

IF ONE PART HURTS

Healing, Hope, and Flourishing

Megan Chitsike



This piece is dedicated to a group of brave, strong, gifted women who learned and grew alongside me as egalitarian women in a complementarian church.

We gathered on my veranda one afternoon. I remember the warmth of the autumn sun, the smell of fresh bread, and the way we were easily able to dive straight in to sharing our stories with unguarded honesty and vulnerability.

Through friendships, mutual connections, and chance conversations, this small group of women had discovered our shared journey from complementarianism to egalitarianism. It was the first of many meetings. Over several months we ate, laughed, cried, and prayed

together. We talked about books, podcasts, verses, Bible translations, commentaries, and more. These women became my safe place and my sanity through a painful but ultimately beautiful journey from hurt to healing and hope.

After many individual letters and conversations with the all-male elders of our complementarian church, we realized it would be more effective to engage with them as a group. We arranged a meeting where we shared our theological convictions about women in leadership; one elder admitted that it did seem strange for women to be permitted to lead in the workplace but not the church, but that's what he believed "because we

have the Bible.” We invited them to explore key Bible passages with us, and there seemed to be an openness to engage. The very next evening we attended a church meeting and those same elders publicly affirmed their complementarian position, arguing against the very ideas we had shared with them. While they believed women to be critical to the mission of God, they asserted that a pattern of male leadership and authority was established in Genesis, then affirmed by Jesus in his choice of twelve male apostles, and again by Paul in his mention of male elders. We were heartbroken and felt as if we had been used as a practice run the evening before.

We reflected, prayed, and asked to continue the conversation. Only one elder accepted the invitation and, to his credit, met with us a number of times over a few months, engaging respectfully and kindly. The others chose not to participate, but we heard whispers of things said about us rather than to us. The conversation eventually came to an end. It was clear that while we had been given a chance to engage, the church position was not going to change. It was even gently suggested to some of us that it would be best for us to leave the church. In the months that followed, most of us slowly and silently left one by one.

If One Part Hurts

While none of us felt particularly called at that time to lead churches or be elders, all of us were involved in many areas of church life and served faithfully for years. We had all examined Scripture in depth and shared the strong conviction that God’s design for the church is for women’s voices and gifts to be fully included, celebrated, and encouraged at all levels. We were compelled by the Spirit to speak up, not only for our sake, but for our sisters, friends, and daughters. We knew that “if one part of the body suffers, then all the other parts suffer with it” (1 Cor. 12:26, ERV). I particularly love the Message translation of this verse

(emphasis mine): *If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt and in the healing.*

Through our journeys, we connected individually and as a group with other women with similar stories and journeys:

- Women who questioned the status quo in their churches and were seen as “bitter troublemakers” or as too easily influenced by “feminist” and “liberal” ideas.
- A clearly gifted woman who was allowed to preach in her church, but each time she did, one of the male elders would walk out of the auditorium in protest.
- A woman pastor whose church changed their position on women in leadership, saying that only “exceptional women” could lead. (It wasn’t clear who decides which women are exceptional enough to lead or if this meant “unexceptional” men could lead.)

Cognitive Dissonance

What stood out to me through countless stories and conversations was the cognitive dissonance of “soft complementarianism” which allows women to lead in the workplace or even in politics, but not in the home or church. This hypocrisy is also seen in the many justifications made for only occasionally allowing women to preach, or for allowing women to “preach but not to teach” (if that’s even possible!), or allowing women to preach a stand-alone message but not as part of a sermon series. None of these ideas are found in Scripture, yet they appear in “soft complementarian” churches.

Nice Complementarianism

Austin Channing Brown’s description of “nice white people” resonates: “When you believe “niceness”

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disproves the presence of racism, it's easy to start believing bigotry is rare.”¹ Robin D’Angelo also writes about “nice” racism and the way progressive white people can perpetuate harm.² The same applies to complementarianism: “nice” complementarians do not disprove the presence of sexism and the reality of its resulting deep harm.

Gaslighting

Women in complementarian churches are often told that we are valued and equal to men. We may even be encouraged to develop our gifts but then aren’t allowed to use them in specific contexts, solely based on our gender. This sends the message that women are gifted enough to do the hard work of serving in church spaces but not gifted enough to lead. This subtle psychological manipulation contradicts the theological claim that we are fully valued and equal. The condescension of being politely assured that we are valued and equal to men, yet at the same time restricted by our gender in how we use our gifts, is a painful and destructive form of gaslighting. Gender is an inherent part of our humanity; how can two genders truly be equal when one is arbitrarily restricted from the work, authority, and spiritual gifts meant for the whole body?

The Work of the Spirit

Not allowing women to use our gifts is profoundly hurtful and limits the work of the Holy Spirit. If a woman has a gift of preaching or leadership but is restricted in the ways she can use this gift, that limits the Spirit’s effectiveness and hampers the spread of the gospel. Joel 2 speaks about the Holy Spirit being poured out on all flesh, a vision that finds its fulfilment in Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 12. Just as Joel insists that “sons and daughters, young and old, servants and leaders alike will prophesy and dream dreams,” Paul tells us that “to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). The Spirit does not discriminate in the distribution of gifts but gives “just as he determines” (1 Cor. 12:11). To deny or restrict the exercise of those gifts based on human categories such as gender is to resist the Spirit’s sovereign work.

Paul’s metaphor about the body, culminating in verse 26, sits between two passages about spiritual gifts (verses 7–11 and verses 27–31), reminding us that gifts are not given for individuals but for the sake of the body. Gifts are not hierarchies. They are Spirit-determined, not gender-specific. They are given to each one by the will of the Spirit for the good of the body. There are no gender-related conditions, restrictions, or requirements for receiving spiritual gifts, including the gifts of apostleship, prophecy, and teaching. The Spirit gives gifts freely, but the church must embody that reality by honouring all gifts and ensuring that no one is silenced or excluded.

In Marg Mowczko’s piece on 1 Corinthians 12, she writes about the equality and mutuality which comes through strongly in the passage:

“... each of us should use what the Spirit has given to us and serve according to God’s calling. That’s the ideal. The reality, however, is that some people are prevented from ministering. Women especially are dissuaded and excluded from certain ministries in some churches. By differentiating men from women in regard to ministry we are creating a divide in the church. This is not what God intended.”³

Healing and Hope

Let’s revisit the group of ladies on my veranda, a few years later. Some of us have since found churches where women lead freely alongside men in full and truly equal partnership. Some of us lead and preach in these spaces. Some of us are still holding on in complementarian churches, bravely following the example of Esther, who through her courage and humility brought change and freedom for her people. Some of us don’t feel safe in any church spaces but are finding healing in other ways. We have shared in each other’s hurt and in each other’s healing. We continue to hold hope for the church everywhere, the body of Christ, to embrace the God-given equality of men and women and the full inclusion of women’s gifts and voices. We continue to share our stories and journeys in the hope that those listening may be moved to speak and act.

IF ONE PART HURTS, EVERY OTHER PART IS INVOLVED IN THE HURT, AND IN THE HEALING.

To those who have taken your complementarian church's position as your own without reading or studying for yourself: Listen to the stories. Read the books. There are many excellent materials available. You have a responsibility to your wives, sisters, mothers, daughters, and to the Lord to thoroughly examine Scripture for yourself on this issue.

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To those who feel you have studied this topic and have landed on a view that restricts women: I acknowledge your genuine desire to follow Jesus and invite you to re-examine what the Bible says, recognizing the harm even well-meaning patriarchal theology causes. When half the church is at stake, keep an open and humble mind. Find someone to walk with in your journey.

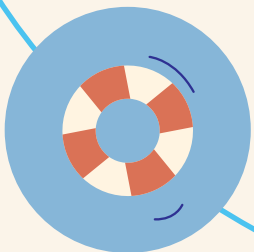
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To the women who don't feel strongly about this and are comfortable in your complementarian church communities: You may not feel affected by this issue, but for the well-being of the whole body, speak up. It may lead to discomfort, but please don't stay silent.

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To women who are holding on in complementarian spaces or who have left broken and crushed: Whether you have found healing in a new community, or whether you are still alone in your brokenness, may you find hope, healing, and a place of flourishing.



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To those who are convinced that women's full participation in all forms of church ministry is God's design and have spoken up in complementarian spaces, risking your status, reputation, friendships, and more: Thank you. Your courage has paved the way for healing, wholeness, and hope.

Healing and flourishing looks like churches where women lead, teach, and serve alongside men in genuine and equal partnership. It looks like women free to operate in God-given spiritual authority and the men around them embracing and celebrating this. It looks like communities where no one walks out when a woman speaks but instead leans in to listen. It looks like spaces where daughters grow up knowing they are fully seen, heard, and valued. Flourishing looks like the whole body of Christ working together, each part contributing freely with joy and strength, so that the church exudes wholeness, unity, and the transforming power of the gospel.

**WE CONTINUE TO SHARE
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Notes

1. Austin Channing Brown, "Nice White People," in *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* (New York: Convergent Books, 2018), 93.
2. Robin DiAngelo, *Nice Racism: How Progressive White People Perpetuate Racial Harm* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021).
3. Marg Mowczko, "Equality and Unity in Ministry: 1 Corinthians 12," *Marg Mowczko* (blog), March 30, 2013, <https://margmowczko.com/equality-honour-and-unity-in-ministry-1-corinthians-12/>.



Megan Chitsike works in mathematics teacher education in South Africa and believes that education is a powerful tool for equality. Her passion for equality has shaped her desire to see women flourish in all spheres of life, including the church, using their God-given gifts without restriction.

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