

Women, The Church, And The Gospel Story | Reframing The Conversation

Part 1: Reframing the Conversation – Women, the Church, and the Gospel Story

In a world that often seems driven by competition and comparison, the unique differences between the genders are no longer celebrated or championed as God intended. Many of these differences are deeply rooted at a biological level and reflect the essence of our individuality as humans. Men and women are the same in many ways, but also fundamentally different in others – differences which are coded into our DNA and which matter. You can read more about some of these differences in the article [‘The War On Gender’](#).

The ongoing conversation about the ‘role’ of women in the church, in marriage, and in society is not new. Nor is it unique to our time. Early Christians also had to navigate and reevaluate this issue, particularly in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It’s a topic that impacts me personally, both as a woman and as the mother of two daughters. My understanding and position have shifted significantly over the past few years of Christian journeying. It was one of the first major theological shifts for me.

Christians generally fall into two camps: *complementarian* or *egalitarian*. These labels don’t capture the full nuance of either view, but broadly:

- **Complementarianism** holds that men and women have different but complementary roles in marriage, family,

and church life, particularly in areas deemed 'leadership'.

- **Egalitarianism** teaches that the Bible mandates gender equality, including shared authority in the home and full participation of women in ministry.

I was raised in a complementarian church where leadership, preaching, teaching, praying, and speaking publicly were generally reserved for men. There were some (baffling) exceptions – women could teach boys, but only up to a certain age; they could lead worship (by playing the organ); they could vote in church elections but not serve. They could publish articles, but not address the church from the platform. Interestingly, it was known that some women wrote their husband's sermons, which were then delivered by the husband as if they were his own words.

It was also a head covering church. I explore this further in my article '[Leaving](#)', but it added to the confusion. 1 Corinthians 11:4 seemed to (at the very least) permit women to pray and prophesy as long as they were covered, yet this too was prohibited.

It wasn't until my mid-30s, with three children of my own, that I began seriously reconsidering this topic. I reexamined everything I had believed, in the light of scripture. This conversation loomed large in my mind. What was God's will for me as a woman and Christian? What was my place in the church and in my marriage? What should I teach my children about their identity and place in God's story?

Sincere Christians can be found on both sides of the argument and both affirm the authority of Scripture in relation to faith and practice. Yet both sides arrive at vastly different conclusions. Which one is right – and does it even matter?

The key differences lie in interpretation. How we read certain

biblical texts, and how we apply them in our own culture and time, plays a huge role. I also came to realise that we all bring bias to the table – formed by our upbringing, worldview, experiences, and church community.

Even the process of translating scripture involves interpretation. Translators make judgment calls as they try to express meaning in different languages. So, on any complex topic, we need to examine not just the verse in question, but its context, the culture in which it was written, and how it fits into the broader narrative of scripture.

The Importance of Context

Context includes the surrounding text, the audience, the cultural expectations of the time, and the language in which the passage was originally written. More importantly, every interpretation must align with the overall story of scripture – the gospel.

The gospel is not just a personal message about salvation but the story of God's intention for all creation. It's massive scope stretches from Genesis to Revelation 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.

Any conclusions we draw from particular passages in scripture must align with these consistent gospel threads, woven throughout the narrative.

Exposure to the gospel often radically shifts our assumptions. It reorients our lives, offering us a vision of what will be, rather than what is. And it invites us to live into that

bigger story.

We see this clearly in the New Testament. Paul the Apostle's letters are full of encouragement and correction for the early church as they grappled with this radical new gospel.

His letter to Philemon, for example, shows how the gospel reshaped the relationship between a master and his slave. Though their social relationship may have remained intact under Roman law, Paul reminds Philemon that Onesimus is now his brother in Christ. It is this status that should dominate their new relationship.

Jews who thought of themselves as God's unique and chosen people were now to consider Gentiles as family, loved by the same God, and this particular issue is highlighted in Paul's letters to the churches at Ephesus and Galatia.

And, importantly for many women, men were to consider and treat women as equals in the purpose and plan of God for humanity; directly challenging a long and complex history of patriarchy.

What Is Patriarchy?

Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold primary power in areas like political leadership, moral authority, and control of property. It's also associated with the belief that this dominance is natural and justified by inherent differences between men and women. Most ancient and many modern societies are patriarchal.

Both Roman and Jewish societies were patriarchal and hierarchical. The gospel entered that world – and challenged it. It was into this context that Jesus and later Paul and the apostles preached, taught, and formed communities.

Understanding this helps us see why some of Paul's words might sound jarring today. But it also helps us see just how radical

the early Christian message really was.

Where to Start?

It can be hard to know where to start in this conversation. Right at the beginning, in Genesis? In the middle of the '*I suffer not a woman to teach*' passages? At the dawn of early Christianity?

In this series, I'll start with the women who followed Jesus and served in the early church. Then I'll explore the three passages most often used to argue against women in leadership. My hope is to offer clarity, context, and a more cohesive view of what scripture teaches.

To truly understand the framework God intended for His church, we need to look more closely at the women who walked with Jesus and led in the early church. That's where we'll go next.

This article was first published 15 November 2020