

# **Women In The Early Church | What Scripture And History Actually Show**

Women were active in the early church – prophesying, praying, teaching, and serving. Luke tells us of Anna the prophet (Luke 2:36) and Philip’s daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9). Paul acknowledges that “every woman who prays or prophesies” should do so appropriately (1 Corinthians 11:5), not that she must not do so.

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## **Part 3: Women Must Keep Silent – Examining The Troubling Texts**

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Despite the strong evidence for women’s involvement in the life and ministry of the early church, there are three specific New Testament passages that continue to be used to limit or prohibit that involvement. These are 1 Timothy 2:11–12, 1 Corinthians 14:34–36, and 1 Corinthians 11:1–16. For many, these are the so-called “troubling texts.”

These passages have been interpreted as clear and universal instructions that restrict women from teaching, leading, or

even speaking in church – essentially promoting the idea that women must keep silent in church. And for a long time, I accepted that interpretation. But as I began to study the full counsel of scripture, these texts – when held up to the broader gospel story, cultural context, and even their immediate surroundings – began to reveal something quite different.

This final part of the series is more detailed, because I believe it's necessary. A fair, honest, and faithful approach to scripture cannot avoid these verses. But neither should we be content to accept a surface reading of them.

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## **1 Timothy 2:11–12 – “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man...”**

The context of 1 Timothy is key. Paul is writing to Timothy, who was helping lead the church at Ephesus – a church under strain from false teaching and disorder. From the beginning of the letter, Paul makes it clear that confronting false doctrine is central to his purpose (1 Timothy 1:3–7).

Before Paul even addresses the topic of leadership, he instructs both men and women to devote themselves to godly worship. Men are told to pray without anger or argument; women are told to pursue godliness, not status or appearance. Then we get the verses that have caused centuries of debate:

*“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.”* – 1 Timothy 2:11–12

Let's consider a few things here:

- **Paul begins by stating that women should learn.** That, in

itself, is radical in a culture where women were often excluded from formal learning, especially in matters of theology. I talk more about this in [my previous article](#). He doesn't say they should be kept from learning, but rather that their learning should take place with respect and a readiness to listen – just as men were expected to learn.

- **The Greek word translated “authority” here is *authenteō*.** This word is used only once in the New Testament, and it carries a complex range of meanings – from domineering control to aggressive usurpation. Paul could have used the more common word for authority (*exousia*) if he intended to speak of ordinary, godly leadership. But he didn't.
- **This is a corrective instruction, not a universal law.** Paul is addressing a specific issue in Ephesus, where women – likely under the influence of false teachers – were teaching before they had been properly instructed themselves. Paul is calling for *order and proper discipleship*, not issuing a blanket prohibition against women teaching for all time.

Paul then grounds his instruction in the creation narrative – not to argue for a hierarchy of value, but to correct false beliefs circulating in Ephesus, particularly the idea that Eve was created first or was superior (a view associated with Gnostic teachings). His conclusion, that women “*will be saved through childbearing*,” is itself a debated phrase, often understood as referring to the faithfulness of women in their domestic and spiritual roles – not as a literal statement about salvation.

It's also worth noting that in Ephesus – the city where Timothy was ministering – Artemis (or Diana) was widely worshipped as the goddess of fertility and protector of women

in childbirth. Her temple was one of the largest and most influential religious sites in the Roman world. Many Ephesian women would have grown up believing that Artemis alone kept them safe during pregnancy and labour. Against this backdrop, Paul's statement can be seen as a direct challenge to that cultural belief: that salvation, protection, and purpose come not from Artemis, but through continued faith in Christ. In other words, it is not through a pagan goddess or mystical rites that women are saved, but through remaining faithful to the one true God who created them and calls them to live out their faith with purpose and dignity.

In light of the full context of the letter, Paul's words make far more sense as a situational instruction aimed at correcting disorder and false teaching, rather than a universal, timeless rule about women in the church.

## **1 Corinthians 14:34–36 – “Women should remain silent in the churches...”**

This passage is often quoted in isolation, but it stands in direct tension with what Paul has already said just three chapters earlier in 1 Corinthians 11: that women *did* pray and prophesy in church, as long as they did so respectfully.

*“Every woman who prays or prophesies...”* – 1 Corinthians 11:5

So why would Paul later say women must be silent? There are a few possibilities worth exploring:

- **Textual scholars have long noted that these verses appear in different places in different manuscripts.** In some early texts, they appear at the end of the chapter. This suggests they may have been a marginal gloss – a note added by a scribe that was later incorporated into the main text.
- **Paul could be quoting the Corinthians' own views, which**

**he then refutes.** Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul often quotes positions or slogans the Corinthians had written to him about, before responding to them (see 1 Corinthians 7:1). This passage could follow the same pattern, with verses 34–35 representing the Corinthians' position and verse 36 as Paul's rebuttal: *"Did the word of God originate with you?"*

- **If the verses are original to Paul, they must be understood contextually.** Paul is addressing order in worship. Just as he instructs those speaking in tongues and prophesying to do so "one at a time," he may be asking certain women – perhaps those disrupting the service with questions or chatter – to be silent and ask their questions at home. The word translated "women" can also mean "wives," which supports this possibility.

It's difficult to accept this passage as a universal command for women to remain silent when, just a few chapters earlier, the same letter affirms their participation through prayer and prophecy. Any interpretation that results in a contradiction within the same context needs to be revisited carefully.

## **1 Corinthians 11:1–16 – "The head of the woman is man..."**

This passage has often been used to justify a hierarchy of men over women. But closer study reveals a more nuanced picture.

The key word in verse 3 is *kephalē*, translated "head." While in English "head" often implies authority, the Greek *kephalē* more commonly means "source" or "origin." So Paul's statement can be read:

"The source of every man is Christ, the source of woman is man, and the source of Christ is God."

This reading aligns well with the creation narrative – woman

was made from man, just as man was made through Christ, and Christ from God. I talk more about this in my article on marriage '[Husbands and Wives](#)'.

Importantly, Paul goes on to affirm that men and women are interdependent “in the Lord” (v.11), and that both come from God. He acknowledges that women were prophesying and praying in the assembly (v.5), and his concern is not to stop them, but to ensure they do so in a way that honours both their witness and their gender.

The broader concern of this passage is about cultural presentation and honour. In Corinth, head coverings likely carried symbolic weight related to honour, modesty, or marital status. Paul encourages the believers to present themselves in a way that upholds mutual respect and avoids scandal – not to impose a rigid gender hierarchy.

## Conclusion

None of these passages, when rightly understood, undermines the many others that affirm women’s active participation in church life. On the contrary, they reveal a consistent and compelling pattern – one in which women, like men, are gifted by the Spirit, called by God, and invited to take their place in the unfolding mission of the gospel.

I haven’t come to this position lightly, or simply because it resonates with modern ideas. I’m not motivated by cultural trends or personal frustration, but by a deep and growing conviction that this is what scripture truly teaches. Through study, prayer, and wrestling with the text, I’ve come to see that an egalitarian reading is not only faithful to the integrity of scripture – it’s faithful to the heart of the gospel itself.

If this has stirred thoughts or questions, I’d love to hear from you. Let’s keep the conversation going.

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# Stop Promoting Gendered Hierarchy!

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)

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One of the most damaging teachings that has defined the church throughout history – and still shapes it today – is the belief that God established a hierarchy of men over women at creation. This hierarchy, it's claimed, was either part of God's original plan or a prescriptive punishment on women because of sin.

If this structure was indeed part of God's design, then it supposedly flows from creation into the church – the second, or "new," creation. Despite appearing outdated in our 21st-century, Western context (though it's far from gone), this so-called "divine order" is still taught and implemented in many churches, shaping how we view the relationship between men and women.

## Off To A Bad Start

Many Christians claim to believe men and women are equal in dignity and worth. Yet they often point to one detail in

Genesis: that Adam was created first.

Eve, they argue, was created second – and as a helper. This order, and her role, are used as proof of a divinely established hierarchy. The bottom line: men were made first to image God, and women were made second to help them.

It's a little painful to hear Eve described, in vaguely apologetic tones, as an afterthought – created to gather berries, collect firewood, and generally help Adam with other mundane pre-history tasks that would prove to be too much for Adam on his own. (God had hoped one of the animals might do the trick – but alas, no joy.)

More painful still is seeing this belief play out in the church, where women are still prevented – explicitly or implicitly – from contributing meaningfully, even when clearly gifted. Some hesitate to limit women entirely (the “soft complementarian” view, which I’ll return to shortly), allowing them to use their gifts only under male oversight. Others, the so-called “hard complementarians,” are more direct – permitting little to no participation from women at all.

## Firstly, What Is Meant By ‘Hierarchy’?

*hierarchy*

*/ˈhɪərɑːki/*

*noun*

1. a system where people or things are ranked by importance
2. those in the upper levels of a system who control it
3. a structure where authority is distributed by level

Inherent in hierarchy are ideas of **power**, **importance**, and **authority**. These concepts aren't necessarily wrong. In organisations, it can be wise to entrust leadership to those with greater experience or training. Some items are more



valuable due to rarity or function – gold, for example.

*“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 colour, size, and expiration date, you might want to consider visiting a therapist.” – Vocabulary.com*

But not all hierarchies are just. **Patriarchy** and **colonialism**, for instance, are historical hierarchies whose lingering effects show how damaging disproportionate power structures can be. The question is whether such a hierarchy exists *by design* between men and women – and whether Scripture actually teaches this.

Does God truly assign more power or value to men simply for being men? Was this the original plan?

## **Hierarchy + Complementarian || Egalitarian**

Within Christianity, two main frameworks attempt to describe the relationship between men and women: **complementarianism** and **egalitarianism**.

- **Complementarianism** teaches that men and women have different but complementary roles, especially in marriage and church leadership.
- **Egalitarianism** teaches that men and women are equally authorised to lead, teach, and serve – both in the home and the church.

Both positions acknowledge key truths. Men and women are different – biologically and psychologically. Some of those differences are shaped by environment; others are hard-wired by design. Scripture affirms the value of both sexes and depicts God’s nature through the fusion of masculine and

feminine traits (Titus 2:1–5; 1 Peter 3:7; 1 Timothy 3–4).

At the same time, men and women are alike – equal in worth, dignity, and relationship to God. We are the same and we are different. Both truths matter deeply in marriage, in the church, and in how we relate to one another.

## Complementarian Is Not Complimentary

The trouble is, complementarianism is not truly complementary in practice. In reality, it functions as a male-dominated hierarchy, often softly packaged but unmistakable in outcome.

I say *true* complementarianism because many Christian couples who identify with the term actually function as equals in practice. Many “complementarian” churches operate largely egalitarian day to day – limiting only senior leadership roles to men.

However, prominent complementarian voices go much further. For some, male authority and female submission aren’t limited to marriage or the church – they extend into every area of life. These teachers claim God *intended* a male-dominated structure from the beginning and that it applies universally.

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 is established in Genesis will shape how we read the rest of Scripture – and, by extension, the kind of gospel we teach.

I believe this issue directly influences the way we understand the gospel narrative and how it plays out in the life of the

church, our identity in Christ, relationships between men and women, marriage, and how all these dynamics function in healthy, whole, and holy ways.

Genesis provides the framework. It's deeply connected to our theology and our view of God's intention for humanity. And crucially, **before we even reach the New Testament**, our interpretation of Genesis often predetermines how we read later passages – especially those that seem to support gender hierarchy.

In that sense, this is foundational. If we get the beginning wrong, we'll likely misread what comes next.

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

To argue that hierarchy is built into God's design for humanity – and thus into the church – many jump quickly from Genesis to Paul, usually 1 Corinthians 11:3: *"The head of the woman is the man."*

That verse, along with 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and Ephesians 5:22–24, is often used as proof that a gendered hierarchy is God-ordained. But the reasoning often skips context, bypasses qualifiers, and then reads these interpretations *back* into Genesis, retrofitting hierarchy into the creation narrative.

But 1 Corinthians, for example, is a letter addressing issues of unity, conduct, worship, and resurrection. And 1 Timothy is a letter about healthy church leadership, rooted in mutual submission (see Ephesians 5:21). Chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians, in particular, is one of the most debated and difficult passages in the New Testament – and requires far more care than a proof-text allows.

Yes, the New Testament has things to say about creation, gender, and marriage. But we **must read the New Testament**

**through the lens of Genesis**, not the other way around.

Genesis sets the scene. And as the text makes clear, everything that goes wrong – sin, death, brokenness – happens *after* the fall. The beginning shows us how things were always meant to be.

*“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 what existed **before the fall** was God’s original design – normative, life-giving, and intended for human flourishing. That design, marred by sin, is restored in Christ and reinstituted through the work of the Spirit in the new creation (the church).

Genesis 1–3 is foundational theology. It tells us who God is, who we are, and what redemption is restoring.

## **What Genesis Says**

### **1. No Hierarchy In Our Humanity:**

The crowning glory of God’s creation was humanity, and Eve was the final masterstroke. Created from Adam’s side, her status was equal to his – made in the image of God, with the same capacity to reflect His glory (Genesis 1:27).

*“Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind (adam in Hebrew) in our image, in our likeness...’ 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)*

The Hebrew words used to describe Eve’s creation are *ezer*

*kenegdo* – often translated as “helper suitable for him.” But “helper” in English doesn’t capture the weight of the word. In the rest of the Bible, *ezer* usually refers to God as a protector or rescuer. The word *kenegdo* conveys the idea of someone equal and corresponding – a partner.

Eve was not beneath Adam, nor above him, but stood beside him as his equal – a woman of valour, worthy of him in every way (Proverbs 31:10).

Yes, Adam was created first, but this order isn’t mentioned elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, and Jesus doesn’t refer to it. It comes up in two of Paul’s letters, and even there, context matters.

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:**

Genesis 1:28 tells us that God blesses both the man and the woman and gives them the same commission – be fruitful, multiply, and rule over the earth. Neither could do this alone. Together, they’re entrusted with caring for creation and stewarding God’s world.

This is the first place we see God’s authority exercised through His image-bearers – and it’s shared authority. The same theme carries into the new creation, where both men and women are commissioned by Jesus to go and make disciples (Matthew 28:19, 2 Corinthians 3:6, 5:19–20).

Men and women are created equal in purpose, capacity, and calling. They were both given the same responsibility from the beginning.

## **3. No Hierarchy In Our Conjugality:**

Adam and Eve weren't just the first humans – they were also the first married couple. Their equality wasn't just about identity, but also about how they related to each other in marriage.

Genesis 2:23–24 gives us a reflection on that relationship:

*“The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...’ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.”*

Marriage here is a mutual partnership. Two individuals, equal in worth and capability, choosing to leave their family of origin and form a new family together – united, cooperative, and committed.

Eve was made from Adam's side, not the ground. She shares something unique with him – a bond the animals didn't have. The phrases *“bone of my bone”* and *“flesh of my flesh”* show their connection and equality.

Why did God create Eve this way? Why make Adam first? Why does Adam name her? These are all fair questions – and we should explore them with care. But always through the lens of what Genesis is doing: illustrating God's intention to dwell with His people and restore creation through partnership.

## **Jesus + The Church**

There are beautiful theological overtones in the creation story that point to Jesus and the church. Paul writes in Ephesians that marriage wasn't the model for the church – it was the other way around. The church came first, marriage second.

That might sound odd, since the church didn't exist in Genesis. But when we recognise that Genesis lays the blueprint for all God intended – a partnership between God and His people to reflect His glory – it begins to make sense. The

plan was never for hierarchy, but for union and restoration. The church is part of that story.

Adam's deep sleep and Eve's creation from his side foreshadow something greater. Jesus falls into the sleep of death, and from His sacrifice the church is born. Just as Eve was made from Adam's body, the church is formed from Christ – His body, His life, His Spirit. She is of His essence.

The church exists only because of Jesus' death and resurrection. Her identity is shaped by her source. Through His sacrifice, she becomes a living creation. Paul calls the church Christ's bride – the *ekklesia*, called out from the nations, brought into being through His suffering and love.

*"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy."* – Colossians 1:15–18

God did it this way – creating Adam and Eve in that particular order and manner – to teach us something greater. The Genesis narrative speaks of marriage, yes, but even more, it points ahead to Christ and the church. That's the theological foundation being laid.

Marriage in Genesis 2 is marked by mutuality – sacrifice, defence, support, commitment, faithfulness. That's the pattern we see again in Christ's relationship with the church. And that's the model God intended all along.

## **Hierarchy: Things Go South**

The first few chapters of Genesis paint a picture of how things were meant to be – ideal human community, kingdom living, perfect partnership. But then it all goes wrong.

Adam and Eve disobey. Sin enters. The world is fractured. God

outlines the consequences for each of them.

To Adam, God says: *“Because of what you have done, cursed is the ground because of you. Through painful toil you will eat from it all your days... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground. For dust you are, and to dust you will return.”* – Genesis 3:17–19

To Eve, God says: *“I will make your pains in childbearing very severe... Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”* – Genesis 3:16

These consequences aren't prescriptive – they're descriptive. God is not endorsing hierarchy or suffering. He is naming what sin has broken. The ground is cursed, not Adam. Pain and power struggle are now part of human life, but they are not what God originally intended.

So is this a punishment, or a prophecy? Has God changed His mind about Eve's value? Or is He simply stating the fallout of their disobedience?

When we read Scripture as a whole, we see the story arc pointing not to hierarchy, but to restoration – a return to the “very good” creation we saw in Eden. Revelation speaks of a renewed heaven and earth. And the early church gives us glimpses of that restoration in action.

Through the lens of Genesis, we can see how the early believers wrestled with and overturned cultural norms – racial divides, class systems, gender roles. The new creation brought change. Women ministered, prophesied, planted churches, and led alongside men.

If gendered hierarchy exists, it is not God's ideal. It is a result of the fall – not a design for human flourishing, and certainly not a model for the church.



# Where Have All The Good Men Gone?

Some say this issue isn't central to the gospel. I both agree and disagree.

I agree in the sense that it's not a salvation issue. I fully affirm that people on either side of this discussion – complementarian or egalitarian – can be sincere, faithful followers of Jesus.

But I also believe it's more than just a side topic. Where you land on this shapes the kind of gospel you preach, the kind of church you build, how you see your identity in Christ, and how you treat others – especially in marriage and leadership.

What we teach our sons and daughters matters. The framework we pass down has real consequences.

There are many good men who identify as complementarian. They sincerely believe this is what Scripture teaches and try to live it out with gentleness and humility. But in practice, especially in healthy marriages and churches, these men often don't live as strict complementarians. Their relationships function with mutual respect and shared responsibility – they are far more egalitarian in practice.

Then there are other men – still under the complementarian label – who are not good. They are abusive, controlling, entitled, and demeaning. Some behave differently in public than at home. Others use Scripture as a weapon – quoting verses on submission, headship, and authority to justify mistreatment.

As Rachel Held Evans once said, *“Complementarianism doesn't work – in marriages or church leadership – because it's not actually complementarianism. It's patriarchy. And patriarchy doesn't work because God created men and women to reflect His character as equal partners with equal value.”*

One of the greatest challenges Christian women face today is recognising abuse that hides behind spiritual language – submission, obedience, roles, headship. And even when they do recognise it, they often feel powerless to name it, prevent it, or escape it.

Studies show that abuse within the church is far more common than we'd like to admit. A report from the Anglican Church revealed that many clergy remain in denial, despite years of evidence.

New Testament scholar Scot McKnight writes:

*"Complementarians teach biblical hierarchicalism and patriarchy, and say men and women are equal – not in a substantive way, but in a spiritual sense. Their 'role' language quickly becomes power language. This hierarchy leads to entitlement and the submission of women. All abusive men are entitled. They lash out, seek control, and demand submission. All abusive men believe women are inferior."*-  
Complementarianism and the Abusive Male

Abuse is never justified by Scripture. No matter how carefully someone tries to twist the text, the message of Jesus doesn't support it. As McKnight says: *"Males feeling entitled is a cultural product – and complementarianism creates a culture that feeds it. To change the outcome, we have to change the culture. And we have to change the men."*

## **In Conclusion**

The gospel is the story that runs through the whole Bible. It's not just a message about personal salvation from sin, but about what God has always intended for creation. It begins in Genesis and ends in Revelation – telling the story of God's glory, humanity's calling to reflect it, the fall, redemption through Jesus, and the restoration of all things.

From the beginning, God's design for humanity was never built

on gendered hierarchy. It was built on mutuality – cooperation, commitment, trust, and partnership. Men and women, different but equal, both reflecting God's image.

That intention was damaged by sin, but it's restored in Christ. The new creation – the church – is called to model that restoration. We're meant to reflect God's original design, not reinforce the brokenness of the fall.

Genesis 1 and 2 should shape how we read the rest of Scripture. If we get the beginning right, we'll tell a gospel story that's full of life, hope, and freedom.

I don't believe gendered hierarchy fits the biblical gospel. I don't believe it reflects God's intention, or what Scripture teaches about men and women – not in creation, not in the church, and not in Christ.

And more than that, I believe the power imbalance created by complementarian structures often leads to real harm. Cultures that promote male authority over female participation – even subtly – create space where abuse can grow unchecked. That harms individuals, distorts the church, and obscures the beauty of the gospel.

**Stop promoting gendered hierarchy. Stop calling it God's design.**

It's time for the church to rediscover what it truly means to live as the body of Christ – each part honoured, each voice heard. The world is watching. Let's not reflect hierarchy. Let's reflect Him.

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**There is so much more to read, watch, or listen to on this topic. If you want to explore further, I recommend: 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 and Reimagining Church – Frank Viola, and The Kingdom Roots podcast by Scot McKnight**