

Women's Ordination: Creation Order or Cultural Tradition?

Does the Bible restrict church authority to men because of ancient culture, or because of God's design in creation?

Creation and culture

The question of women's ordination boils down to the difference between *creation* and *culture*.

Those who support the ordination of women to ecclesiastical office point out that women are equal to men. From this perspective, they assume that excluding them from ministerial office is based on outmoded cultural norms of the past. This view is called egalitarianism.

Since women today have competed successfully with men in such domains as business and politics, egalitarians see no reason for excluding them from leadership within the church. Refusing them, it is argued, is simply discrimination based on bygone prejudice.

Those who reserve ordination solely for men base their thinking on God's purposes in creation before cultures existed. This view is called "complementarianism" because its proponents argue that woman was created to complement man in his created purpose, which is to be the caretaker of the earth for God's glory.

The burden of proof

To overthrow 3500 years of Jewish and Christian practice, egalitarians must show from the biblical text itself that the reason for excluding women from authority in the church was cultural. Merely affirming it was cultural is not proof. Accusing complementarians of chauvinism or prejudice is not proof either.

If even one Scripture places the exclusion of women from ecclesiastic office on other grounds than culture, then egalitarianism stands refuted. Though one text would suffice, there are many.

In the study below, we will see the apostles were well aware of cultural considerations but ignored them in favor of issues going back to creation before cultures existed.

Does male headship in the household extend to the church?

Male headship in the household is clearly established in Genesis before the existence of cultures. Both complementarians and egalitarians recognize this.

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." Gen. 2:18

From this, we see that woman was created for two purposes: as a companion to the man and as his helper. This establishes the question of authority.

Though egalitarians agree with this point, they argue that the home and the church are separate institutions.

Are they separate? Or, does the male headship in the household carry over to the church? Let's see what Paul says:

Paul's argument from creation

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. 11. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. 12 For Adam was formed first, then Eve; 13 and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. 14 Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control. 1 Tim. 2:11-15

Paul immediately resorts to an argument from creation to justify two prohibitions: women may not teach men in the church nor exercise authority over them.

The reason given is that Adam was created first. This allowed Adam the right to *exercise authority*. Does Paul claim the term referred only to the household? He is using the creation of Adam to justify a policy in the church. This predates cultures.

Moreover, Paul implies that putting women in a place of authority may open them to demonic deception. The church may be exposing them to the same kind of temptation that Eve faced. Paul's intent, therefore, is not to be discriminatory but protective.

The last verse puzzled me until I saw the protective element in it. The clause *saved through childbearing* does not mean that childbearing has saving value, nor does it impose a moral obligation on all women to have children. He simply means that the primary role of women is to be wives and mothers. If we put them into roles for which they were ill-suited, we subject them to pressures they were unprepared to handle. It is the man's job to deal with snakes in the garden.

Again, the context shows the ordination question is a creation issue, not cultural. Times may change, but God's purposes in creation do not.

Another key text is 1 Cor.11:3-16. In this chapter, Paul answers a question about the local Corinthian custom of head covering for women. Though he clarifies that the other churches have no such custom, nevertheless, he approves of the practice insofar as the

Corinthians intend to express the submission of the women to church authority, which in turn is based on creation purposes.

It is difficult to see how egalitarians can identify any other intent in this text than the establishment of male authority in the church.

The question of image and authority

Egalitarians argue that both men and women are the image of God and therefore have equal value. From this, they assume that women must be entitled to the same functions and offices in the church. The illogic of this is plain enough without Scripture, but Paul uses the image of God to make his point. This argument in turn refutes the egalitarian position.

First point: Precedence in the home

But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. 1 Cor. 11:3

Paul starts his argument from a simple hierarchy that incorporates the whole of creation. God, Christ, husband, wife. He implies it would be just as absurd for the wife to take authority over her husband as for the husband to have authority over Christ or Christ over God the Father.

More importantly, he uses the home as groundwork for authority in the church. In the apostolic tradition, the home and the church are different institutions but by no means separate. This explains why Paul moves his argument smoothly from the home and applies it to the church. This puts the egalitarian in an uncomfortable position, for he must show that the two institutions are entirely separate, contrary to the text.

Second point: The precedence of image

For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. V.7

Man is the image of God. Woman is the image of the man. That is why she is the image of God. His image was derived directly from God; hers indirectly, via the man.

Third point: Creation order

For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. 1 Cor. 11:8

Paul implies that God intends the man to be in authority on the grounds that he made him first.

Fourth point: Creation purpose

Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. 1 Cor. 11:9

God created the man as caretaker of creation and the woman as his helper. This establishes authority by the difference of *purpose* in the creation of the two genders.

Paul shows he understands that authority is established by this creation purpose with the words, “*That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head...*”

Does this mean women today should have a veil on their head, as in some Eastern cultures? No. Paul commends the Corinthians for applying a local custom to express a biblical truth, although that particular form of cultural expression is not applicable universally. A woman’s hair suffices for covering if someone is concerned about that question.

Paul shows he was keenly aware of cultural issues but allows no grounds for the authority of women in the church, not even on the basis of culture, image of God, giftedness, or anything else.

Interdependence between men and women

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; 11 for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. 1 Cor. 11:11-12

It is a grave mistake for a man to assume that because he is in authority in the home or the church, he has a right to an independent attitude toward women. That attitude is a product of pride, not logic, and is unjustified by any creation purpose. A Christian leader who disregards the women in the church or home will face trouble, not only with them but also with God.

Woman was created to complement man. Though she is not to lead him, he must respect her.

Spiritual gifts and church authority

Egalitarians sometimes argue on the grounds that women may have any spiritual gift and therefore are entitled to equal authority. Children can have spiritual gifts too. What does this have to do with creation purposes?

What about competence? The issue in ordination is not competence but call.

And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, Heb. 5:4.

It does not necessarily follow that God calls individuals because they are the most competent people around. His call is based on his own sovereign will and grace. This has nothing to do with creation purposes regarding genders.

Conclusions

- Egalitarians base their view on three considerations: culture, image of God, and equality of competence. The apostolic teaching as to God's purposes in creating the two genders slices through all three egalitarian arguments and exposes them as irrelevant.
- The two texts we discussed, 1 Cor. 11 and 1 Tim. 2, are adequate for addressing all egalitarian arguments, although other scriptures exist as well.
- Woman was made to complement man and be his helper. This verse establishes the headship of man in the home. The question is whether this principle extends to the church. The Bible answers this question with a resounding yes.
- Though women are also the image of God and equally valuable as his children, they may not exercise authority in the church over men or teach them. This is not intended to be discriminatory but protective.

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