

Before + After

Truth #1: 'before'

"In the beginning, the earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters."

In the beginning, there was nothing. A vast, endless emptiness. Deep, restless waters, devoid of life, and overshadowed by a darkness as complete and as final as death itself.

It is over this dim, watery world that the Spirit of God hovered, waiting, moving; poised to begin the work of creation. And it is into this dark world that God said. "let there be light".

This is, of course, how Genesis begins its narrative concerning the creation of the natural world (Genesis 1:1-2). But it's also an apt description of the spiritual reality into which we are all born.

Whether we know it or not, whether we are aware or not, each one of us is part of a creation that was made for a purpose – to walk with and be in relationship with God. Humans were made to be with God, to reflect His character, to glorify him and steward His good creation. And for a time, we did [walk in close companionship with God](#), delighting in His presence.

But that relationship was severed by disobedience and our spiritual connection was lost.

We were cast out of Eden, banished from proximity to the tree of life, into a land whose ground was cursed and whose wages were death. We were exiled to live under the rule of another, one to whom we had given over our allegiance – the prince of this world. His is a dominion of darkness, a realm

characterised by sin, evil, and separation from God.

Every single human is born into this dominion. As one author puts it, it is *our misfortune not our crime*. It is not our fault, it is simply our reality. And God has been working hard since that first day of exile to save us, to bring us back, to rescue us from the emptiness into which we're now all born.

This is the first truth we must come to terms with. We are born into a dying world, a temporal, fallen world that will one day pass away along with everything that's in it, ruler and subject alike. We are helpless and hopeless, separated from our true purpose and disconnected from a life-giving relationship with God.

This is our 'before'.

Truth #2: 'After'

God, who is rich in loving kindness, mercy, generosity and, above all, love, did not leave us to our fate. Hovering over the spiritual darkness of our world, He spoke words of life: 'let there be light' (John 1: 1-14).

Into the darkness, failure, chaos, and ruin of humanity, light shone, a good and healing light which the darkness of this dominion can never extinguish. This is the true light that shines ever more, even unto the perfect day, when all things will be made new (Proverbs 4:18, Revelation 21:5).

That light is Jesus, full of unfailing love and faithfulness, and to all *who [believe him and accept him](#)*, he gives the right to become children of God – to be *born again*.

He has come into this dark world to rescue us, to draw us to the Father, to bring us home. He invites every person to follow Him as His disciple, living according to His teachings and sharing His love with others. This invitation is a call to transformation and purpose, and an imperative to acknowledge

that he is Lord and Christ, surrendering to his rule (John 10:27, Romans 10:9-10). When we accept his invitation, this is our moment of rescue, an existential exchange of his life for ours, a purchase of our freedom by his blood.

This is our 'after', a second great truth: We are bought with a price, and our lives will never be the same again.

Born Again: Come As You Are, Don't Stay As You Are

In John 3:3 and 5, Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again of water and Spirit."

To be born again, then, is part of the great rescue God enacts on our behalf. But what does it mean, in real terms, to be [born again](#)? What does our life look like 'after'?

Paul the Apostle says that we will live 'as children of light', throwing off our old sinful nature and former way of life and, instead, let the Spirit renew our thoughts and attitudes (Ephesians 5:22-24). Like a fine garment purchased specifically for us, we are to put on our new nature, created to be like God, truly holy and righteous.

The letter to the Ephesians (Chapter 4) then continues on, listing out more 'befores' and 'afters'—a laying down of old ways and a putting on of new habits and choices.

Stop telling lies; instead, be truth-tellers. If you're a thief, quit stealing; use your hands for good, honest work. Watch what you say; use your word for life, not death. Exchange your bitterness, anger, and harsh words for kindness, forgiveness, and a posture of tenderheartedness.

Don't allow sexual immorality, impurity or greed to be present in your life. Be holy. Don't take part in obscene stories or coarse jokes. Have speech seasoned with love and grace. Don't

have anything to do with the worthless deeds of evil or darkness, instead, expose them. For once you were full of darkness but now *you have light from the Lord*. (Ephesians 4: 3-14)

“Come as you are”, Jesus said. “Come all you who are weary and heavy burdened. Come and lay those burdens down”.

Come as you are...but don't stay as you are. “Take *my* yoke upon you, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.” (Matthew 11:28-29)

The call to Christian life – the ‘after’ – is a call to holiness. But that holiness is a work of God's grace as the Holy Spirit empowers the believer to live a life pleasing to God. New Testament holiness is a joyous privilege, not a heavy burden and duty, and it is a burden which Christ carries alongside us. New Testament holiness is a mark of real life, the one that Jesus rose again to give us. It's Jesus living *in and through us*.” | Lance Ralston

To be born again means that everything in our life changes, although not necessarily all at once. Becoming a Christian (a Christ-follower) marks the beginning of a lifelong process of transformation, called **sanctification**, through which believers grow to reflect the character of Christ. It is the start of a journey, not the end.

But is a journey that takes place in the glorious light of the kingdom of God, which will, one day, fill all of heaven and earth. We no longer belong to the world which is passing away, the old dominion of darkness, but instead now belong to God, in restored relationship, as we were always intended.

“There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son. And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but

people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants.” | John 3:18-21

When God Moved Into The Neighbourhood

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

Glory, All-In-All

I think our view or perspective of God and His intentions may have been shaped by many things, but the Bible seems to set the narrative straight pretty much right away, declaring His intent and purpose from the beginning. We read in Genesis 1:6 that God said *“Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.”* Further, God declares in Numbers 14:21 that *“the whole earth will be filled with the glory of the LORD.”*

God’s desire has always been for us to be like Him and for Him to dwell with us, utterly and completely.

He intended us to not only be like Him but for us to also rule over His good creation on His behalf, exhibiting his justice,

goodness, and truth throughout the earth. Affirming God's sovereignty, reflected in the way we choose to live like Him, gives shape and purpose to the role for which humanity was created (and, later in scripture, why and how [the church](#) also finds her purpose).

How amazing – the King of all the earth desired to make us in His image and in His likeness so that we might reflect His glory – the weight and splendour of all that He is, and so that everywhere one might look – east, west, north or south – all that can be seen and felt is God.

God dwelt with us once, long ago, in a garden. His glory and splendour could be seen then, as humanity and God walked together in perfect harmony and everything was *very good*. Only one thing remained in order to make this eternal; the application of our free will to partner with God and undertake this rule on His terms, a display of obedience and commitment to Him.

This isn't what the first humans choose, though, and the third chapter of Genesis starkly illustrates the terrible outcome; banishment from His presence and separation from His glory.

The book of Genesis is a means to a theological end; its purpose to illustrate in historical-mythological language 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."* (Professor C. John Collins).

Genesis 1–11, then, is the founding story of humanity, ending in crisis. These narratives give a real and true assessment of God's initial purposes and the human plight. Genesis 12–50 is the founding story of the nation with whom the covenant is

eventually made at Sinai. The covenant establishes the relationship to Abraham and his descendants, provides the structure for living in God's presence, and lays the foundation for God's presence to be established on earth. – Biologos

The Purpose Of Israel

The people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, were the chosen people through whom God intended for all the world to learn of Him and be invited into a restored relationship with Him. After their epic deliverance from slavery in Egypt and a desperate flight through the Red Sea, the book of Exodus tells the story of Israel's journey under the leadership of Moses to Mount Sinai. There, they find its summit is wrapped in thick smoke and access to its base must be limited *because the Lord had descended on it in fire.*

Through rolling thunder and lightning, God makes solemn promises to them in that place. He intends to make of them a *"holy nation, and a kingdom of priests"*, contingent on their faithfulness to His covenant. He gives them ten commandments, so they might understand His holiness and His laws, by which their lives and worship of Him were to be governed. They will be witnesses to the nations around them of the glory and sovereignty of the God, who not only rules over them but also dwells with them.

It was also at Mount Sinai that *the tabernacle* – the *residence or dwelling place of God* was to be constructed. Designed to be able to be transported, it was to be a reminder that God was with them always, dwelling in their midst and travelling with them throughout all their journeys. Housed within *the holiest of holies* inside the tabernacle would be *the ark of the covenant* – a pure, gold-covered wooden chest with an elaborate lid, ornamented with two golden cherubim, called *the mercy seat*. Inside the ark would be placed the *two*

stone tablets of the ten commandments.

Swathed in an impermanent, transitory wrapping of tapestry curtains covered in images of cherubim, the glory of God descended and *tabernacled* amongst them. A large cloud of light and mist settled overhead, signaling God's presence was there in their midst. They would know it was time to set out when the cloud lifted but until then, they waited and rested in the presence of the Lord.

God had moved into the neighbourhood.

Solomon Builds A Temple

The tabernacle was an itinerant dwelling place, as the people of Israel would be on the move, as it turns out, for 40 years. When they finally reached the end of their wilderness wanderings and settled in the promised land, it would be many more years before a permanent structure was built to welcome God's glory.

Under the reign of King Solomon the Wise, son of the great [King David](#), a glorious temple was constructed, some 480 years after the Great Exodus. Built with exquisite craftsmanship, using masterfully quarried stone blocks, and cedar and cyprus timbers from the great forests of Lebanon, it was a magnificent building dedicated to the God of Israel and intended as the place in which He would dwell with His people in a more permanent way.

Solomon's words at the dedication of the temple are beautifully moving to read:

"I have built this Temple to honor the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. And I have prepared a place there for the Ark, which contains the covenant that the LORD made with our ancestors when he brought them out of Egypt. Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the entire community of Israel. He lifted his hands toward heaven, and

he prayed, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in all of heaven above or on the earth below. You keep your covenant and show unfailing love to all who walk before you in wholehearted devotion. You have kept your promise to your servant David, my father. You made that promise with your own mouth, and with your own hands you have fulfilled it today. And now, O LORD, God of Israel, carry out the additional promise you made to your servant David, my father. For you said to him, 'If your descendants guard their behavior and faithfully follow me as you have done, one of them will always sit on the throne of Israel.' Now, O God of Israel, fulfill this promise to your servant David, my father. But will God really dwell on earth? Why, even the highest heavens cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!"
| 1 Kings 8:20-27, NLT

Solomon asks an important question. Will God really dwell on the earth, with us?

The answer is yes, but as humanity would come to understand, the living God desires to dwell not in temples made of wood and stone but in a living temple, in a structure softer and more pliable than stone, more ancient and beautiful than Solomon's temple or the wilderness tabernacle before that.

He longs to dwell *with us, in us*, utterly and completely.

The people of Israel, however, struggled with their unique and privileged identity. They would worship and serve God for a season and then, when things were going well, they would become complacent and selfish, turning aside to worship gods made of wood and stone, like the nations around them. They abandoned their covenant with God, over and over again.

They paid little heed to the warnings from prophets like Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, and Ezekiel about the impending doom that would come upon Jerusalem, should they remain feckless and unfaithful.

Finally, Ezekiel is given a sobering vision of the end; of the moment that God's glory will leave the presence of His covenant people.

“Now the cherubim were standing on the south side of the house, when the man went in, and a cloud filled the inner court. And the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub to the threshold of the house, and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the LORD. And the sound of the wings of the cherubim was heard as far as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks. Then the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubim. And the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, with the wheels beside them. And they stood at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the LORD, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.” | Ezekiel 10:4-5, 18-19, 11:22-23

The God Who Dwells With Us

The nation of Israel had forgotten that God is not tethered to a building and His desire is not to dwell in a place, *but in a people.*

The final pages of the Old Testament come to a close with the prophetic words of Malachi, written around 460-430 BC. We find the people of Israel have now returned from nearly 130 years of exile and are back in the land of their ancestors. Yet the nation is vastly diminished. The temple has been restored under the leadership of Nehemiah but it is a much smaller building than the previous, gloriously constructed temple of

King Solomon's days. Despite Ezekiel's later vision which seemed to offer the promise of God's presence (Ezekiel 43:2), the glory of the Lord has not returned to this temple.

Yet there is still hope to be found. Isaiah speaks these comforting words to Israel around the time of their return from exile in Babylon:

"Comfort, comfort my people", says your God. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." | Isaiah 40:1-5, ESV

John the Baptist deliberately echoes these words, over 700 years later, to announce the arrival of Jesus Christ (found in John 1:1-18).

The gospel of John (the Apostle, not Baptist) opens with an otherworldly prologue regarding Jesus and his origins; specifically, the identification of Jesus as the Word, who was with God and was God in the beginning, through whom all things have been brought into being, who is the light and life of humanity, and who *became flesh and dwelt among us*.

He concludes his origin account with a brief explanation as to his role. "I am", he simply says "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord".

As author and theologian, Eugene H Peterson puts it (and where the title of this article is taken from), God had moved into the neighbourhood (Zechariah 2:10, John 1:14).

“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.” | John 1:14

God's Temple Is A Person

The glory of the Lord had returned to dwell among His people. But this time it was wrapped in a perishable, temporary covering [of flesh and bone](#). This was the true temple of the living God, the house of God in which there are many rooms, and which, though it would be destroyed, would be rebuilt again in just three days, an eternal life-giving spirit for all who would enter in (John 2:19-21, John 14:2).

A temple with just a single door, larger on the inside than on the outside, where worshippers as numerous as the stars of heaven would find sacred space.

A place where people could fully enter instead of only just drawing near. A place where the dividing wall would be broken down and peace would be found instead of hostility. A place where there once had stood a wall, but now there would be a way; many brought near by the blood of Christ himself.

A place where people and God could meet, at last, face to face and be reunited.

A place where there once had been two, but now there would be one; humanity reborn in this holiest of places with God dwelling utterly and completely in and with His people.

All the narratives of the Old Testament had been simply shadows and markers, one-dimensional illustrations intended to point the world to the real story God had been writing all along, to the reality that God had intended from the beginning. God would dwell, as He has always intended, among people, *in people*; in a kingdom of priests ransomed to Him by

the precious blood of the lamb slain before the foundation of the world.

The glory of God dwelt among us, *tabernacled with us* in the person of Jesus Christ, God-With-Us, and it's in the truest of all temples – Jesus – that all things become possible.

He was all things; the presence of God dwelling fully with us, the glory of God in our midst, the way, the gate, the faithful shepherd, the life, the resurrection and victorious conqueror of death itself, our priest, our peace, the bright and morning star, and the true temple of the living God into whom we can fully enter, through the power of the blood of the cross (Colossians 1:20).

“Therefore, brethren, we have boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus.” | Hebrews 10:19, Weymouth

For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” | Ephesians 2:18-22, ESV

Worthy To Enter Into Glory

It's strange – the more I read the Bible, the more complex it seems, and yet the simpler it becomes. Sure, it's full of strange visions and obscure prophecies, lamentations and poetry, passages offering wisdom for life, and chapters delving into deep theological insights about God and humanity.

Reading the vivid and apocalyptic language of Revelation, for

example, stirs our blood while immersing ourselves in the trials and tribulations of faithful Job pulls at our hearts.

The Bible is a completely magnificent book, the traverse of which is the journey of a lifetime.

But there really is only one take-home point in all of it. God wants to *dwell with us*, all-in-all, utterly and completely, in glory.

It's what we were created for, yet humanity, left to ourselves, is unable to echo God's holiness, His perfection, His righteousness, and His supreme goodness. The nation of Israel, first specifically chosen to be God's people, showed the truth of this. Their faithless, inconsistent example and half-hearted desire for God are a reflection of all humanity.

We could never enter into God's temple, into the very presence of His glory without help. And Jesus was sent to be that help, to make a way, to break down the wall, to bring us back to God. Holy, innocent, unstained and exalted above the heavens, he is the guarantor of a superior covenant; both the presence, the pardon, and the promise of God.

Jesus makes everything possible.

All of scripture, in a million different ways, is simply telling us the truth of this; that in Jesus, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose.

And *that* is a story worth telling.

"Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil

conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” | Hebrews 10:19-25, ESV

The Pauline epistles are just brimming with thoughts on this subject, too numerous to comment on here. I'm conscious I've only just scratched the surface and hope I have managed to do it some small justice. If you're looking to soak a little longer in these thoughts, I'd recommend heading on over to the book of Hebrews and starting there with a read-through of chapters 1-10...

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A Guide For LGBTQ+ Christian Teens

Are you a Christian teen struggling with or feeling confused by LGBTQ+ and gender identity issues? Then this is a conversation we need to have...

First of all, know this. You are loved.

The God of all the Universe, the One in whose image you're made loves *you*. He knows you; your innermost fears, your deepest insecurities, and your hopes and dreams for the

future. He has counted every hair on your head.

This is the same God who can count the stars by name, who has caused worlds to come into being, and who has decided that no two snowflakes should be the same.

This God is interested in *knowing* and *being known* by you.

There's a beautiful little verse in the gospel of Matthew that tells us just how much God cares for us. In Matthew 6, Jesus says to the listening crowds:

“Look at the birds in the sky! They don't plant or harvest. They don't even store grain in barns. Yet your Father in heaven takes care of them. Aren't you worth much more than birds?” | Matthew 6:26 CEV

God cares *for* us and He cares *about* us.

You are of infinite worth to God.

Know this too, He is not astonished by your mistakes. He's not surprised by your fears or doubts and He isn't shocked by the things you've done wrong. There's nothing you've done that He hasn't already seen coming, that He hasn't accounted for, or that He hasn't already prepared a way through. Your best moments and your worst moments are all known to him.

In fact, he knows exactly how it feels to be human because His Son Jesus became human, just like us. He experienced all that we do; the pressure to conform, the criticism of peers, the rejection of friends, the pull of temptation, the pain of betrayal. He knows and he understands.

You are not alone.

You Might Be Wondering...

Why am I here? What on earth is the point of humanity?

This is a great question and it's really one of life's most basic questions: what is the purpose of human existence?

Well, we're all here for a reason and it starts with God.

God has a plan. I know it sounds a bit cliched but, He really does.

He intends to fill the earth with His glory, with all the amazing attributes and characteristics of Who He is; love, kindness, justice, peace, holiness, beauty... Basically, a perfect, incredible, amazing space, probably better than anything we can really get our heads around! And humanity was created to be a part of this plan; not just as a minor detail but as major character.

Humanity was created to rule over this world and all the creatures that live in it wisely and well, as God's image-bearers. Being an image bearer of God means that when you look at a person, you see God. And, in a collective sense, when you look at humanity, you see God. You see His character, His values, His glory, His holiness; everything about Him. He's the king of everything and we get to represent Him in this good, good world!

Part of this plan specifically involved the creation of male and female, [a gender binary](#) that many people today are rejecting. Yet this is exactly how God designed humanity, it is a foundational part of each of our identities, and, collectively, it's how humanity reflects the completeness of God's image. When men and women (male and female) come together in one, extraordinary collective, we are the complete image of all that God Himself is. Isn't that incredible?

LGBTQ+, The Gender Binary + More...

You might be struggling with the idea of [a gender binary of male and female](#). You may feel at odds with your body; unhappy or discomfited by your physical appearance, or challenged by

how your body is changing, without your 'agreement' or 'permission'. You might be surprised at what you look like or sound like, or maybe at how differently people start to treat you. You might feel like you don't even recognise yourself when you look in the mirror.

All this is normal, and ok, *and you will be ok.*

You are transitioning, *as you have been designed to do*, from a child to an adult to becoming a functional and fully-formed man or woman. This is one of life's great crossings, a time of new discovery and development, but also of great upheaval and emotional angst, and it can be a really tough space.

It's ok to feel a bit out of your depth, super cranky with your parents or siblings, or all jumbled up and unsure of *who.you.really.are.*

Think about this for a minute; when a caterpillar changes into a butterfly, it's totally mushed up, taken apart, and reorganised into the beautiful insect that finally emerges. It shouldn't really surprise us that moving from young, dependent children to fully independent adults can feel a bit like this process.

You will feel *a lot of feels*. And while our feelings are real, and they often provide important signals about what is going on in our world, we need to know that *they're not always reliable*. Feelings *alone* are not adequate markers of what might be true.

So it's really important to not rely on *our feelings alone* but to take other things into account as well. These might be things like wise guidance or advice from people we know and trust, and who we know love us, applying a healthy dose of critical thinking to our decision-making and the values we want for our life, and, most importantly, the truths found in God's word and what He has to say about us.

It's really important, particularly during times of transition and change, to remind yourself that you are deeply known and loved by God, even when you feel like you don't know yourself. You have been created with intention and purpose, and God has a hope and a future planned for you. He has taken care of you and he will continue to take care of you, through your good times and (especially) in your bad times. You can take anything to Him and you can ask Him for guidance and help, through prayer and through reading His word. You can trust Him.

Remind yourself, if you are a female, that you have been gifted with unique and diverse qualities, specific to your sex. This is intentional, beautiful, and life-affirming. You are on your way to becoming a woman, with all the inherent and amazing attributes that God has designed for you. It might feel a little scary, a lot unknown, but you can trust that God knows what He's doing.

If you are a male, remind yourself that you have been gifted with unique and diverse qualities, specific to your sex. This is intentional, incredible, and life-affirming. You're becoming a man, with the opportunity to contribute your incredible characteristics and attributes to the purpose of God, as He has intended for you. You might feel overwhelmed, and more than a bit nervous but you, too, can trust that God knows what He's doing.

(And, just a little note here: one gender isn't better than the other, and neither is complete without the other. We need both men and women to truly image God in this world, as He intended!)

"It is out of the diversity and distinctive separateness of male and female that we humans are called to not only reflect the image and likeness of God, but we also represent God in the stewardship of His good and wonderful creation." (Genesis 1:28-29). | [Focus On The Family](#)

Let's Talk About Sex

You, or somebody you know, might be baffled by a (sudden and new) attraction to someone of the same sex, attraction to people of both sexes, or maybe just confused and overwhelmed by sexuality in general. This is often new and surprising territory for us all when we arrive here.

I want you to know that it's normal to feel these struggles and perhaps even experience confusion and emotional overwhelm. It's actually very common for teens to be attracted to or have sexual thoughts about people of the same sex and/or the opposite sex; it's often part of the emotional and physical changes that humans go through as they mature into adulthood.

The Bible tells us that sex is amazing, that it's been designed by God for the flourishing of humanity, and that it's part of His good creation. You only have to read the [Song of Solomon](#) to realise the Bible isn't shy about talking about sex (some of those passages are certainly blush-inducing!) But, as with everything, sex has been designed for a purpose and to be experienced within boundaries, with our good in mind.

What you need to know is that God has designed sex to be experienced by a man and woman, within the boundaries of a committed, life-long relationship (marriage). This kind of committed sex with a life-long partner provides physical, emotional, and spiritual intimacy, and is the foundation for a secure and stable family unit, into which children may be born.

Part of the original intention for humanity in Genesis was 'to be fruitful and multiply' (to have children) and to fill the earth with humans who will all bear God's image. To this end, God created one man for one woman (Adam and Eve) and they were brought together in the union of marriage, giving us the blueprint for healthy and flourishing sexual intimacy.

The bond that is created between a man and a woman in marriage and, particularly, in their physical unity, is a mirror of the character of God, in all its completeness. (The Bible also tells us in the New Testament that marriage is a symbol of Jesus and the church, who is called 'his bride').

God never intended for sex to be experienced by two women together, or by two men together, or outside of the committed, life-long relationship of marriage. Again, this is very counter-cultural to what you might hear around you, what you think your feelings are telling you, or even what your friends might believe. But this is the Bible's truth about sex, and this is God's will for humanity, in order that we (humanity) will flourish.

If you're a teen struggling with your sexuality or a teen trying to maintain God's will in relation to sex (abstinence), please know you are not alone! It's really important that you find people you can trust, who can pray with you, who can encourage you in pursuing God's will for you, for your good and for your flourishing, and that you understand, too, that even when we mess up, God can still forgive us and help us get back on track (more on this in a minute).

You might find [this online message](#) by Ps Mark Lohman, from [The Bridge Church \(in the Chino Valley, California\)](#), on 'The Gospel & Sex' super helpful, and, if this is an area you're struggling in and would like some Christian advice and guidance on, I'd really encourage you to have a watch.

Getting Back On Track (Why We Need Jesus)

Being an image bearer of God means that when you look at a person, you see God. And, in a collective sense, when you look at humanity, you see God.

Well, at least, that's what was meant to happen.

Adam and Eve really put a spanner in the works on that one.

You've probably heard the story; a garden, a snake, 'don't eat from a certain tree', a lie, disobedience, sin, punishment, death... It all gets pretty grim, right from the get-go.

And so even though we're made to image God, to be a significant part of His plan, and even though we were created with all the capability and purpose to do this, it gets messed up pretty quickly. The introduction of sin into the world brings about terrible consequences for not just Adama and Eve but for all creation. We live in a fallen world, with the echoes of our intended greatness all around us, but now subject to decay, death, and, in a lot of cases, hopelessness and despair.

But this is how much God loves you, how much He loves me, how much He loves *us*, His creation. *While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* (Romans 5:8)

God sent His son to die for us! To fix up the issue of sin, to make a way for us to be forgiven for our mistakes, and to show us the way to live in right relationship with Him. He sent Jesus to save us, to redirect our lives towards His good and abundant way of living, and to help us see that our true reality, who we *really are*, is *one beloved of God*, intended for glory and greatness.

Every other identity – and the world around us has plenty of 'identities' on offer – are false and shallow copies of our true identity; a human made in God's image, intended to reveal His character and glory, and who, in Jesus, can find forgiveness and restoration and become empowered to live this purpose fully.

"God loved the people of this world so much that he gave His only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn its people. He sent him to save them!" | John 3:16-17, CEV

God already knew how messed up we all are, He already knew the kinds of bad things we'd do, in fact, He's already seen all the bad things you'll ever *do*...and yet He still sent Jesus to die for you!

We all need Jesus. There's not a single person who hasn't done something wrong, who hasn't made a choice or taken an action that wasn't outside of God's ideal, who doesn't need Jesus to get back on track. Jesus gives us hope and a future, belonging, homecoming, and the opportunity *to be fully known and truly loved*.

An Invitation And A Challenge

One of the first things Jesus told people when he began his preaching ministry was "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*"

It was both an invitation and a challenge to the people then, and it's no less an invitation and challenge for you today, a 21st-century teen.

Will you turn away from your willfulness, from governing your own life without God's guidance, your persistence in trying to find identity in shallow and dissatisfying deceptions, and will you turn to the maker and creator of all things, the One in whose image you're created and with whom you have been intended to experience eternal and satisfying relationship?

God's story – the one written in the stars and carried on the wind – is the story of who each one of us was intended to be. It's a story that confirms we *were* made for more than just this life, that we're meant to be part of something greater, something eternal.

It's a story of promise; of *knowing and being known*, of being *fully and completely alive*, and this is what following Jesus is all about.

Maybe you've never thought about following Jesus? Or maybe you *have* been thinking about following him and becoming a Christian, but just aren't sure how to take that step. That's a topic I intend to talk about more in my [next article](#) in this series (Letters To My Kids) so look out for that soon!

In the meantime, I'd love to hear from you. Let me know your thoughts on this topic (you can message me publicly or privately here or on my socials), or any questions you'd like answers to on this topic (or anything else) in upcoming articles!

"Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield." Psalm 5:12, NIV

Lord, I ask that You will rescue, guide, and protect our teens today. Answer them when they call on You, and be with them in times of trouble. I know that Your plans for them are good, and not for their harm. Guard and protect them with Your favor as with a shield (Psalm 5:12). Amen." | [Prayers For Teens](#)

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

/'hɪərəʊki/

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 Conjugality: 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.)

By One Man

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

I like the Apostle Paul.

I like his ability to 'call a spade a spade', the unrelenting pursuit of his faith, and his bold assertion to "preach nothing but the cross of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:2). No doubt he ruffled more than a few feathers at times, with his unapologetic directness and refusal to tolerate any other gospel than that of being [saved by grace through faith alone](#).

He doesn't shy away from telling it how it was; the reality that his zeal for God had been seriously misplaced early on,

and that he had been a violent persecutor and destroyer of the very faith he was now thankful to call his own.

He doesn't downplay the facts of his former life; that not only had he been zealous for the traditions of his fathers, he had also been considered an 'up and coming' amongst his peers, his upward trajectory in Judaism eclipsing many of those his own age (Galatians 1:13).

Yet he also doesn't state this just for effect or from a place of pride, but rather as facts relevant to advancing the true gospel narrative he now endeavors to preach. He states that he counts all those things of his former life as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, his Lord.

He has a particularly warm and fatherly relationship with Timothy, his 'son in the faith' and he shows deep regard for several fellow workers whom he commends by name: Epaphroditus, husband-and-wife team, Priscilla and Aquila, Barnabas, Titus, Silas, Luke, Lydia, and Onesiphorus.

He demonstrates tenderness and genuine love and concern for all those of the "household of faith" and he is a passionate evangelist to those who are yet still "strangers and foreigners" to the gospel of grace. His letters to the early churches are full of pastoral advice and authoritative direction. Yet he is also unapologetically direct and is prepared to meet and name injustice or falsity head-on, as in the situation that he writes about in 2 Corinthians 7 (see also 2 Corinthians 11, Galatians 1:6-9, Galatians 2:4; 2 Corinthians 11:26).

"Paul's letters reveal a remarkable human being: dedicated, compassionate, emotional, sometimes harsh and angry, clever and quick-witted, supple in argumentation, and above all possessing a soaring, passionate commitment to God, Jesus Christ, and his own mission." | [Britannica.Com](https://www.britannica.com)

Paul's influence, passion, and commitment enabled the gospel of Jesus Christ to take root and flourish throughout Asia Minor, and its spread continued long after his death, reaching even to the ends of the earth.

Paul wrote several letters, one of which was the letter to the church at Rome. In chapters 5 and 6 of Romans, he covers some significant theological territory by dealing with the themes of death, life, and resurrection, which came about, he states, 'by one man'...

By One: Death In Adam

The need for our forgiveness and reconciliation with God sits at the heart of the gospel. Paul recounts in Romans 5 how humanity found itself in the dismal state of being sinning, dying creatures and why we need forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal.

He makes his first point in Romans 5:12 where he teaches that Sin came into the world *by one man* and that death followed swiftly on Sin's heels, enslaving all of humanity in a dominion of darkness and, ultimately, separation from God.

The word he uses for 'man' is the Greek word ἄνθρωπος (anthrōpos) meaning *human*. We get our English word anthropology from the combining of *ánthrōpos* (ἄνθρωπος, "human") and *lógos* (λόγος, "study"). It's therefore strictly more accurate to say that *by one human* Sin entered the world and death spread to all.

While Adam becomes the representative of us all, the focus, I think, is not primarily on his gender (as a man) but on his humanity. In fact, scripture elsewhere confirms that Eve was complicit in sin alongside Adam (Genesis 3:6,12, 1 Timothy 2:14). Together, they were responsible for the catastrophe that unfolded.

"The narratives of Genesis focus on conflict and resolution.

God's purpose from the beginning is to have His presence fill the earth; humans are to image God and subdue the earth, i.e., bring about order and fruitfulness in creation (Genesis 1–2). Conflict enters the story when humans rebel against God (Genesis 3). Shalom is shattered, and the earth is cursed. Further degeneration takes place (Genesis 4–6) until God brings judgment and mercy (Genesis 6–9). Humans then attempt to restore God's presence (Genesis 11) before God launches His own initiative to re-establish His presence on Earth (the covenant). Genesis 1–11, then, is the founding story of humanity, ending in crisis. These narratives give a real and true assessment of God's initial purposes and the human plight. Genesis 12–50 is the founding story of the nation with whom the covenant is eventually made at Sinai. The covenant establishes the relationship to Abraham and his descendants, provides the structure for living in God's presence, and lays the foundation for God's presence to be established on earth." | [BioLogos](#)

The consequence of the fall in Eden – mortality – flowed from Adam and Eve to all of humanity; a literal reality and a core theological truth embedded within the Genesis record. Dying became hard-coded in our DNA.

Not only that, Paul comments later in Romans 7, Sin is a powerful and destructive force that humans find impossible to resist. Humanity has been *sold under sin*, constantly battling against the pull of our own self-will, which is invariably in opposition to God. Despite having the desire to do good, more often than not, we lack the ability to do what is right, so powerful is Sin's hold and influence over us. There is no one in all the world who has not fallen prey to Sin's insidious, whispering temptation* (Ecclesiastes 7:20, Romans 3:21).

The introduction and continued presence of Sin in the world is what gives death its power over humanity. We die because we're mortal and death now reigns supreme and we remain dead because

of the power that Sin gives death.

In Adam, all die. This is Paul's first point and the incontrovertible theological teaching of Romans 5.

By One: Life In Christ

Yet, says Paul in Romans 5:21, and here he makes his second point, in Christ, there is life. There is another theological truth embedded within the Genesis record, a promise “that new life would be delivered out of death.”

“And I will put enmity (open hostility) Between you and the woman, and between your seed (offspring) and her Seed; He shall [fatally] bruise your head, And you shall [only] bruise His heel.” | Genesis 3:15, AMP

Humanity was promised that a descendant of Eve – [another human](#) – would arise to wage war against Sin and to overthrow death. Yet in waging this war, death would deal him a powerful blow, a seemingly mortal wound. But out of his death would flow life.

This promise would be affirmed countless times throughout scripture, and, particularly, by Jesus himself during his ministry, who stated the reason for his coming was that “they [humanity] may *have life*, and have it in abundance [to the full, till it overflows]” (John 10:10, Amplified Bible).

Unable to wage the war for themselves, God's promise and gift to the world would go into battle on humanity's behalf. He would wage war for all those who were weak, utterly helpless, and hopelessly enslaved to Sin. Those who were living in darkness, far from the eternal life God had intended for them. Those whose greatest enemy was death itself.

In fact, this hero's [redemptive work](#) *on behalf of humanity* would be deeply connected to *his own humanity*. He had to be

human, like us, in order to make atonement for the sin of humanity (Isaiah 53:6, Hebrews 2:17)

As a human, he would still feel keenly the pull of Sin's seductive promise, the desire and temptation, as *the first Adam* had, to undertake this battle on his own terms. He would wrestle with the terrifying but necessary reality of confronting death up close; not just any kind of death but the painful and humiliating death of a traitor.

He would face the world's great enemy alone, rejected by all, even by those who were closest to him, in the moment of his greatest need. Defenseless, *like a lamb led to slaughter*, he would cling to the words of the Psalmist that, though he walked through the valley of the shadow of death, God would be with him still. He would choose to suffer according to God's will, committing his soul to a faithful Creator.

This war would be brutal and bloody and seemingly fatal for our hero.

And yet, there would be an extraordinary twist...

Where *the first Adam* had been a living being; *the last Adam* would be a life-giving spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45). This hero would be human *but not merely a human*. He would be the "Word-Made-Flesh" – the 'one and only of his kind' and in him would dwell 'the entire fullness (completeness) of God's nature (Colossians 2:9).

Written into the very fabric of our reality was a powerful promise that Sin *could be* defeated by the willing sacrifice of one who had committed no sin and who had lived a perfect, moral life according to God's will. The sacrificial death of such an individual, on behalf of all of humanity, would heal the division between God and humanity, reopening the way to the eternal life God had always intended for His creation.

Scripture could not be any clearer that the victory over Sin

and death was going to be God's, accomplished through the sending of His Son, the Word-Made-Flesh. Sent in the likeness of all of humanity, but in whom dwelt all the fullness of God, only the Son of God would be able to overcome and defeat our greatest enemy.

Not only that, in meeting death head-on, he would deal it a fatal blow, overturning and destroying its claim on him. Sin's power to command death would be vanquished. Jesus himself would now hold the keys of death and the grave. On the third day, at the break of dawn, he would rise from the silence, *Life* himself having swallowed up death in victory (Acts 2:24, Romans 6:9, 1 Corinthians 15:54).

One act of righteousness, Paul says, led to justification and life for all humanity. By one man's obedience, many would be made righteous (Romans 5:18-19).

"As sin has exercised kingly sway in inflicting death, so grace, too, may exercise kingly sway in bestowing a righteousness which results in the Life of the Ages through Jesus Christ our Lord." | Romans 5:21, Weymouth New Testament

Deeper Magic

I love how C S Lewis writes about this epic moment in his fictional work, *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*:

At that moment they heard from behind them a loud noise—a great cracking, deafening noise as if a giant had broken a giant's plate...The Stone Table was broken into two pieces by a great crack that ran down it from end to end; and there was no Aslan. "Who's done it?" cried Susan. "What does it mean? Is it more magic?" "Yes!" said a great voice from behind their backs. "It is more magic." They looked round. There, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane (for it had apparently grown again) stood Aslan himself. "Oh, Aslan!" cried both the children, staring

up at him, almost as much frightened as they were glad... "But what does it all mean?" asked Susan when they were somewhat calmer. "It means," said Aslan, "that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward." | C S Lewis

This "deeper magic" is an immutable law of consequence, as certain as the law of gravity or the rising of the sun. Jesus has brought life and all those *in him* will live. This gift of grace has been given, the work has been finished and the end has been written. *"While we were still enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, and, further, now that we are reconciled, we will also be saved by his life."*

In Christ, all will live. This is Paul's second point and the incontrovertible theological teaching of Romans 5.

The Resurrection: Proof + Promise

One of the great theological truths of the Christian faith, as taught by Paul and, indeed, written into the earliest Christian creeds is the necessary and factual reality of [the resurrection](#), particularly, the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, Paul asserts that resurrection underpins the entire gospel narrative, without which all of Christian life is rendered futile.

*"If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even **Christ has been raised**. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are*

still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.” | 1 Corinthians 15:17, NIV

He actually summarised the gospel by affirming three statements, one of which is a declaration of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus:

“Remember Jesus Christ [the anointed], raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.” | 2 Timothy 2:8 | NIV

The Christian faith asserts and teaches that resurrection is a historical reality; Jesus Christ really did live, die, and was raised again to eternal life.

The resurrection is not only relevant to the gospel narrative, it's essential. Author Craig Blomberg comments, *“As wonderful as Jesus' life and teachings and miracles were, they were meaningless if it were not historically factual that Christ died and was raised from the dead and that this provided atonement, or forgiveness, of the sins of humanity.”* Embedded in this reality is the proof that what was begun in Jesus, God intends to do for all creation.

“The most startling characteristic of the first Christian preaching is its emphasis on the resurrection. The first preachers were sure that Christ had risen, and sure, in consequence, that believers would in due course rise also. This set them off from all the other teachers of the ancient world...Nothing is more characteristic of even the best thought of the day than its hopelessness in the face of death. Clearly, the resurrection is of the very first importance for the Christian faith” – The New Bible Dictionary 1996, p. 1010, “Resurrection”.

Jesus didn't just overcome death, his death also made reparation for all the sins of the world. Sin, in its

entirety, was dealt with, once and for always** (Romans 6:10). His resurrection was both proof and promise that the war against Sin had been waged and won. Death has lost its power. Those in Christ *will live*, no longer be held by death but merely passing through it. They too, like him, will be raised to life, never again to experience death.

“I assure you: Anyone who hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from death to life.” | John 5:24

Life, and *life abundantly* – the same life that Jesus now has [awaits them on the other side](#).

It's no wonder Paul concludes his thoughts on this subject with these inspiring words: *“In everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us. I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!* (Romans 8:7-39, CEV).

This is indeed good, good news!

***apart from Jesus, of course.**

****This, of course, doesn't mean that we don't still struggle with sin – this is the challenging reality of the Christian life – but rather that the penalty that sin inflicts, death, has been absolved for those in Christ (Isaiah 53:6, 1 John 2:2, John 1:29). We eagerly wait, with all of creation, to be completely set free from the bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Romans 8:22).**

A large part of the inspiration for this article came from the

worship song 'This My Soul' By The Gray Havens. It's truly worth a listen and captures Paul's sentiments from Romans 5 and 6 perfectly. This song is one of my personal favourites.

The Church | A Woman Of Valour

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

This article is dedicated to the memory of William Tyndale (c 1490-1536), an active and passionate Christian writer and translator, whose historical influence on the translation of the Bible into English cannot be overstated. Tyndale was convinced that the Bible alone should determine the practices and doctrines of the church and that every believer should be able to read the Bible in his own language *"The church of Christ is the multitude of all those who believe in Christ for the remission of sins, and who are thankful for that mercy and who love the law of God purely, and who hate the sin in this world and long for the life to come."* – William Tyndale

In my recent article, '[The People Of The Kingdom](#)', I noted that **the church is the tangible evidence of the kingdom of God**. Church people are kingdom people, living in a fellowship under King Jesus, with lives that *"are literally connected to things before the creation of the world and extending far into eternity"* ([Ecclesiastes 3:11](#)) (Matter Of The Heart). By looking more closely at how the Bible describes the church, we will also see what the advancement of this kingdom of God looks like, in reality, demonstrated in the lives of those men and women who gather together as the church.

What Does 'Church' Mean?

Our English language Bibles were translated from manuscripts written primarily in two languages; Hebrew (in the Old Testament) and Greek (in the New Testament). The translative history of the Bible is a fascinating journey, from an academic and historical perspective, and is well worth exploring. You can [read more about the translation process here](#).

In the New Testament, the word translated into English as *church* is not actually a translation or even a transliteration of the original Greek word. The translators of the first English language Bibles generally elected to use the English word *church* (which had emerged first as the word *kirk* and finally evolved through the centuries into the word *church*), as an English equivalent of the original Greek word. The first usage of this word 'church' in English was as a building in which religious meetings were held, but eventually it came to be used for the people in the building too. By the time translators began translating the Greek manuscripts into English, it had been in accepted use in English for a long time. In all truthfulness, however, it wasn't an accurate translation of *ekklesia*, which is the original Greek word.

The original Greek word used in the New Testament – *ekklesia* – is a compound of "ek" (out of) and "klesis" (calling), a derivation of "kaleo" (call). A literal meaning would be "a calling out" or "the called out." An *ekklesia* was originally a select civil body, summoned or convoked for a particular purpose and the word, in and of itself, didn't have any religious meaning attached. In Acts, the word *ekklesia* is used of a riotous mob (Acts 19:32 and 41) and also used to refer to a lawful gathering in Acts 19:39.

Ekklesia should perhaps be more accurately translated in English as *assembly* or *congregation*. However, the King James Version, the 'authorised' (and most commonly read) translation

for many years, renders it *church* some 76 times, *churches* 36 times, and *assembly* three times. Most other translations follow the KJV's example. Essentially, the translators chose to replace *ekklesia* for another Greek word (*kuriakon* which, by this time, had already made its way into English as 'church').

Despite this, it would be true to say that the word *church* is now an extremely established and recognisable word in our modern English, and it has been used for centuries as the English equivalent of *ekklesia*, however erroneous the original translative methods were.

But What Does Church *Really* Mean?

Today, most people would understand the word *church* to mean one or all of three things:

1. A **place of worship** (the original meaning of the word *kuriakon* ('*belonging to the Lord*'))
2. A particular **denomination or religious group** within Christianity (when attached to a name, for example, an *Anglican Church*)
3. A **body of Christian believers** (*the church*)

The primary goal, when trying to understand the use of the word *ekklesia* (in the context of the Bible's original meaning) is not necessarily to reinstate a truthfully accurate translation of the original word (although that would, of course, be a more proper process of translation) but to correctly understand the **meaning** of the original word. We know that words change meaning over time and also that it's not the word itself that is important, but how we understand and use that word. Do we talk about and describe the church in the same way, today, that the first-century authors did? (For the sake of continuity, we will discuss the biblical meaning of *ekklesia* in this article using the established English equivalent *church*).

The Bible never speaks of the church in the sense of a building or organisation. Neither does it speak of the church in the sense of a particular denomination. The biblical definition of church is actually about the people – those who place their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation (John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 12:13). These people are the global community of believers who gather together in ‘local expressions of church’. The Apostle Paul describes this community like the human body, a living thing – made up of real people (1 Corinthians 12:12). The New Testament authors don’t describe many churches but one, simply expressing that *‘where two or three are gathered in my [Jesus’] name, there am I among them.’* (Matthew 18:20).

In the early years of the church, these gatherings were known, for example, as *the church that met at Corinth* (1 Corinthians 1:2), or *the church at Ephesus* (Ephesians 1:12), communities acknowledged to be the one body of the Lord ‘scattered abroad’ (Acts 8:1-4, 1 Peter 1:1). The church is about people – **the people are the church, the *ekklesia*** – called out, connected in relationship by Jesus Christ and assembled together for a purpose.

There’s a very real sense that many Christians are returning to this original meaning behind the word used by the New Testament writers; that is, to view and speak of the church as an *organic identity*, made up of ‘people who are called and gathered together as a community in Jesus’.

A ‘Called Out’ Community

In the first few chapters of Acts, we read of the birth of the church in a rush of wind and fire; a pivotal moment in history where people begin responding to the call of the gospel and the announcement of Jesus as the risen king and saviour. Peter’s sermon in Acts 2:14-36 ‘cut many of the listeners to the heart’ and his life-changing teaching regarding Jesus caused many to receive his words with gladness, believing that

Jesus was both the risen Lord and [Christ](#) (Acts 2:36). This belief and repentance of their sin was demonstrated by them being baptised – 3000 people in one day!

Acts 2:42-47 describes how these individuals began gathering themselves together as a community 'called out to follow and serve King Jesus'. We begin to get a sense of the reason for the use of the word *ekklesia* by the apostolic writers to describe the formation and purpose of this one body of believers.

Throughout Acts, there are examples of the believers meeting together as a community and the purpose of these gatherings can generally be summarised by five key elements:

To honour God and His Son – '**worship**'

To grow community – '**fellowship**'

To develop personally – '**discipleship**'

To provide service to others – '**ministry**'

To share the Good News – '**evangelism**'

Being 'called out' is a common theme in the New Testament:

- Jesus came to **call** sinners (Matthew 9:13, Mark 2:17, Romans 8:30).
- By God's [grace](#) and mercy, He **calls** people from among Jews and Gentiles to be His people (Romans 9:24-26).
- The believers in Corinth were **called** into fellowship with Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:9).
- God **calls** believers to [peace](#) (1 Corinthians 7:15).
- The **calling** is by the grace of Christ (Galatians 1:6).
- The believers in Galatia were **called** to [freedom](#) (Galatians 5:13).
- Paul implored the saints at Ephesus to walk in a manner worthy of their **calling** (Ephesians 4:1, 1 Thessalonians 2:12).
- The believers at Colossae were **called** in one body (Colossians 3:15).
- God **calls** believers into His own kingdom and glory (1

Thessalonians 2:12).

- God **calls** believers to conduct their lives in holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:7, 2 Timothy 1:9, 1 Peter 1:15).
- God **called** the believers in Thessalonica by the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14).
- God **calls** believers out of darkness and into His marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9).

These passages all cite the original greek word *kaleo* ('to call' or 'called') and have to do with a believer's relationship with God and their connection to His eternal purpose. We can also see the connection here with the use of the Greek word *ekklesia* to describe the collective community of 'called out' people – believers that assemble together.

Metaphors For The Church

Other metaphors are used throughout the Bible to describe the community of believers, one of which is that believers form a spiritual 'house' – living stones to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5).

Another metaphor is the human body, a living thing – made up of real people (1 Corinthians 12:12). Paul devotes a whole chapter in the book of Corinthians to the principles and purpose of 'church' and how each 'member' of the body is to be valued for the diversity and contribution they bring to 'the body'.

This metaphor of a body is further expanded as yet another metaphor, that of a particular kind of body, the body of a bride; the fiancée and intended wife of 'the lamb' (John 3:29, Revelation 3:12). We are given to understand from Ephesians 5 that the relationship between Jesus and the church wasn't modelled on the first marriage but, in fact, it was the other way around. God had the church in mind from the very beginning and our understanding of marriage is therefore modelled on the

relationship that would exist between Jesus and his bride. Therefore, if we want to understand how the church, as the bride, relates to Jesus, we are to look to marriage and the examples given in both the record of creation in Genesis and Paul's writings in the New Testament. Marriage is our human way of experiencing and understanding how we, together as one body, relate to Jesus as his church.

"A wife should put her husband first, as she does the Lord. A husband is the head of his wife, as Christ is the head and the Savior of the church, which is his own body. Wives should always put their husbands first, as the church puts Christ first. A husband should love his wife as much as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it. He made the church holy by the power of his word, and he made it pure by washing it with water. Christ did this, so he would have a glorious and holy church, without faults or spots or wrinkles or any other flaws. In the same way, a husband should love his wife as much as he loves himself. A husband who loves his wife shows he loves himself. None of us hate our own bodies. We provide for them and take good care of them, just as Christ does for the church, because we are each part of his body. As the Scriptures say, "A man leaves his father and mother to get married, and he becomes like one person with his wife." This is a great mystery, but I understand it to mean Christ and his church." | Ephesians 5: 22-32, CEV

The Birth Of The Church

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. We see the obvious echo in the story in Genesis of the creation of Eve from Adam's side:

"The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone.

I will make a companion for him who corresponds to him.” The Lord God formed out of the ground every living animal of the field and every bird of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them, and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man named all the animals, the birds of the air, and the living creatures of the field, but for Adam no companion who corresponded to him was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep, and while he was asleep, he took part of the man’s side and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the part he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one will be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” | Genesis 2:20-23, NET

What an eloquent phrase: *‘bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh’!* Adam looks at this new creation and exclaims *“this is my very own self, from my very own body”*. She is man’s counterpart, not merely in feeling and sense – his flesh – but in his solid qualities. We also have another significant phrase – *‘taken out of’* – echoing *‘the call’* that goes out in Acts 2. Here in Acts, we read of people being *‘taken out of the dominion of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of light and life’*; visible proof of the power of the Gospel to bring about a new creation. Without the death and resurrection of Jesus, there would be no church, no new creation, no bride. The insistence of the critical reality of the resurrection of Jesus being connected to the fulfillment of the gospel promise was the firm teaching of the first century Apostles and this remains the solid framework of the existence of the church today.

“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.” | 2 Timothy 2:8, NIV

The woman in Genesis is the man's possession, not in the sense of ownership, but rather in the sense of belonging. She is from him and of him, they belong together and are as one body. Paul comments on this being 'profound' and that ultimately, he is referring to the church's relationship with Jesus (Ephesians 5:32).

A Woman Of Valour

The word used of Eve at her creation is the Hebrew word *ezer*, which is translated as 'helper' in English. However, 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'. The counterpart, therefore, to the man is "a woman of valour, whose worth is incalculable" (Proverbs 31:10).

We have this extraordinary *woman of valour* fleshed out in more detail in Proverbs 31:10-31; a famous passage celebrating 'the virtuous woman (or wife)'. We would perhaps understand *virtuous* to mean 'having or showing high moral standards', but the original Hebrew words *eshet* and *chayil* used in these verses don't convey virtue or virtuousness in the same way we would understand 'virtuous' today. The Hebrew word *eshet* is the construct form of *isha* (woman) and *chayil* connotes bravery (Psalm 76:5); capability (Proverbs 12:4); triumph (Psalm 118:16); or strength (Psalm 84:7). In the 17th century (when the first English Bibles were translated) *virtuous* still suggested the French 'virtu', which at the time meant 'manly' or 'brave.' A better translation of the Hebrew words *eshet chayil* is 'woman of valour' (as translated by the Tanakh Jewish Bible (1917)). This *virtuous woman* is the same woman who is also, in the King James translation, 'clothed in strength and honour' (Proverbs 31: 25).

If marriage is modelled on the church and her relationship to

Jesus, then it's not such a stretch to recognise the ideal woman in Proverbs as a detailed portrait of what the well-functioning, organic body of the church looks like.

"She obtains wool and flax, and she is pleased to work with her hands. She is like the merchant ships; she brings her food from afar. She also gets up while it is still night, and provides food for her household and a portion to her female servants. She considers a field and buys it; from her own income, she plants a vineyard. She begins her work vigorously, and she strengthens her arms. She knows that her merchandise is good, and her lamp does not go out in the night. Her hands take hold of the distaff, and her hands grasp the spindle. She extends her hand to the poor and reaches out her hand to the needy. She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all of her household are clothed with scarlet. She makes for herself coverlets; her clothing is fine linen and purple. She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. She is clothed with strength and honour, and she can laugh at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and loving instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed, her husband also praises her..."
| Proverbs 31: 13-22, 23-28

What a remarkable description of the capable, industrious, joyful reality of the organic church; a living, breathing *woman of valour*, of which every believer is a member and valued part.

The Bride And The Lamb | The Story's Resolution

Yes, Christians are stones making up a house (1 Peter 2:5).

Yes, Christians are branches connected to a vine (John

15:1-7).

Yes, Christians are subjects and citizens of a kingdom (Ephesians 2:19).

Yes, Christians are children of a heavenly Father (1 John 3:1).

Christians are all these things. But these are still metaphors for the individual. It's only when we consider marriage, as a metaphor of the church and the king being brought together, as one, that we understand that the Christian life isn't intended to be experienced as individuals but as a collective community. The church – the *woman of valour* – is created from the body of Jesus, who was crucified, buried and raised the third day, just as the first woman was taken from the first man. Together, Jesus Christ and the church are one body. She, the church, is the bride of Jesus and He, Jesus, is the spotless lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:22-23, Ephesians 4:4, 2 Corinthians 11:2, Acts 20:28, Colossians 1:24, Revelation 13:8).

The first two chapters of Genesis are where we first discover God's eternal purpose for humanity. The last two chapters of Revelation tell us of the glorious resolution of God's story. And Paul's words in Ephesians assert the *"supremacy and centrality of Jesus Christ in all this, together with his counterpart, the church, which should dominate our understanding of everything physical and spiritual."* – Frank Viola

"Christ did not die just to save us from sins, but to bring us together in community. After coming to Christ, our next step is to be involved in community. A church that does not experience community is a parody, a sham. Simply put, the purpose of the church is to stand for God's eternal purpose. In short, wherever the church gathers together, its guiding and functioning principle is simply to incarnate Christ." –

Frank Viola, *Reimaging Church*

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him the glory. For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.” | Revelation 19:7, BSB

“The heart of her husband has confidence in her, and he has no lack of gain. She brings him good and not evil all the days of her life.” | Proverbs 31:11-12, ESV

Author’s Comment: A Further Brief Note Regarding The Translation Of ‘Church’

The English language was first spoken as a Germanic dialect, known as Old English or Anglo-Saxon, beginning in northern England some years after the Anglo-Saxon conquest (circa 449 AD). The earliest written Old English, however, did not appear until approximately 800 AD. Probably sometime around 500 AD, the people in northern England started referring to a building erected for worship as a *cirice*, later, *chirche*, and finally, a *church*.

By the time William Tyndale translated the New Testament from Greek to English (known as the “Tyndale Translation”, 1525 AD), the word *church* had been in use for centuries. Throughout these centuries, the state church had maintained its power over the people through bloody crusades against resistance groups for the sake of “doctrinal purity.” It was claimed that the Apostle Peter had started the church (based on Matthew 16:18); and therefore the church should be lead by a clergy and not placed in the hands of any “congregation or assembly.” Not only that, prior to the fourteenth century, a complete Bible in the English language, for the common people, didn’t exist. Even for modestly educated clergy, the Bible was mostly inaccessible – available only in the Latin language and in large folio copies of two or three volumes. These Bibles were

ridiculously expensive, limited in number and difficult to access. For the most part, the clergy had to rely on the small portions of scripture that were included in prayer books.

In his translation of Matthew 16:18, Tyndale rightly translates the Greek word *ekklesia* as *congregation*, as opposed to the word *church*, signalling a return to a correct understanding of the organic reality of the church. Tyndale's accurate translation of this one word threatened the power and control of the entire state church system. Knowing Tyndale's translation was soon to become public, to be read by the common people in their own language, presented a real threat to the power of the religious institution of the day. Tyndale was told to amend his translation. Despite being threatened by the religious leaders of his day, William Tyndale would not revoke his translation of the word *congregation*. Ultimately, he was betrayed, sentenced to death, and burned at the stake in 1536.

In 1604, King James of England and Scotland commissioned a new translation in response to perceived problems or flaws with earlier translations which did not "*conform to the ecclesiology and reflect the episcopal structure of the Church of England and its beliefs about an ordained clergy*". Instructions were given to the translators that the new version would conform to the ecclesiology of the Church of England (which, by now, had broken with and was directly in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church). As such, certain Greek and Hebrew words were to be translated in a manner that reflected the traditional usage of the church, now long-entrenched and in common use. Ecclesiastical words such as *church* were to be retained and not to be translated as *congregation*.

The King James Authorised Version was published in 1611 and quickly grew in popularity. It still remains a significant and popular English translation today. Unfortunately, however, the inaccurate use of the word *church* to replace the original *ekklesia* became firmly embedded in most translations with many readers unaware of the problematic nature of its translative history.

Can we unravel and reverse nearly 500 years of linguistic and cultural understanding that now surrounds the word *church*? Can we edit and reprint millions upon millions of editions of the Bible in English, which, in truthfulness, used a word that was an inaccurate representation of the original? Should we withdraw every copy of errant English Bibles from circulation, simply because it contains the word 'church'? Is it possible to determine what was genuine translative prerogative or suspect ecclesiastical bias, then or now? The answer is clearly 'no' to all these questions.

A better solution, perhaps, and one worthy of investing our energy and resources to, is to rediscover the original meaning that the New Testament writers had in mind – the organic reality of a community of believers – and to speak, think and believe this of the church today, recognising that wherever the church gathers together, its guiding and functioning principle is simply to incarnate Christ.