

## **“Why I Support Women Serving as Elders”**

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### ***A Little Background***

At a Fall 2006 meeting of the Midwest Presbytery of our EPC, a number of people expressed their views relative to women Teaching Elders. A motion was made to initiate a study as to the advisability of precluding women from this option. I was among those arguing against such an undertaking. Subsequently, I have been asked by a few people to share my views on the matter. Hence, I have prepared this article.

My purpose is to respond to some genuine concerns regarding my analysis. As a preface, please allow me to be autobiographical [with brevity I assure you!] I was ordained in the EPC in November of 1983. I have served professionally in a church of 150, another of 5000 and these last years at Cornerstone with a worship community of about 2500. My initial views regarding women serving as Elders were quite traditional when I entered Gordon-Conwell Seminary in 1978. Under the thoughtful influence of Drs. Meredith Kline, Roger Nicole and David Sholar, I was prompted to at least consider other viewpoints. Later, as a D.Min student at Eastern Seminary in Philadelphia, I still held to the traditional view. As a doctoral candidate, I was privileged to present my thesis to the fine New Testament scholar Manfred Brauch. I can hardly relate without amusement his responses to my paper. At one point, I suggested that Adam really should have tossed Eve out of the Garden when she sinned and not joined in her transgression! Professor Brauch told me he'd never heard anyone suggest that. I refrained from quoting Dr. Kline from whom I had learned the notion. I found it wiser to excise that little suggestion with a view to being graduated!

In any case, my position has “evolved” but I do not see myself as so thoroughly conversant with the issues that I might persuade others to my view. Nor do I seek to. I simply write hoping to demonstrate that I am not a theological liberal and that I believe in “male headship” in both the family and the church. Thus, please allow me to explain my convictions.

### ***The “Foundational Passage”***

I believe that a meaningful understanding of Paul's concerns [as expressed in 1 Timothy 2:11-15] begins in Genesis Chapter One. The original intentionality of God was quite clear. Namely, that Adam was

placed in the garden to manage it and Eve was given to him to assist him in doing so. We read:

**Genesis 1:27-28 (NIV) So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. [28] God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."**

Clearly they were commanded *as a team* to be fruitful, increase, fill, subdue and *rule*. But they fell into sin and that pattern was shattered. With the entrance of sin, instead of working under Adam's lead, assisting him to rule, Eve now wanted independence. In fact, she would be insubordinate by virtue of her new sinful nature, and she would become combative.

**Clearly they were commanded *as a team* to be fruitful, increase, fill, subdue and *rule*.**

So we read:

**Genesis 3:16 (NIV) To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."**

The first clause in this passage indicates that motherhood would now begin with trauma. But it is the second clause that requires attention in our present analysis. Namely, what did it mean when God said to Eve **"Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."** At first blush, this passage seems to be speaking of sexual passion. More than one interpreter has written at length about Eve's newfound sensuality and how Adam would have to restrain her. But sound exegesis yields a very different analysis. In fact, this probably has nothing whatever to do with sexual passion but with the desire to dominate. The word in question, typically translated as "desire" [NIV, NASB, KJV, NKJV] is the Hebrew "Tish-shu-kah" meaning to "long for" or "stretch towards" [Strong's HEBREW 8669].

If "Tish-shu-kah" was only used this one time in the Hebrew Old Testament, one could argue that it meant or might have meant sexual desire. But it is used two other times, once arguably to mean sexual passion. In **Song 7:10 (NIV)** we read: **"I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me."** But that usage is clearly in the context of romantic love and was written by Solomon. However, the Genesis usage was in the context of contention and written by Moses. The critical question would not be how this word was used in Song of Songs but how Moses used it

elsewhere. This would give us insight into his understanding of its meaning. Fortunately, we find that the same word is used one other time in the very next chapter of Genesis. When God speaks to Cain he warns him this way:

**Genesis 4:7 (NIV) “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”**

Obviously the intended meaning was not that sin had sensual designs on Cain. But rather that it desired to dominate him. In the same way, in Genesis Chapter Three, God was saying that because of sin Eve would now want to “dominate” Adam and he would have to exert vigorous rule over her. Let us compare the verses:

**Genesis 3:16b “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”**

**Genesis 4:7b “...sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”**

Thus, the “desire” in question was a longing to dominate. This was as if God was saying “Now they have disabled the dynamic that I designed between the two of them! Instead of Adam leading with Eve assisting, he will now have to hold back her urgings to take over and steal away his headship. He will have to control her!”

In my view this is precisely what Paul was concerned about when he wrote to Timothy. It is rarely appreciated that his guidance had to do with not permitting her *to dominate*. He said:

**1 Timothy 2:12 “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man...”**

The Greek text translated “have authority” is the word “authentein” properly understood as “usurping authority” or “dominating!” Those who argue that Paul was forbidding a woman to ever exercise any kind of leadership responsibility wherein she would give directives to a man may be missing Paul’s point. It was “usurped” or “excessive unauthorized authority” that was forbidden.

In this understanding of “authentein” I might have a woman working as my assistant to whom I give an assignment. In the process of carrying out that assignment, *under my authority*, she might actually tell me what I must do. She would remain under my authority even as she directs me. It would only be usurpation if she stole away my authority and then tried

to direct me. Much like a Captain following the directives of a Sergeant to whom he assigned a project.

With these observations about the “Foundational Passage” as background, let us consider Paul’s directives to Timothy.

### ***The “Pivotal Passage”***

Over the years, I’ve had people approach me at Cornerstone and say something like this: “I’m curious ...why would an otherwise Bible-believing church have women serving as Elders?” Inevitably, the questioner is referring to the well-traveled and much examined Pauline proscription regarding women in leadership in the church. It’s a fair question.

**“I’m curious ...why would an otherwise Bible-believing church have *women serving as Elders?*”**

As we’ve said, Paul wrote to the young Pastor Timothy whom he had left to oversee the Church in Ephesus. Apparently, the Ephesian believers were struggling with a number of issues including Gnosticism, wrangling over the Law, legalistic asceticism and leadership. In that context, he addresses the role of women.

The centerpiece of the matter seems to be:

**1 Tim. 2:11-15 (NIV) “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. [12] I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. [13] For Adam was formed first, then Eve. [14] And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. [15] But women will be saved through childbearing--if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”**

I am usually asked “Why don’t you simply take Paul at his word and follow this teaching from the Word of God?” My rejoinder is as follows:

### ***Three Essential Responses***

**FIRST:** I do take Paul at his word and I do not doubt that he meant what he said. I could not, for example, agree with Professor Jewitt from Fuller Seminary. As I recall, years ago he taught that Paul simply misunderstood the creation account or that he just got it wrong.

**TWO:** While taking Paul at his word, I ask **“What else would he have said in his culture?”** Paul seems to be simply re-affirming the first century Synagogue rules for worship. Why would he have given any other instruction especially in a church with other internal doctrinal and relational struggles?

**THREE:** As stated above, the usurpation of authority seems to have been what Paul had in mind.

But let us assume that my analysis of “authentein” is flawed. Let us proceed believing that Paul used “authentein” to mean simply “authority” and that woman, because she *is* woman, was not to have any authoritative position whatever in the New Testament Church. It seems then that this conclusion would still not settle the question about the permanence of such a prohibition. Thus...

### ***The Issue of “Trans-Cultural Normativity”***

In short, suppose we could determine that Paul meant “No women in leadership in the church. Why? Because they are women. Period!” In doing so, would we not ask if he meant that to be the policy forever in the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth until he returns? Would such a directive transcend culture? Let’s discuss this fascinating issue.

<p><b>“Trans-Cultural Normativity?”</b></p>
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In making reference to culture, we are required to ask what teachings in Scripture must be considered **“Trans-Culturally Normative?”** [An exceedingly clever phrase that someone smarter than I used somewhere.] This is the right question. What things transcend culture and how are we to determine those things? Is there a set of rules somewhere which, if followed, will make this an easy task? Unfortunately no. But some untangling is possible with a little common sense and an unhurried analysis.

For example, the prohibition against adultery must be considered trans-cultural. Why? Because we find it in the Word of God in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. [Exodus 20:14 cf. Hebrews 13:4]. It shows up from the very start of God’s Word and is mentioned as late as Revelation 18:19. Clearly culture is irrelevant to God in this matter. Adultery has always been and will always be sinful! But the punishment for adultery that was prescribed in the Old Testament did not carry over. We simply do not execute such people [Leviticus 20:10.]

Consider the punishment for the sin against blasphemy [Leviticus 24:14]. It is not trans-cultural either [thankfully!]. While blasphemy remains a sin and always will be a sin in that God’s Glory is diminished by the blasphemer, in our day we do not stone those guilty of this transgression. Thus, the condemnation of blasphemy should be seen as trans-cultural but the particular penalty was not. It was not found in the New Testament Church. Hence, at the very least, these examples demonstrate

that some Biblical injunctions should be seen as bound up in a particular culture. In the end, these are questions of hermeneutics, the science [and art?] of both Biblical interpretation and application.

This is not the venue to introduce a lengthy discussion about hermeneutics. But in my view, the particular question about trans-cultural applicability *is* relevant to our understanding of the women's issue. In short, was Paul giving guidance that we can respectfully dismiss as "bound up in *his* culture" and therefore not relevant to the modern church? Or did his guidance "transcend" his culture and would it thus be applicable to our churches today?

I believe the former. My conclusion is that his teaching was indeed culture bound and not necessarily binding on today's church. This should be noted: I am not saying that the prohibition against woman usurping authority from man could be understood as culture-bound. It was affirmed, in my view, from Genesis 3 to 1 Timothy. I am asserting that the Synagogue rules of dress and behavior, instituted to indicate compliance with male headship, were themselves culture-bound.

At this point, some will offer a "resounding "No!" Typically, they argue that Paul's word on this cannot be considered culture-bound because he refers to the "Creation Order" which, by definition, would transcend all time and cultures. I find that analysis and conclusion to be thoughtful but incomplete. Let's examine this nuance in the larger question.

### ***The "Creation Order" and the "Creation Mandate"***

The "Creation Order" dramatically affirms male headship. All objective reading of the Biblical data indicates this. Adam was made first and Adam was held accountable for their corporate transgression [Genesis 3:9]. For God's ancient people, woman was to display her status unequivocally as subservient to man. This manifested itself not only in heart attitude but in behavior and dress. In fact, that was the precise point Paul was trying to make. Namely, that a woman whose behaviors and dress did not conform to the Synagogue rules of the first century was in open defiance of male headship. In such a state of defiance, she would be manifesting her desire to usurp his authority.

**The "Creation Order" is inevitably linked to the "Creation Mandate!"**

In Paul's culture, a woman had to exhibit the described behaviors [read: **required** behaviors]. Failure to do so meant that she would be considered out from under her "covering" and wickedly rejecting her place in the "Creation Order." But in our culture that is not necessarily true or even regularly true.

In my church, we have women professionals in teaching, medicine, the arts, business and every other walk of life. We sit between two major universities and many in our worship community are involved with those institutions. Yet, no one views these women as recalcitrant and stiff-necked resisters of Biblical propriety! In fact, in our cultural setting, to limit women to the safe roles of children's Sunday School and nursery management would be a major stumbling block to our ministry!

But those observations alone are not compelling. They beg the question: was Paul referring to the "Creation Order?" I think that he was but that would still not call for the permanent non-person role that he seems to require of women in our text. Why? Because the "Creation Order" was by design coupled with the "Creation Mandate!" If Paul understood the one part of God's plan why would he dismiss the other part?

Thus, reference to the "Creation Order" would not, in and of itself, address the question of women's permanent exclusion from leadership. In short, Paul was referring to the "Creation Order" for a specific reason. Namely, to affirm that the woman must be in submission. And how would she "act out" her submissive role in his culture? By obeying the first century Synagogue rules! Thus, in his instructions, it is doubtful that he had in mind speaking to all cultures in all places in all times.

Put another way, I do not think Paul would have seen the "**CREATION ORDER**" as proof that women can never serve or assist in leadership. Why not? Because Paul would not have understood that order without its attached "Creation Mandate." If he was permanently forbidding all female involvement in leadership and management, he was abridging the mandate! My sense is that his goal was not the permanent prohibition of female assistance in leading. Rather, in his era the "Mandate" had been set aside and the topic of the moment was the "Order."

Once again, here is his teaching:

**[12] I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. [13] For Adam was formed first, then Eve. [14] And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.**

To repeat, if his concern was the "Order" being respected, his words made perfect sense to his readers. He is simply re-affirming the fact that the man is in charge and she is not. Since women demonstrated compliance with that reality in the first century Synagogue by being silent, it is understandable that he would call for silence.

Speaking of silence, admittedly, my argument borders on advocacy from silence! I readily acknowledge that Paul did not say the following: "In

your situation in your church in Ephesus....I want the women to follow the Synagogue rules showing they respect the 'Creation Order.' Perhaps at a later time when the churches throughout the kingdom are more mature, women will be able to fulfill their 'Mandate' to assist men... and do so still in compliance with the 'Creation Order' but not now!"

Why do I suggest that this is essentially what Paul meant or would have said if he'd been asked to elaborate? **THIS MAY BE THE CRUX OF MY ARGUMENT:** If Paul attached so much importance to the "Creation Order" clearly suggesting it was meant to be trans-cultural...why would he dismiss the "Creation

Mandate" as no longer in force? I conclude that Order and Mandate were both transcultural. But the woman's *permanent silence* could not be trans-cultural without eviscerating the Mandate! Thus, in view of his first-century setting he was saying, in effect "At this time the "Creation Order" is in effect but not the "Creation Mandate!" *He would have known that the silence could not be a permanent characteristic of her life if the Mandate was to be restored.*

***The question reduces to this: Would Paul have insisted that we honor the "Creation Order" but not the "Creation Mandate?"***

The person arguing for a timeless injunction against women sharing leadership must realize this: they are understanding Paul as calling for the permanent revision of the "Order-Mandate" command from God Himself! Is it likely that Paul would have meant that? To the contrary, all of the flow of Pauline argument for the Lordship of Christ suggests that he was and would be restoring and reconciling men and women to their original positions before God!

Put another way...this teaching cannot represent the entirety of Paul's views on men and women and how they relate in the church or anywhere else for that matter. If his view was simply a function of verse 14, he would be woefully ignorant of the equally important issue of the **"Creation Mandate!"**

Thus, we see God's original intentionality was for her to assist him in managing the creation! **Genesis 1:28 God blessed them and said to them... Rule...** Yet, Paul was a realist. *If I am incorrect in this*, then we would have to conclude that Paul was totally pessimistic about the possibility that "in Christ" men and women could ever play their "Creation Mandate" roles. But not so! In fact, Paul evidences great hopefulness by saying:

**Galatians 3:28-29 (NIV) There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. [29] If**

**you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.**

Thus, it seems more reasonable to believe that Paul was speaking to his church society and probably to a particular church. If he viewed our age, I believe he would rejoice that the Holy Spirit has continued the ministry of reconciliation even approaching a "Creation Mandate" restoration of male/female roles, while honoring the "Creation Order."

***An Important Corollary Question***

**How could a woman be in *submission to her husband* yet exercise rule over him as an *Elder* in the church?**

At this point, some might say "Even if you're correct

...how could a woman serve as an Elder yet be under the "Headship" of her husband if she is married?" My response: I've never seen this to be an actual problem. In our church, the husbands of women Elders have always affirmed their serving as such. If a woman does not properly defer to her husband's headship as in Ephesians 5: 22-28 she will not properly defer to male Pastoral Headship in the church. In serving as an Elder, her "rule" is a small part of a corporate function whereby she merges her views with of all the Elders as a group. In any case, a woman Elder is not usurping authority if her husband has asked her to help lead the church. Which leads me to the next point:

**MALE HEADSHIP** was part of the "Creation Order" and the "Creation Mandate." We read:

**Genesis 2:18 (NIV) The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a *helper suitable* for him."**

Here we see the Hebrew word "Et-zare" meaning "completer" or "helper." Yet ***Adam was made first*** and she is described as his helper not vice-versa. Beyond that, when God confronts the first two sinners, the Almighty speaks to Adam and not to Eve first.

**Genesis 3:9 (NIV) But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"**

So, the Bible teaches male headship in the Old Testament and re-affirms it in the New Testament. For that reason, I would not advocate that a woman serve as a Senior Pastor or Preaching Pastor. But in the subordinate roles of counseling, teaching and assisting in worship under the coverage of Session and a male Senior Pastor, I believe she can rightfully carry out her role as "helper." She need not be silent as long as she is submissive to his leadership. Lack of silence in our culture would

not indicate lack of submission. In any case, for me, it is sufficient that the Senior Pastor be a male; those assisting him may be of both genders.

For this reason, I contend against the idea that Presbytery should or could refuse a local congregation's choice of a woman as a Teaching Elder. It is true that some may press my argument further and desire a woman Teaching Elder to assume the lead position. If the decision were mine alone, I would draw the line below that level and permit women to serve as Teaching Elders but not allow them to assume ultimate leadership responsibilities. Yet, even in that, I believe we should allow the Holy Spirit to lead individual churches to perceive their sense of propriety on the women's issue.

In short, I have argued that Paul was forbidding usurped authority. In doing so, he invoked first-century synagogue rules whose effect was to eliminate the Creation Mandate in order to sustain the Creation Order. In Paul's day and culture he was insisting that failure to comply with those rules would be seen as an attempt at usurpation.

If Paul was forbidding any kind of role for women in authority simply because they are women, such a preclusion would have necessarily only applied to his cultural era. Why? Because Paul's commitment to the "Creation Order" would have included a commitment to its "Creation Mandate" aspect as well. Since it seems impossible to believe he would have so trivialized that dimension, I conclude that he was not considering it when he wrote to Timothy. My sense is that he was dealing with a problem in that church and did not intend to extrapolate his directives to permanently excise the "Mandate" element from the "Order" element.

Knowing Paul's concern not to cause stumbling among new believers or potential believers, it's as if he said "Follow the known rules and do nothing to scandalize!" I could conceive of him arguing just the opposite in our church culture! He might say "Since you know the "Creation Order" came with the "Mandate" and since your culture views women so differently, why not conform to the original design? In doing so, your church will be all the more winsome to women whom our God is calling!" One last point...

*Finally, allow me to suggest that the standard "Traditionalist" argument actually proves too much for even most "Traditionalists" to accept!*

**With all due respect,  
"Traditionalists" are usually  
quite unwilling to fully  
follow Paul!**

Speaking propositionally, let us suppose that I am entirely wrong-headed in all of this. Let us assume that the Traditionalists are correct in their desire to permanently exclude women from church leadership. Then I would ask politely: "On what

basis?" In every instance their reply is "On Paul! We must honor his teaching on this matter!" My reply raises a point typically overlooked. In short, it is as follows:

"Why do you insist on following Paul when it comes to his prohibitions about women in leadership...but not on the other issues? Paul forbade a number of things that modern men and women holding the traditional view simply dismiss!" To the text:

**1 Tim. 2:9-14 (NIV) I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, [10] but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. [11] A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. [12] I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. [13] For Adam was formed first, then Eve. [14] And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.**

It seems to me that if a Traditionalist argues for strict adherence to Pauline teaching in this matter, [understood as any authority ever given to woman throughout the church age] then he or she must insist that the following be honored in the church age:

1. Women are to dress with complete modesty without regard to fashion or attractiveness.
2. Women are to wear their hair very simply [and cover it according to 1 Corinthians 11:5] and avoid jewelry or other ornamentation.
3. Women are to be quiet and submissive thus not permitted to speak or sing in worship, etc.
4. Women are to be excluded from leadership over men.

I must say that the response of my "Traditionalist" friends at this point is nearly always the same. They say "Well...we're not actually concerned about those things. That was just Paul's time and society." Really? Why would we have license to dismiss all of Paul's rules for women except the one about leadership? The irony is that most Traditionalists who reject the cultural argument use it themselves to justify their dismissal of the "unimportant" aspects of Paul's injunctions such as make up and silence!

**Why would we have license to *dismiss* all of *Paul's* rules for women except the *one about leadership*?**

In my view, those who refuse to allow women to serve as leaders in the church should consider the inconsistency of their position. ***Unless they follow all of Paul's requirements, they have no real basis for insisting on only one.*** My conclusion? In the absence of a commitment to consistency, those who oppose women in leadership do so using a very convenient and selective hermeneutic. And if we ***can*** honor the entire "Creation/Mandate Order" ...we should do so!

In any case, peace.

## NOTES