](#) was a huge melting pot of ethnicities and also one of the [first areas to flourish with converts to the new religion of Christianity](#). It was also part of the expansive [Roman Empire](#), at the height of its glory, and was therefore subject to Roman law and Roman customs.

Living in the shadow of the Empire would prove a difficult tension for Christians to navigate. No longer [giving allegiance to Caesar](#) as 'Lord of the earth' but instead confessing that this title belonged to Jesus Christ, how were they to behave as people *in the world but not of it*?

As *citizens of heaven*, did the laws of Rome no longer apply to them?

And, as *people of the kingdom*, how were they to live out the values of the kingdom in the society around them? Were they justified in using force to make *the kingdoms of this world the kingdom of the Lord and Christ*?

These are all important questions, not just for those in the first-century church but for every generation of Christians who have come after them.

How should Christians conduct themselves, living in the shadow of the Empire?

A Letter From Peter, An Apostle Of Jesus Christ

The importance of the way a Christian behaves so as to be a credible witness for the gospel is a significant principle emphasised throughout the New Testament. It's a [theme picked up by Peter the Apostle](#) in his first letter to the early churches (1 Peter 1-5).

Discouraged by the persecution they were suffering because of their faith, Peter writes to the early churches throughout Asia Minor to encourage them and to provide wisdom and counsel in their response to the pressures around them and in their life of Christian witness.

Keep Your Conduct Honourable

Firstly, Peter urges them, *keep your conduct honourable*. They are holy people, [called out of darkness](#) into God's marvellous light. Walking in the light means [walking humbly alongside God](#), doing justly and loving kindness. Deceit, malice, hypocrisy, slander, drunkenness, sensual living; these are all fruitless deeds of darkness (Ephesians 5:11) and Peter encourages the church to choose differently, to live exemplary lives in their neighborhoods so that their actions will refute pagan prejudices (1 Peter 2:11-12).

They had been [born again](#), by the living and imperishable Word of God, new creations guarded through faith for a salvation that would one day be revealed to all. Demonstrating lives that paralleled what they preached would witness to the truly supernatural power of the gospel and its ability to effect transformation.

Respect And Submit To Authority

For the Lord's sake, Christians were to show respect to all people and, particularly, to those in authority. They were to be model citizens, subject to every human institution (1 Peter 2:13). As Jesus the master had made clear during his earthly ministry, *render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's*.

Their allegiance to Jesus wasn't an excuse to engage in illegal behaviours, disrespect of their masters, or dishonour of the Emperor or his delegates. *Pay your taxes, submit to the laws of the land, pray for those who have the rule over you*.

They were to treat their service to the Emperor, their master (if they were a slave), and indeed each other as service rendered to the King himself.

The Christian life wouldn't always bring blessing, and the persecution and suffering they were currently experiencing were proof of this reality. Yet Peter encourages them to look to the example of Jesus himself, who demonstrated that the kingdom of heaven advances not through power and might, but through missions of mercy, kindness, and humility and, ultimately, through suffering.

The greatest suffering of all brought about the greatest victory for all (1 Peter 4:13-14).

Love Earnestly And Do Good

They were to love each other earnestly. This was the defining mark of those who belonged to the King and it was how the

world was to know they were his disciples.

Given to hospitality, they were to love with open hearts and generous lives. They were to live bright and unafraid: remembering that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it. They were to entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while continuing to doing good to all and especially to those of the household of faith (1 Peter 1:22, Galatians 6:10). *Love and do good to others just as Jesus has loved you. By this, all people will know you are his disciples.*

Early Christianity found particular expression through philanthropy; care for the poor, widows, and orphans, for those brethren who had been imprisoned or condemned, and particularly for brethren, who due to poverty, could not afford an honourable burial. The early church would often provide services for such persons, believing care in death as well as life was an active expression of love. The early Christian insistence on caring for those *made in the image of God* transformed the ancient world.

In The World But Not Of It

“The Christian ideal is not freedom from work, but strength to do it; not freedom from temptation, but power to overcome it; not freedom from suffering, but joy in an abiding sense of the Father’s love; not absence from the world, but grace to make the world better for our presence; not holy lives driven from the world, and living apart from it, but holy lives spent in the world and leavening it.” – Ellicott’s Commentary For English Readers.

Like our early Christian brethren, we too continue to live in the shadow of the Empire. We too must wrestle with issues of allegiance, to show submission to those institutions and ordinances which have authority over us, yet not be conformed

to this world in the process.

We may think this requires us to limit our interaction with the people around us or remove ourselves 'from the world', but this isn't what scripture is concerned with. It's the ruler of this world who is our enemy, not those who are enslaved to him; those who, like us, have also been made in the image of God. They, too, desperately need the presence of Jesus in their lives, whether they know it or not and our Christian witness in this current world is vitally important.

Jesus' prayer for his disciples was not that God would take them out of the world but that He would protect them from the evil one. We must not be conformed to the image of the ruler of this world, nor choose his way, a path that only leads back to darkness (John 12:31, 1 John 1:5-7). Jesus prayed for the protection of his followers, knowing we are left in this world for a specific purpose; to witness to the power of his saving name. *"You are the salt of the earth,"* he said, *"you are the light of the world"*.

Our commission is to live and work, to love and forgive, to mourn, trust, despair and hope [alongside and together with](#) our unbelieving neighbours and friends, all the while telling of the faithfulness of a good God and the hope found in the gospel message.

Our lives – our everyday, mundane, messy, uncomfortable, terrifying, joyful, and thoroughly human lives will be the greatest witness of all to the hope that lies within us.

How we conduct ourselves, as we live in the shadow of the Empire, is still just as relevant and important today as it was for our first-century brethren.

As Christians, we're now citizens of a spiritual city whose builder and maker is God, people of a heavenly kingdom, living out the values and ideals of [that kingdom](#) in this earthly life.

Yet we're also still literal citizens of the countries we live in. We still retain all the privileges that citizenship affords, together with the responsibilities it holds. *Because we have given our primary allegiance to Jesus and, for the Lord's sake, we're to continue to submit to the laws and ordinances of the countries in which we live.*

Christians have a greater not lesser responsibility to do good and model appropriate citizenship. We don't get a leave pass to flout the regulations and laws passed by those in authority, just because we're 'not of this world.' *"It is God's will that by doing good, you might cure the ignorance of the fools who think you're a danger to society. Exercise your freedom by serving God, not by breaking the rules."* (1 Peter 2:13-17)

Yet, there must be a disclaimer at this point. We also have a responsibility – a greater responsibility, it can be argued – to model the values of the [kingdom of heaven](#). This responsibility often highlights issues of injustice, prejudice or inequality which may exist both within the church and without, issues to which God is adamantly opposed and therefore we also should be opposed.

The Atlantic slave trade, which operated between the 15th and 19th centuries, might never have been abolished, had it not been for the public agitation of those who spoke vocally against a legally sanctioned practice and campaigned tirelessly for its elimination.

Two distinct laws passed in Nazi Germany provided the legal framework for the systematic persecution and resulting genocide of millions of Jews, demonstrating that sometimes doing what is lawful isn't the same as doing what is right.

And in our own country of Australia between 1910 and 1970, at least 100,000 Aboriginal children were forcibly removed – stolen – from their parents and families as a result of

various government policies, leaving a legacy of loss and trauma that persists today. The pain inflicted on an entire people through separation and forced assimilation was enabled by governmental law, regardless of the reality that it was morally repugnant to do so.

As Christians, the law cannot be our ultimate moral guide. Slavery was lawful. The holocaust was legal. Segregation and apartheid were legally sanctioned. Many of today's laws are created to protect corporations rather than people. Simply put, the law does not dictate our ethics. God does. | Craig Greenfield

[God's values have the final word in our actions](#) and this may mean, at some point, our choices or actions put us in conflict with the culture around us or the laws of the country in which we live. *We submit, until, for conscience sake, we can no longer submit* (Acts 5:29, Exodus 1:7).

The Covid-19 Pandemic

For Christians, times of trouble are opportunities to test and prove our own conviction; that there is One God who rules over all things and that we remain confident that He continues to do so, even through trouble and difficulty ([Psalm 103:19](#), [Daniel 2:21](#), [Ephesians 4:6](#)).

While the early Christians faced very different times of trouble than we do today, comparable only perhaps by how we choose to respond, our faithful response is no less necessary than theirs.

The ongoing crisis of Covid-19 is a troubling and anxious time. The most recent reports regarding the virus are particularly concerning, causing fear for many people, especially the elderly and vulnerable in our communities. Whilst we shouldn't be ambivalent about what's going on around the globe, we also need to be measured in our response and

very careful not to be contributing to or escalating the level of panic that people may be experiencing.

It's extremely disturbing that Christians would contribute to misinformation regarding both the virus and associated treatment options, particularly in the social domain. Many, in reality, are unlikely to be qualified to actually comment from a medical perspective, yet this doesn't seem to prevent them from offering advice, suggestions, criticisms, or conjecture on the subject.

Verified medical information shared in responsible ways is helpful; unfactual, fear-inducing conspiracy theories are not. By all means, discuss the situation with those around you but choose to do so in responsible ways, with a view to banishing exaggerated fear.

Neither is it appropriate for Christians to participate in acts of disrespect or civil disobedience of those in authority, whilst current regulations don't directly contradict God's directives. We ought to instead continue to pray for wisdom and guidance in our own personal choices as well as for those in the difficult situation of accessing risks and making decisions on behalf of our nation.

Christians also have both a responsibility and a privilege to point the world's attention to the One who is still in control of all. We can choose to positively redirect the conversation, to comfort people's hearts and try to settle their fears, whilst still acknowledging the gravity of the current pandemic and assist in supporting practical measures to combat it.

There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God (Romans 13:1). We are to seek their welfare, to speak evil of no one, to respect the government and be law-abiding. If it is possible, as far as it depends on us, we're to live at peace with everyone. (Titus 3:1-2, Jeremiah 29:7, Romans 12:18).

We need to continue to pray, worship and connect in all the ways that are possible to us right now. Most of all, we need to continue to point the people of the world to Jesus, who told his much-loved followers: “Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Trust in God and trust in me also” ([John 14:1](#)).

Convictions + Conduct

Our convictions and conduct go hand in hand. What we say and what we do must show itself to be in agreement.

“We don’t believe something by merely saying we believe it, or even when we believe that we believe it. We believe something when we act as if it were true.” | Dallas Willard

If we believe that God is King of all the earth and remains sovereign still, then we must act in such a way that confirms this truth to the watching world.

We are to be thankful for those in authority and especially at a time like this, those in healthcare, who risk their own lives to treat and save others ([1 Timothy 2:2](#)). We need to remember to pray for them and assist where we can.

We ought to show responsibility in following the direction of the government and officials, acknowledging measured concern for the situation we all find ourselves in and abiding by recommendations for the good of everyone ([1 Peter 2:13](#)). Now, more than ever, is the time to show consideration and restraint and to lead the world by example. It is not the time (or ever!) for Christians to display greed or selfishness but to consider those who are our neighbour and to love them, as ourselves ([Romans 13:8-10](#)).

And, particularly, it is vitally important to consider those who are weak and vulnerable amongst our communities, who have always found a special place in God’s heart ([James 1:27](#); [Psalm](#)

[68:5](#)).

We have opportunity right now, to remind the world of a good, good God, who is actively seeking to overthrow the effects of sin in the world and restore humanity to full relationship with Himself.

Even here, in times that seem very dark, God is still busy making all things new.

I first wrote about [the Christian response to the pandemic](#) over a year ago, when things had really started to impact our communities. We've seen a lot happen around the world in that time and, recently, it seemed as if Australia had finally gotten a handle on things and life might be returning to normal.

I confess, I've not personally felt any real sense of fear throughout this situation until very recently, when the various mutant strains became more contagious and seemingly more virulent. The recent restrictions in Sydney give cause for concern and Covid-19 now feels very much on our doorstep. I had to intentionally take time this week to remind myself of my faith, my conviction that God is sovereign still and that the wind and waves still know His name. Through it all, my eyes must remain on Him.

At the same time as this was occurring, three events impacted me personally and I felt compelled to again write about the situation.

One was several shares in one week on social media of what can only be described as 'doomsday' commentaries; fear-inducing and based in theory, not fact.

The second was the illegal, unmasked gathering/protest that occurred in Sydney, which was also shared on social media (whether to criticise or congratulate I couldn't say for sure,

although it did appear to me to be in support of the protest).

The third was two different statements from Christian pastors within a denomination stating this: that if you chose to vaccinate, you weren't faithful, and, that if you didn't choose to vaccinate, you weren't faithful. In my opinion, this kind of religious pressure, criticism or coercion about a very personal choice is completely irresponsible and amounts to spiritual abuse, especially from those in a pastoral position.

I was reminded again of the relevance and importance of the Christian faith in our world, to provide hope, comfort, and assistance to those who are struggling, fearful, or angry. And I was reminded of the example left for us in God's Word, which seems to have an answer for every situation, of those in the early church who lived in the shadow of the Empire and navigated the same tensions with faithfulness and steadfast hope. We can learn a lot from them.

Pictured: Sculpture of Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, Emperor of Rome 24 January AD41 – 13 October AD54