

Woman Must Keep Silent?

The Troubling Texts

There is a great deal of evidence of [women's participation in the early church](#) and the role they played in early Christianity. Certainly, scripture and history itself show that women actively participated in the life of the early church in all areas, including leading, teaching, disciplining, praying, and prophesying.

Yet it's claimed that women must keep silent in church, with three New Testament texts put forward as proof. But is this what the Bible teaches?

The verses in question are found in *1 Corinthians 14:34-36*, *1 Timothy 2:11-12*, and *1 Corinthians 11:1-16*.

These verses are sticking points for many people, and form the basis for the framework adopted by the church I grew up, as well as many other churches today. The practical outworking of this framework stretches to accommodate what is known as 'soft complementarianism' (meaning women are generally involved in many aspects of ministry, although the role of the senior minister or pastor, and often eldership, is reserved for men), through to a more traditional understanding of complementarianism, in which women are restricted from most areas deemed authoritative, leadership, or teaching, as was the church I grew up in.

As I elaborate on further in my article '[Women + The Church](#)', my understanding and position have shifted dramatically. I have had the opportunity to read the texts for myself, from multiple translations, and with a wealth of scholarly critique and commentary available alongside. My previous approach to scripture – essentially proof-texting or cherry-picking verses, is now quite different. Context is king – and whole

letters are included in my consideration of interpretation and application, not just a verse or sentence on either side. Additionally, I have the clear framework of Genesis at my disposal – God’s original intention for humanity:

*The book of Genesis is a means to a theological end; its purpose 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 outlines the ideal.**” (Professor C. John Collins) (emphasis mine).*

With all this in mind, here are my thoughts on the ‘troubling texts’. My conclusions are summarised for brevity and I’ve arrived at these conclusions from the many different resources I’ve personally read, listened to, and watched. I certainly don’t expect my reader to consider them, alone, to be conclusive arguments for an egalitarian position. I would urge anyone interested or unsure about this topic to make a point of studying both the passages and reading or listening to the resources and commentaries (both for and against) for themselves.

1 Timothy 2:11-12 – Firstly, the context of the letter to Timothy is important. Paul is writing to his young associate Timothy, who was helping train new believers and carrying Paul’s letters back and forward between Paul and the newly planted churches. Paul writes to encourage and guide in the development of healthy leadership within the church – not ego-driven or self-centered but governed by mutual submission to Christ (Ephesians 5:22). The best kind of leadership is always the kind modeled by Jesus, who came as a servant to minister in truth and humility and who is the life-force of the church (John 15:5). Badly formed and misguided leadership can cause

great damage (and this is why 1 Timothy is still such a relevant passage for us today).

But before Paul begins to even discuss leadership, he encourages men to first focus on intimately praying with God and the women likewise (worship). A humble relationship with God (Micah 6:8) must precede any kind of leadership. Paul then addresses the men, commenting that he wants them to ensure they are free from anger and controversy *in every place of worship*, and the women, stating they are not to be obsessed with the latest fashions or beauty routines but focused on true beauty: God's message of salvation in Jesus.

However, the significant issue that Paul bookends his letter with is that of false teaching. He had already urged Timothy to stay in Ephesus (where he was when this letter was written) and *stop those whose teaching is contrary to the truth*. (1 Timothy 3:3). He now writes again to instruct the believers *to be filled with love, have a clear conscience, and genuine faith*. Some, however, *had missed the whole point and were speaking confidently as teachers, even though they didn't know what they were talking about* (1 Timothy 1:5-7).

Paul urges Timothy to command the false teachers to stop teaching false doctrines. These 'teachers' were *devoted to myths and endless genealogies, abusing the law, and forbidding marriage and certain foods*. For a church to be healthy and flourish, it needed to be grounded in truth and empowered by genuine faith, its leaders devoted to sound teaching and holy worship, things that the church at Ephesus was in danger of losing sight of.

The subject of false teaching and how to combat it in a church context is a recurring theme throughout the letter and it seems clear that this is the overarching context of Paul's comments.

Approaching the first 'troubling text', then, "*Women should*

learn quietly and submissively. I am not permitting women to teach men or have authority over them; Let them listen quietly" (1 Timothy 2: 11-12), there are several ways in which this passage can be interpreted. In light of the context, culture, and the framework of Genesis, the one that I believe makes the most sense is this:

This passage is not a prohibition on women speaking or teaching, universally or for all time, but a time-limited injunction to deal with a specific and local issue. Paul's comments are instructions for how the believers in Ephesus, both men and women, are to generally conduct themselves in church affairs, and for women, particularly, how they ought to behave in matters of learning and teaching.

False teaching was an issue, that's clear, and it seems that women, who had long been barred from the traditional all-male sphere of learning Torah and rabbinic study, were behind the eight-ball, so to speak. By-passing the appropriate framework for adequate instruction would result in *godless ideas and old wives tales*, and the church at Ephesus needed to pay greater attention and give specific focus to sound teaching, for both genders but particularly in relation to the women, who had no experience in this area.

Women were to learn in quietness and obedience, just like everyone else. This is the posture advocated for students of rabbis – catch the connection to the story of Mary I commented on earlier – and Paul, rather than silencing women, is actually advocating equality and liberation for women in Jesus, far surpassing what they may have experienced in their culture. But it must be done properly, and not at the expense of the equality of men or at the cost of false or shallow teaching. Women must first learn, then they can teach, with the same attributes of faith, truthfulness, and love in leadership to be shown by both men and women (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

The original word translated as *authority* in English is the Greek word *authenteō*, used only once in all of the New Testament, and is not the usual word used in Greek to mean authority, as we would understand it.

Over the course of its history this verb and its associated noun have had a wide semantic range, including some bizarre meanings, such as committing suicide, murdering one's parents, and being sexually aggressive. Some studies have been marred by a selective and improper use of the evidence. The issue is compounded by the fact that this word is found only once in the New Testament, and is not common in immediately proximate Greek literature. | [CBM Resources](#)

It's important to ask why Paul uses this rare word when he could have used other more common words to convey *authority*, if that's what he meant. A single word can't be severed from its context, so the entire letter and surrounding text particularly need to be taken into account when trying to understand and interpret Paul's use of this word and his overall meaning.

I believe what he was getting at was this: concerning their learning and teaching, women aren't to take over, act in domineering ways, or tell everyone else what to do (just because they are now 'free in Christ'). Neither are they to use their gender as a weapon, either sexually or authoritatively, claiming superiority over men or absorbing the cultural myth (that Eve was formed first and was therefore more important).

Paul concludes this section by reminding the believers of the dangers of false teaching and poor leadership, which results in deception and transgression. He recounts the Genesis story of humanity's fall, giving the example of Eve who was deceived by the serpent's false teaching (and sinned first), with Adam right behind her (who, although not being deceived, sinned

anyway). Yet, although Adam was made first (and could be considered by the men as 'more important'), it was through Eve that salvation came about.

This passage isn't about prohibiting all women, for all time, from leadership or teaching, but about matters of faithful church leadership and careful church teaching, specifically for the church at Ephesus, but still applicable to us today.

Links: <https://bit.ly/2wMnDXk>, <https://bit.ly/3dGijp9>
<https://bit.ly/39z4Ufm>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdTtr0NvrCo>
<https://shorturl.at/eikC2>

1 Corinthians 14:34-36 – These two verses are a somewhat jarring and odd inclusion in a long dialogue from Paul about spiritual gifts, which begins in chapter 12. In fact, they are at direct odds with the force of Paul's argument and, quite frankly, do not seem to fit the context through these previous chapters in which Paul is discussing the 'body of believers' – those who gather together in Jesus' name – and what that looks like in real terms. He uses phrases like "To **each person** has been given the ability to manifest the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7), "As it is, there are **many parts**, but **one body**" (1 Corinthians 12:20), "Now you are the **body of Christ**, and **each of you** is a **member** of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27) and "Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have **all been baptised** into one body by **one Spirit**, and we **all share** the same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

The context of the first epistle to the Corinthians is one of a church in disarray and Paul tackles all manner of issues that had arisen in this church – irresponsibility, promiscuity, immorality, quarrelling, and disunity. In short, the Corinthians had forgotten that they were God's church – the body of Jesus, set apart for a spirit-led life – and that the knowledge of their salvation in Jesus was meant to

transform them, in love, to a life in common 'with Jesus'. When we get to Chapter 14, Paul is still discussing the importance of acting for 'the greater good' of the church, in relation to spiritual gifts. There are three explanations around verses 34-36, which are as follows:

1. These verses are considered to be a reader-added marginal gloss. They were added at some point in the translation process, probably very early on, as a notation in the margin by a scribe. Subsequent translations either added them in position between verses 33 and 36 or place them at the end of the chapter, after verse 40. The fact that they 'float' in several translations, in terms of positioning, does lend weight to this idea, along with the presence of a distigme (two dots) in the margin, the general symbol marking the location of any kind of textual variant. You can read more about this here: <https://bit.ly/3arPNp2>. You will notice that if you skip over these verses (as if they never existed in the original letter), the flow of the chapter remains intact and Paul's conclusion to his dialogue makes perfect sense. Commentators have noted that 'this 'gloss view' explains all the external and internal data, preserves the chiastic structure and integrity of Paul's argument, and avoids conflict with Paul's other teachings.
2. If these verses **are** original, then it is an entirely reasonable conclusion that they were written to address a specific issue in, admittedly, a very messed up church. Given we know that women *did* pray and prophecy from other passages in the Bible (Luke 2:36, Acts 21:7-9, 1 Corinthians 11:5-11), the seeming prohibition on the women in these verses must be specific and contextual, rather than general and unlimited in time, much like the injunction in 1 Timothy 2.
3. 1 Corinthians is largely Paul's response to a large number of topics that the church had written to him

about, seeking clarity and instructive advice (1 Corinthians 7:1 *"Now for the matters you wrote about:"*). From Chapter 7 onwards, he speaks to a number of topics the Corinth church had asked him about, at times quoting their statements or comments verbatim. We certainly don't take those comments themselves to *instructive* or *inspired*, merely Paul's reiteration of certain questions asked (followed by his replies or comments in relation to those questions). We see this pattern at the beginning of Chapter 7 ('concerning sexual relations/married life), Chapter 8 ('concerning food offered to idols'), Chapter 11 ('concerning worship and the Lord's supper'), and Chapter 12 ('concerning spiritual gifts'). 1 Corinthians 14 is a continuation of Paul's thoughts in relation to spiritual gifts, and the passage in question (1 Corinthians 14:34-36) can quite easily be read as *'the matters you wrote about'* (forbidding women to exercise their spiritual gift of prophecy or tongues). His comments, including a refutation to this question/statement are in verses 36-40, which makes it clear that they (*"my brothers and sisters"*) *"should be eager to prophesy, and are not to forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."*

Any one of these explanations would be acceptable to me. The one that doesn't make sense is that women are being prohibited from 'speaking in church', universally and in perpetuity. Here's why:

– Paul's comments are intended for both men and women. Some English translations may inadvertently obscure this by their use of the word '*brethren*' or '*brothers*' but the correct understanding of the original Greek (ἀδελφοί (adelphoi – meaning *brothers* or *siblings*) is that Paul is addressing men and women both – the believers as a whole, who are *the family of Christ*.

– The context is a call to orderly worship and, in particular, the appropriate use of spiritual gifts, such as prophesying, speaking in tongues, interpretation, and special revelation. We know that these gifts were given to both men and women (Acts 1:14, 2:4, 17-18, Acts 21:9-10), and in fact, only a few chapters earlier Paul had instructed the church on the culturally correct way this gift was to be exercised (either by a man or a woman) (1 Corinthians 11:4,5). It would seem rather odd that only a few chapters later, he would reverse this entirely and silence women, especially those who had been gifted with prophecy, tongues, or interpretation.

– These gifts were given for the edification of the church ie they were intended to be heard aloud by all, and not for personal or private edification.

– The context of the immediate text in question is '*if they have questions, they should ask their husbands at home*'. Some differentiation seems to be being made here, that the women in question are possibly '*wives with questions*', not just the women in the congregation in general. Again, the context is orderly and edifying worship for all, and wives who have questions are instructed to ask those at home, rather than during congregational worship where it would be distracting and disorderly. (The Greek word for *woman* and *wife* (as for *man* and *husband*) is the same, so several differing interpretations could be drawn from this alone.)

– Paul concludes his thoughts by encouraging everyone to be eager to prophesy and not to forbid speaking in tongues. His caveat (and the actual context of the chapter) is that everything should be done *in a fitting and orderly way*.

Links: <https://bit.ly/3arPNp2> and <https://bit.ly/2wD2G15>

1 Corinthians 11:1-16 This is by far the largest section of verses and can initially appear somewhat confusing and challenging to interpret. In fact, these verses are regarded

by commentators as ‘one of the most obscure passages in the Pauline letters’.

Again, we must remember the context of this epistle – that is, it was written to a church in disarray with a multitude of issues that Paul was speaking into. The particular issue he is addressing here, in these verses, distinctly relates to the cultural context of Corinth. Particularly, Paul is referencing the issues of homosexuality, gender fluidity, and immorality rampant in that culture, and which influences we know the Corinthian church were floundering under.

The particular passage that seems to indicate hierarchy is this: *“But I want you to realise that the head (κεφαλή (kephalē) of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.”* (1 Corinthians 11:3-4). However, there are fourteen primary reasons to interpret head as referring to “source” rather than “authority” in this passage (see links below), and this alternate translation changes the meaning of the passage entirely. (Incidentally, this same word is used by Paul in Ephesians 5 – the ‘husbands and wives’ chapter, where, once again, *source* rather than *head* seems to be a much better translation of the original word and better fits the overall context of the passage. I write more specifically about this passage in my article [‘Husbands and Wives’](#)).

I believe 1 Corinthians 11 is not describing a system of hierarchy, as is sometimes supposed, but rather is speaking to the fact that men and women within the church should present themselves in ways that honour the uniqueness of their own created gender, particularly in the light of their gospel witness, as well as honouring the source of each gender.

These verses (particularly 4-5) are, again, a striking affirmation of women’s equal standing with men in church leadership in that Paul simply assumes that “every woman,” like “every man,” could prophesy and pray in public.

To briefly summarise, Paul is addressing the importance of believers exercising their freedom in Christ carefully, so as to not bring disrepute to their witness of the gospel. Christians need to be mindful and culturally aware not to display themselves in ways that malign the gospel or damage its credibility. Their 'oneness in Christ' does not mean that markers of gender are no longer relevant or valued. As Ronald W Pierce comments, *"General decency or even one's cultural preferences should never distract from the message being preached."*

The relationship between men and women in the church is an important one and the overall principles of respect, mutual submission, and love shown by all are continually argued for in all Paul's writings. However, one of the most important principles that is being emphasised in this passage **is the importance of the way a Christian behaves (here, particularly in relation to their gender signaling), so as to be a credible witness for the gospel**, a theme also picked up by Peter in his first letter to the early church (1 Peter 1-5). You can read more about these ideas and the context of Peter's first letter [here](#)

The message [of 1 Corinthians 11] is, "Don't use your freedom in Christ as an excuse to dress immodestly. In demeanour and word keep it clean!" Furthermore, men and women should show respect to each other, honouring the opposite sex as their source. As Paul stresses in the climax of this passage, believers must affirm the equal rights and privileges of women and men in the Lord. Women, as well as men, may lead in public Christian worship. Since in the Lord woman and man are not separate, women who are gifted and called by God ought to be welcomed into ministry just as men are." – Philip B Payne, Ph.D New Testament Studies

Links: <https://bit.ly/2QVZa8I> and <https://bit.ly/3auVuCP>

Conclusion

I believe these ‘troubling texts’ have often been mistranslated, have long been misinterpreted, and largely misunderstood, leading to a faulty understanding of God’s will for Christian women and their place in the church. They have been used to build a flimsy framework that does not stand up to close analysis and which runs contrary to Scripture itself, the historical and biblical evidence of women’s full involvement in church ministry, and the greater scope of the gospel story.

I believe that when they are read and understood correctly, as Paul intended them to be, they affirm women’s active and fully participatory role in the church alongside their male counterparts and provide a robust and inspiring framework for the church today, as they did in Paul’s day, recognising that wherever the church gathers together, it’s most basic principle is to incarnate Christ.

I haven’t adopted this position *simply because I wanted to*, because I’m a *raging feminist*, or because I have no regard for what scripture *really teaches*. I’ve arrived at my position – egalitarian – because I genuinely and wholeheartedly believe this is what scripture consistently and cohesively teaches about women and the church.

This might be your position also, or it might not. Either way, I’d love to hear from you. Don’t hesitate to get in touch via the contact form or drop a comment below.

This article was first published 17 October 2023. You can read the entire articles relating to “Women + The Church [here](#)’

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

/ˈhɪərɑːki/

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/dictionary/hierarchy) (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 reinstituted* 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.)