

When Faith Hurts: Recognising Spiritual Abuse – Part 1

The Spark That Lit The Flame

One of the contentious sparks that finally lit the flame we now know as the [Reformation](#) was the idea that the common person didn't need priests to mediate between them and God. At the time, the Church (the catholic Church – still the only established Church in the West) taught that grace was dispensed through the sacraments, which could only be administered by ordained clergy. Access to God was mediated through the priesthood, creating a system where spiritual life was filtered through human hands.

John Wycliffe (c 1328-1384), often called the Morning Star of the Reformation, had become outraged by what he considered the moral and political corruption among the priesthood and the spiritual abuse of the laity – the ordinary members of the church. He believed that the priests had elevated themselves so far above the laity so as to create a false barrier between God and people.

Protesting against the commonly accepted practices of the time, he contended that:

- Christ is the only mediator between God and humanity. Believers don't need a priest to confess sins, access God's grace, or receive salvation. Christ alone is sufficient.
- The Bible is the final and highest authority in matters of faith and practice, over and above church tradition or clerical interpretation – **sola scriptura**. I've written about traditions elsewhere so you can read more about that [here](#).

Sola scriptura – Latin for 'Scripture alone' doesn't mean that

traditions or rituals lack value or don't play a meaningful role in the life of faith, it simply means they don't supersede or replace the authority of Scripture – and where they conflict with it, Scripture always takes precedence.

John Wycliffe was not the first to make such an assertion regarding the sufficiency of Jesus or the primacy of Scripture. More than a thousand years earlier, Paul the Apostle took the Galatian church to task over their departing of the faith for what he called *a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all*.

Paul [warned against doctrines](#) that add human effort or tradition to Christ's finished work, emphasising that true faith is rooted in grace, not in adherence to rituals or human-imposed standards (Galatians 3:5-6, Ephesians 2:8). *The work of Christ is sufficient*, he reminded the Galatians.

He would no doubt have agreed with John Wycliffe, who – over 1,300 years later – maintained that any system *prioritising performance over grace, claiming exclusive access to truth, or defining salvation as a list of correct beliefs rather than trust in Christ*, not only distorts the gospel but also sows the seeds for communities rife with spiritual abuse.

What Is Spiritual Abuse?

Spiritual abuse is when a person or system uses God, Scripture, or religious authority to control, manipulate, shame, or harm others. It distorts faith into a tool of domination rather than love and freedom.

The tragedy of spiritual abuse is that it often masquerades as faithfulness, couched in biblical language. Words like *'truth'*, *'spiritual concern'*, or *'loving correction'* are often employed, with the catchphrase *truth spoken in love* used as a cover for conversations that contain cloaked judgment, spiritual superiority, or subtle control.

While this phrase – *truth spoken in love* – does come from the Bible, when Paul uses it, he is encouraging believers to grow in maturity, shown in the way they demonstrate love (Ephesians 4:15), not as it's often twisted to mean:

"I'm telling you you're deceived... but in love."

"I'm about to say something that's actually quite harsh... but only because I'm loving."

"I'm cutting you off... because I love you."

Spiritually Abusive Systems Replicate Themselves

Spiritually abusive people harm other people. However, spiritually abusive *systems* don't just harm individuals – they also *replicate themselves*.

In environments where fear, control, and rigid doctrine are normalised as "*truth*," people begin to internalise those patterns, often believing they are acting faithfully.

Over time, they adopt the same language, the same tactics, the same narrow lens – not out of malice, but because the culture has shaped them to see spiritual pressure as love, and manipulation as discipleship.

In this way, spiritually abusive cultures inevitably produce spiritually abusive people, many of whom genuinely believe they're helping others when they are, in fact, passing on the very harm they once received.

Of course, it's important to recognise that not every disagreement or correction is abusive. Sometimes, truth really does need to be spoken in love – with humility, gentleness, and a genuine desire for someone's good.

The difference lies in the posture of the heart and the impact

of the words: is the goal to restore, or to control? To build up, or to tear down? To *win*, or to *win to Christ*?

The Cure For Spiritual Abuse

And this leads us to the cure for spiritual abuse, which is, I believe, a Jesus-centric mindset. While sound theology matters – I’m the first to advocate for deep, serious, personal and corporate engagement with Scripture, a robust and living theology will spring from *understanding and experiencing who God is and what He has done for us, in Jesus*, not simply by giving agreement to a statement or creed of ‘theological beliefs’.

Like a concentric circle spreading outward, Jesus himself is the core from which every part of the Christian life flows. He is not just the centrepiece of our theology, but the source and shape of our entire faith – the origin of our love, the measure of our truth, the heartbeat of our worship. *He is our life*.

When Jesus is at the centre, everything else falls into place: doctrine aligns with grace, leadership reflects humility, spiritual communities become places that are safe, and mercy and judgment kiss one another.

But when something else takes the centre – a system, a doctrine, a leader, a fear – the circles become distorted, and what flows outward can easily become controlling or harmful.

Spiritual health begins not with getting all the answers right, but with keeping Jesus – who will lead us in all truth – at the core.

How Do I Know If I’m Being Spiritually Abusive?

Most people who perpetuate spiritual abuse don’t *think* they’re

being abusive. They believe they're protecting truth, upholding righteousness, or caring for souls. But underneath that often sits pride, fear, or a deeply ingrained belief that control equals faithfulness.

How can we tell the difference? How do we know if we've slipped from '*contending earnestly for the faith*' to controlling others in the name of faith, or defending doctrine at the cost of love?

1. We frame disagreement as deception.

We view disagreement with someone over theology as them *leaving the faith, being deceived or falling away*. For us, unity might look like uniformity, yet they are not the same thing. The Bible speaks of a universal, visible and invisible Church that is wildly diverse in how its members look, think or worship. Yet, within all this difference, its people are deeply connected in love and purpose, through mutual respect and, as touched on above, through the core central faith in Jesus Christ.

Uniformity, on the other hand, silences diversity in the name of truth and is often about control and fear of difference or 'mess', preferring the idea of enforcing group-think at all costs.

2. We speak with absolutes, black and whites, and hyper-literals.

We see the landscape of the Bible as black and white without nuance or the possibility of alternative interpretations to ours. Passages are applied absolutely and literally, often without consideration for context or in the light of grace.

People will try to say the Bible is black and white on every subject but it's not, not by half. There's plenty of grey, and bold, glorious colour too. There's space for openness and conversation and listening and learning and for seeing things

from different angles. While there are significant core doctrines that its not possible to differ on and still be called *Christian* (for example, the virgin birth or the resurrection of Jesus), there are plenty of second and third-tier theological positions that are fascinating to discuss, interesting to pull apart, and which definitely, absolutely do not define *whether someone is saved or not*. *Eschatology* – theology that deals with *the end times* – is one such topic.

3. We equate someone's worth or standing before God with their beliefs or behaviour

We treat people differently, depending on whether their theology aligns with ours. Rather than seeing every person in the image of God, we may consciously or unconsciously categorise them as '*in*' or '*out*', '*friend*' or '*foe*', and, as is common in some closed conservative communities, kindness, closeness, or blessing may be withheld – *shunning* – from those who we deem to have gone astray. We view this withdrawing as a *sad but necessary discipline*.

4. We think we are always right.

We may feel the need to constantly correct others, believing that our interpretation of Scripture isn't just valid but that it's the *only* valid one. When someone doesn't share our interpretation, we may consider them to be lacking understanding, spiritually shallow, or simply deceived, rather than considering that we could, in fact, be wrong.

Assuming our interpretation is the only valid one shuts down meaningful dialogue and puts us in the place of ultimate authority—where only God belongs. It leaves no room for learning, growth, or the Spirit's work in others. This mindset *turns faith into arrogance, not conviction*, and risks dividing the body of Christ over pride rather than truth.

How Do I Know If A Spiritual Community Is Spiritually Abusive?

The signs and red flags of a spiritually abusive community are the same as those you'd see in an individual – only magnified and reinforced through groupthink, tradition, or fear. Over time, they become woven into [the fabric of the culture itself](#), forming an entrenched and often intractable environment that is difficult to shift or challenge.

In spiritually abusive communities, there is a **certainty over humility** that defines the culture. Opposing or dissenting views or doubts are discouraged and questioning the status quo is seen as disobedience.

There is **control disguised as care**. Spiritually abusive communities often blur or erase healthy boundaries, becoming overly involved in members' personal lives.

Scripture is misused, not only taken out of context, but applied selectively, as and when it suits the agenda of those in control. The Bible becomes less a story of redemption and more a tool for behaviour management. In these settings, Scripture is no longer a living word that points people to Jesus – it becomes *a system of proof-texts* used to maintain power.

In Spiritually abusive communities, **acceptance depends on total agreement or compliance**, with any wrestling with faith or theology discouraged, dismissed, or defined as rebellion, weakness, or a lack of spiritual maturity. Doubt isn't treated as part of the journey – it's treated as a threat to the group's stability. As a result, people learn to suppress questions, keep quiet about struggles, and conform outwardly just to stay connected.

In spiritually abusive communities, there is often a **hyper-focus on *behaving* rather than *becoming***. The church, in

reality, is a messy but vital gathering of flawed, sinning humans who are being renewed daily by the grace of God – asking questions, voicing doubts, stumbling forward in faith. When behaviour modification becomes the primary marker of spiritual maturity, it produces only superficially ‘good’ people who learn to hide their deepest fears and darkest sins.

Yet the church must be the place where those hidden things can be brought into the light – not met with shame, but healed with grace, love, and truth that restores rather than condemns.

How Do I Know If I’m Being or Have Been Spiritually Abused?

Whether in a community or relationship, the signs of spiritual abuse are often subtle.

You might feel confused, fearful, or disconnected from God – as though you need permission to be close to Him. You might suppress questions to stay accepted. You might feel like your worth depends on performance or belief alignment. You might experience distancing and withdrawal upon asking uncomfortable questions or sharing truly where you’re at.

These are warning signs. Spiritual abuse isn’t always overt – sometimes it whispers insidiously, hidden in invisible codes and unspoken expectations.

The spirit of the Reformation was that *Christ alone is sufficient* – the one mediator between God and humanity. We are made right with God through Jesus Christ, not through traditions, systems, sacramentally dispensed grace, or the mediation of others.

At its core, spiritual abuse distorts the relationship a person has with God. It inserts human authority where there should be direct access, making people feel as though they

need permission, mediation, or perfect obedience to be accepted by Him. Instead of creating space where people can personally draw close to God, spiritual abuse places leaders, systems, or expectations in the way – creating unnecessary barriers to genuine, intimate relationship with God and laying ‘burdens on people which are too heavy to bear’.

If this resonates with you – if you’ve felt the weight of silence, shame, or misplaced authority in the name of faith – know that healing is possible. In Part 2, I’ll explore what that looks like: how Christ heals what systems distort, and how to rebuild a faith rooted in freedom, not fear.

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” – 2 Corinthians 3:17, NIV

What Should I Do If I’m In A Spiritually Abusive Community?

Leave.

Systemic spiritual abuse is dangerous, deceptive, and, ultimately, destructive. These environments distort your view of God, damage your sense of self, and normalise control under the guise of faith. Even if you don’t feel personally harmed, staying means you risk becoming complicit – reinforcing harmful systems, silencing questions, and modelling that this version of “faith” is acceptable for the next generation.

You don’t have to stay in a place just because it calls itself ‘*the faith*’, ‘*the truth*’, or ‘*the way*’. There’s only one way, truth and life, and his name is Jesus. Leaving a toxic or spiritually abusive system is not leaving Jesus. *In fact, it may be the most faithful thing you can do.*

You might have doubts about taking such an extreme course of action and wonder, can a spiritually abusive system be *rehabilitated* or should it be *burnt to the ground*?

It depends. Reform is possible, but rare and unlikely. More often than not, if the roots are rotten, the system needs to die, not just be repainted.

When power is centralised and unquestionable, when protecting the institution matters more than healing the people, when spiritual control is baked deep into the DNA, *then it's time to light the match.*

In Part 2, I'll explore what recovery from spiritual abuse looks like – how faith can heal, how trust can be slowly rebuilt, and what it takes to reimagine church through the lens of grace.

I'll also touch on what it might mean for a healthy person to remain within a broken system, and the bare minimum that would need to be in place for that to be a wise choice moving forward. Look for 'When Faith Heals | Recovering From Spiritual Abuse – Part 2' coming soon.

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

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 reinstituted* through the redeeming work of Jesus (and we'd therefore expect to see this reflected in the life and activity of the new creation (the church)).

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

What Genesis Says

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

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

The words used of Eve at her creation are the Hebrew words *ezer kanegdo*, translated rather unhappily as 'helper' and 'meet for' in English. Our understanding of *helper* falls far short of the original sense of the word, which is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe God as a helper to His people or of a king to his subjects. The primary idea of the word lies in 'girding', 'surrounding, hence defending', to 'protect or aid'.

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

(The created order of man first, woman second, or the difference between the way each was created (man from the ground, woman from the side or part of the man), is often brought up in discussions about a supposed gendered hierarchy.

Apart from the creation story in [Genesis 2](#), however, the created order is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and Jesus does not mention it, but it is mentioned in two passages in Paul's letters, as referred to above.

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

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

They also share responsibility for the care of the inhabitants of this world and the stewardship of the earth and its resources. In fact, this is the first place that we see [God's sovereignty](#) enacted by His image-bearers and we later see this commission echoed in the new creation, where both men and women disciples are entrusted with the responsibility and privilege of 'going into all the world and making disciples' ([Matthew 28:19](#), [2 Corinthians 5:19-20](#), [2 Corinthians 3:6](#)).

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

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

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

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

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

The divine view of marriage (and the Bible's definition is that marriage is between a man and a woman), although only touched on very briefly in Genesis 2, is quite clear. It's a relationship defined by a commitment of two individuals (already demonstrated to be of equal worth and capability) to one another, which becomes preeminent to all other familial relationships. Two individuals choose to leave their family of origin and form a new family with one another, united together as one in a full and cooperative partnership.

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

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

These are really good questions to ask and it's important to understand what we are being told by this narrative (keeping in mind the foundational truth that the purpose of the book of

Genesis is to illustrate God's relationship to creation and His intention of dwelling with us.)

Jesus + The Church

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

This seems odd initially, given the church didn't exist until many thousands of years after the creation narrative, but it makes complete sense when we realise the Genesis narrative serves as a description of the blueprint for all that God has intended for humanity; God, in complete partnership with His people, to reflect His glory and purpose throughout the earth. The redemption and restoration of humanity, through the sending of Jesus, was never the backup plan, *it was always the plan*.

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

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

We are to think of the church – this community of believers –

as a woman, a woman whose very life and existence were framed by the death and resurrection of a man. Through this man's death and sacrifice, she is created and at his resurrection, she becomes a living creature.

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

Additionally, we know of Jesus that "he is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn of all creation*. For by him *all things were created*, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created *through him and for him*. He is *before all things*, and in him, all things hold together. He is the *head (source)* of *the body, the church*; He is the beginning and firstborn from among the dead, so that in all things He may have the preeminence." (Colossians 1:15-18)

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

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

Hierarchy: Things Go South

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

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

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

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

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

It’s important to recognise the context in which the statements of Genesis 3:16 exists: *they occur after the fall*.

As such, *they cannot be considered God's original intention for humanity, at the very least.*

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

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

And this is exactly what we do see. When looking through the lens of Genesis, we see the radical readjustment required and the challenges faced by the early Christians; where issues of race, class, social status, financial status, and gendered hierarchy are realigned and brought under the scope of what God had designed all along in Genesis. I explore this in more detail in my article *Women In Ministry*, which you can read [here](#).

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

Where Have All The Good Men Gone?

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

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

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

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

There are many good men who would possibly describe themselves as complementarian (essentially, proponents of a gendered hierarchy) but who also treat women with dignity and respect. While they may **believe** (or say they believe) that leadership and authority are restricted to men in marriage and within the church, they arrive at this perspective with a genuine belief that this is what scripture teaches and they endeavor to outwork this with humility and gentleness. However, in reality, particularly in marriage, and often in the church, these kinds of good men rarely function as true complementarians. They are far more egalitarian in thought and practice.

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

Sometimes this behaviour is only seen and experienced behind

closed doors while a pristine public image is presented to others.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Males feeling entitled is a cultural product and complementarianism is such a culture that leads to such a product. Males who seize that culture’s control are more likely to abuse.

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

In Conclusion

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

of image-bearers and, finally, the arrival of 'the new heavens and new earth', when God will be all-in-all and the gospel story will have reached its resolution.

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

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

Not only do I believe that gendered hierarchy doesn't fit the biblical gospel narrative, I believe it to be theologically unsound. I don't believe it's what Scripture teaches at all in relation to the relationship between men and women, either naturally or spiritually.

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

Stop promoting gendered hierarchy.

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

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