

Learning Through Heartbreak Paved My Path to Embracing Biblical Equality

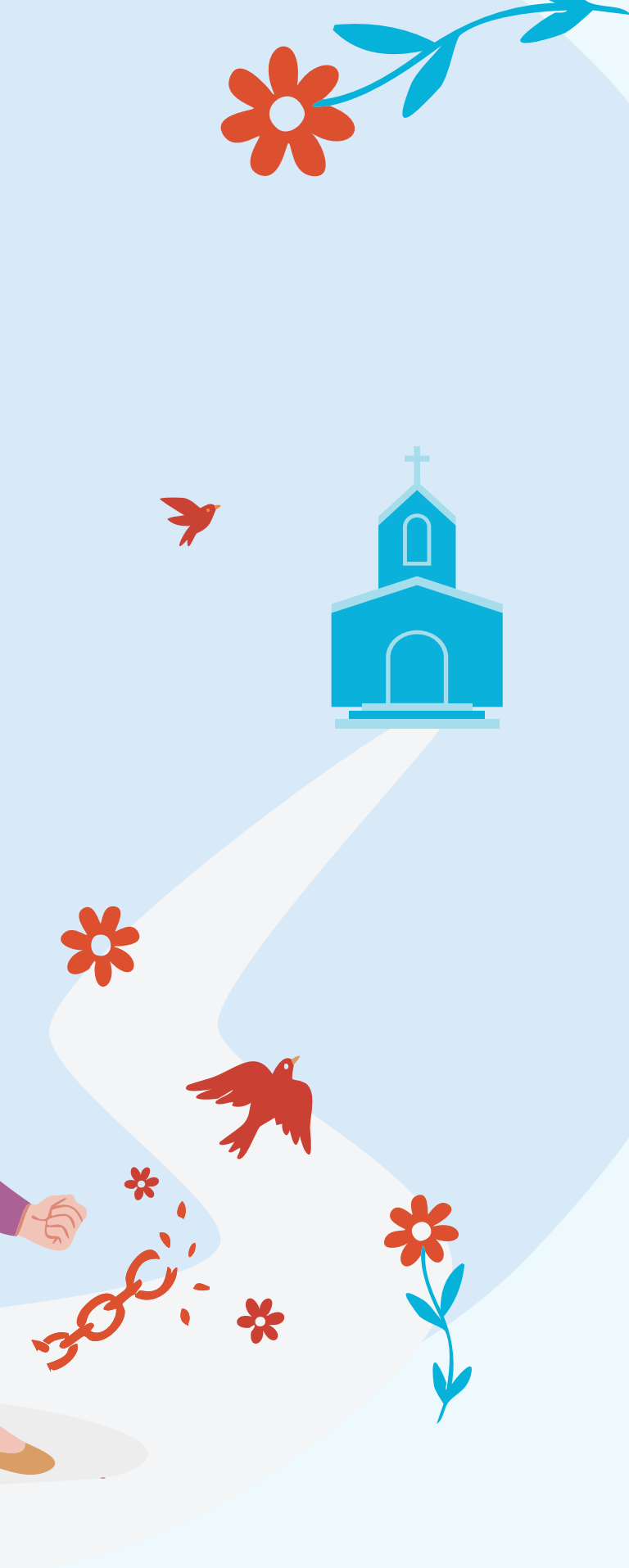
Amy Hendy

I sat across from her at the dining room table, never imagining that *this* friend would be the one giving insight and questioning the biblical basis for my traditional beliefs about women in ministry. I had always considered her to be somewhat “progressive,” and I assumed any opportunity we might have to discuss the Bible would involve *me* correcting *her*. I shudder sharing these honest-but-humiliating words. My journey to embrace biblical equality involved not just a scholarly re-education, but learning a heart posture of humility born from failure and loss.

Holding a minor degree in Bible, a bachelor’s degree in psychology, a master’s degree in counseling, and a law degree, education was my playground. My story proves that it’s not just a matter of having **access** to information, but it’s also the **type** of information we absorb that forms our perspective.

In 2018, I found myself in a small New England church, far from my conservative midwestern roots. My then-pastor asked if I would speak alongside six men at our Good Friday evening service. At this point in my life, I was a stay-at-home mom of three daughters, running a side-hustle style blog on Instagram. I had begun attending a local Bible study and fell in love with Jesus anew through Matthew’s Gospel. Despite having been raised in church and graduating from a Christian university, I had never formally worked in ministry and hadn’t often read the Bible on my own for pleasure. Now I found myself studying Scripture and reading theology books one after the other. I began to develop a reputation as a bold women’s ministry leader in my affluent, largely unchurched, harborside town.





Heartbreak: When Gifts and Beliefs Collide

My church was egalitarian in practice, but that meant little to me. Having been raised in patriarchal church environments and attended a highly conservative evangelical university, I would have said without hesitation that Paul was clear about the place of women in churches: far from the pulpit. I believed women should submit to their husbands, serving under their authority by teaching women's Bible studies, leading worship, greeting guests, or working in kids' club.

That Good Friday invitation led to another opportunity to preach on a Sunday morning. Teaching the Word felt like the perfect culmination of my personality, gifts, and training. Still, I wrestled internally with a growing understanding that came from my personal study of Scripture and my steady diet of complementarian theological resources: Women were to teach only women. I couldn't dismiss the idea that Sunday preaching meant I might be disobeying the Lord, despite knowing that I hadn't sought the pulpit platform and felt the Spirit guiding me down this path.

But the Lord's timing is perfect; he allowed me to sit in this cognitive dissonance as he slowly, gently softened my complementarian-aligned heart. After preaching that first Sunday, I continued to lead mainly women and eventually planted a non-denominational church in my town, hoping to replicate the solid Bible teaching, vibrant worship, and Spirit-filled atmosphere I had grown to love in my church. When its doors opened in fall 2021 with a male friend as pastor and me as women's ministry leader, we had filed "soft" complementarian bylaws:¹ A woman could teach from the pulpit, but she could not serve as an elder. I was still unsure about this concession, but the inclusion of male headship gave me peace.

As I ministered in that church, egalitarian and complementarian discussions became living and breathing realities that took on complex flesh in my life. I discovered that what we believe about a woman's role in Christian leadership and in the home often resides deep in our bones and guides our daily behavior. These beliefs further stem from our understanding of how God himself views women. It would take the loss of a ministry dream and a faith identity crisis for me to be willing to examine my own deeply ingrained beliefs about the Bible's position on gender equality among women and men.

A Re-Education

Over time, I began to realize the complementarian fences of my church plant were stifling my vision and voice,

and my ever-present cognitive dissonance over women's roles was keeping me from my calling. So there I found myself, at an egalitarian's dining table, as she listened to my story and expressed empathy for my profound sadness and utter confusion. She hinted at the impact of my dissonant views on women in ministry. I thought I was clear on what the Bible says and stubbornly believed that this situation was not about biblical equality, but my own pride and selfish motivations. "I just need a good therapist, not a reinterpretation of Scripture." But I was broken and curious, so at my reluctant request, she suggested a few resources that would help educate me on women in ministry from another perspective.

The journey was hard, lonely, and confusing. I battled a righteous anger that questioned how I (and many other women for that matter) had been taught a biblically inaccurate, oppressive system of silencing female voices for decades, by people who claimed to love God and women. At my friend's suggestion, I launched my theological re-education with Lucy Peppiatt's book *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women*.² With each page, I almost stopped reading. It felt like a betrayal, both of my life-long belief structure and the individuals who espoused this structure, whom I admired. Sometimes I even felt like I was betraying God. I recall saying to my husband something along the lines of, "If Lucy and like-minded scholars are right—women are in fact equal to men in any church role and in marriage—what does that mean about any number of influential pastors, their comrades, that infamous statement on manhood and womanhood,³ and a system of oppressive Bible teaching that has led to the majority-held, hierarchical church structure in America?!" It was as if everything I had known, believed, and taught others was unraveling.

I started listening to *The Bible Project* podcast, wanting to see Scripture as a "unified story that leads to Jesus,"⁴ rather than a rulebook. Eventually, I was introduced to and read additional books like Scot McKnight's *The Blue Parakeet* and began to grasp how deeply our interpretation of Scripture matters.⁵ Beth Alison Barr's book *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* gave me solace

that I was, in fact, not alone in my journey.⁶ Nijay Gupta's book *Tell Her Story* guided me through the presence of women in Scripture and provided a great deal of fuel for my fire to share with others what I was learning.⁷ Finally, Pastor Terran Williams's book *How God Sees Women* was an invaluable resource, as Williams shared the story of his own change of mind regarding women in ministry.⁸ He offers a readable but well-researched, biblically based foundation for breaking apart patriarchy within the church and home, which gave me solid arguments to share with some of my complementarian-minded friends as they wrestled with my sudden shift.⁹

Embracing Biblical Equality

Over time, I studied, listened, wrestled, prayed, and submitted to the Spirit. My background in patriarchal environments, the theologians I was drawn to, and my own personal preference for black-and-white answers had kept me from a willingness to engage with the perspective of those who thought about women differently. The truth was that I was comfortable in my complementarian world. I was personally thriving under that structure—until I wasn't, until I wanted too much leadership authority and freedom to use my own vision and voice at the church I had helped birth. Only then, when I had no meaningful choice, would I consider that I had been wrong and that God was much larger and freer than the box I had placed him in.

If my first roadblock on the path to biblical equality was fully embracing that women can teach men, I navigated it rather quickly: I re-educated myself on interpretation and learned to study Paul's letters in historical context, while also relying upon my own lived experiences. Simultaneously, evangelical women and men were beginning to slowly, publicly proclaim their agreement that women could teach, and women were doing so.¹⁰ But, even with what felt like a newfound, more accepted freedom, there was another roadblock which felt impossible to pass: male headship. Could women serve mutually alongside and even lead men? In my own personal experience and journey with the church plant,

**The journey was hard, lonely, and confusing.
I battled a righteous anger that questioned
how I had been taught a biblically inaccurate,
oppressive system of silencing female voices.**



I was comfortable in my complementarian world; I was thriving under that structure—until I wasn't.

eldership was the fault line: Women could preach and lead worship, women's ministry, or missions, but they could not serve as elders because of their gender. They also could not lead equally alongside their husbands in the home.

Thanks to the books and resources I was gathering, I began to navigate this final roadblock. Women in the Old Testament (like Deborah)¹¹ and in the early church (like Priscilla and Junia)¹² held positions of leadership that God championed and that are comparable to the positions of pastor or elder in today's church. Additionally, in August 2023, Bridgetown Church in Portland, Oregon, released a statement announcing their decision to affirm women as elders.¹³ Their thorough explanation supporting their decision to champion women elders was a timely Godsend and "sealed the deal" in my heart and mind. Genesis did not curse women to lifelong positions of subordination to men in church or in the home. Rather, "[t]he biblical story is one of the recovery of all that was lost in the fall, the restoration of Eden, and the renewal of all things (Col. 1:15–23)."¹⁴ Jesus "reversed the curse," and as new covenant believers, we now live out of a place of bringing heaven to earth, to our churches, and to our homes.¹⁵ "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."¹⁶ I am quite certain there will be no unilateral submission of women to men in heaven! At last, my experiences and my education had fully collided, and I knew and embraced the truth that women are equal to men in all roles, in the home and church, under God's loving eyes.

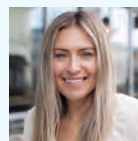
The impact of my transformed thinking was profound, and it continues as I further educate myself in seminary with the resources of new-to-me scholars, train my three daughters to lead, and pray about avenues for using my voice and my story to empower more women and men toward biblical freedom. Despite what many may claim, the pursuit for biblical equality of women and men in our homes, our churches, and our world is a worthy, even if costly, endeavor. This is far from a "second-tier issue" where we can (and should) simply agree to disagree.¹⁷ The Scriptures

proudly proclaim mutuality; to teach and live otherwise is a disservice to the body of Christ, a detriment to furthering his earthly kingdom, and far from his good design.¹⁸

Notes

1. I.e., "Women In Leadership, The Approach of Mariner's Church," September 2022 at https://ericgeiger.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/WomenInLeadership_v3.pdf, 2.
2. Lucy Peppiat, *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women: Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts* (IVP Academic, 2019).
3. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Crossway, 2021), <https://document.desiringgod.org/recovering-biblical-manhood-and-womanhood-en.pdf?ts=1620230082>.
4. "BibleProject," <https://bibleproject.com/>, BibleProject 2025.
5. Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet, 2nd Edition: Rethinking How You Read the Bible* (Zondervan, 2018).
6. Beth Alison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Brazos Press, 2021).
7. Nijay Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* (InterVarsity Press, 2023).
8. Terran Williams, *How God Sees Women: The End of Patriarchy* (The Spiritual Bakery, 2022).
9. Williams, *How God Sees Women*.
10. I.e. Rick Warren, "My Apology to Christian Women," X, June 10, 2023, <https://x.com/RickWarren/status/1667620086251925505>.
11. Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 19.
12. Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 128–152.
13. Bridgetown Church, "Defining a Biblical Decision on Women and Eldership," Portland, Oregon, August 2023, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6314e00979f8094598b9dbab/t/64e465ab45ec2453882f910e/1733441855266/Defining+a+Biblical+Position+on+Women+and+Eldership+-+Written+Statement.pdf>.
14. Bridgetown, "Defining a Biblical Decision."
15. Bridgetown, "Defining a Biblical Decision."
16. Matthew 6:9–13.
17. Rick Ridcock, "Let's stop treating the dignity of women as a secondary issue good Christians can disagree on," March 22, 2023, <https://baptistnews.com/article/lets-stop-treating-the-dignity-of-women-as-a-secondary-issue-good-christians-can-disagree-on/>.
18. Luke 22:25–27, Ephesians 5:21, 1 Corinthians 12:12–26

**The pursuit for biblical
equality of women and men
in our homes, our churches,
and our world is a worthy,
even if costly, endeavor.**



Amy Hendy is zealous for the church to know the truth of how God sees women. Amy is a wife and mom to three daughters. She recently relocated from New England to North Carolina and began a master's program at Denver Seminary. She loves to read, travel, and style.

