

[Note: The item below expresses the views of the individual to whom the material is ascribed and does not necessarily reflect the position of the WRF as a whole.]

## **An EPC Response to the PCA Report on Women Serving in the Ministry of the Church**

Submitted By

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[The EPC, like the PCA, is a denominational member of the World Reformed Fellowship]

I have been asked to offer an EPC perspective on the current PCA discussions on the ministry of women in the life of the church. It is encouraging to see our PCA brothers and sisters continue the conversation about this vital issue. The unique EPC position on these questions has been a defining distinctive of our branch of the Presbyterian family of churches so naturally this topic is of significant interest to us. We respect our PCA relatives, and trust the Lord will guide them in a way forward on this potentially divisive issue. Since I continue to find that some to the right of us are still unclear about the particulars of the EPC position, it seems appropriate to share our insights on the issue through a brief overview of our denomination's journey on this question.

The practice of women's ordination was one of three presenting issues that pushed one of our founding congregations, Ward Church in Michigan, to begin proceedings to withdraw from the mainline church. Immediately after the May 1980 UPCUSA General Assembly in Detroit concluded, Dr. Bartlett Hess, pastor of Ward, called for a special meeting of the Ward Session in June to consider the actions (or inaction) of that Assembly. There were three problematic issues. The UPCUSA had 1) not denounced Mansfield Kaseman's denial of Christ's deity, 2) reaffirmed Overture L making support of women's ordination mandatory and 3) approved a constitutional amendment that declared local church property was "held in trust" for the denomination. Dr. Hess courageously addressed his own Detroit Presbytery of the UPCUSA expressing his distress. His remarks included these words,

The issue is freedom. We talk much about pluralism, but that does not include churches without women elders. This assembly made the overture action of last year, previously unenforceable, enforceable. Exemption is only temporary. Candidates cannot be ordained who will not ordain women elders. Ministers of the same persuasion cannot move from one presbytery to another. But a person who denies the deity and sinlessness of Christ and the Trinity can be overwhelmingly received by a presbytery.<sup>1</sup>

In the fall of 1980 Ward and a group of other concerned churches met in St. Louis and organized a provisional fellowship, the "Association of Evangelical Presbyterian Churches." Six affirmations were approved by the new association: "They affirmed the primacy of Christ as Savior and Lord and 'fully God and fully man,' the infallibility of Scripture, the Westminster Confession, the Presbyterian model of church government, the 'evangelical vitality within the Reformed faith,' and spiritual unity in the basic tenets of the Christian faith, but spiritual and constitutional freedom in the area of 'nonessential and secondary distinctives' (women elders and deacons, for instance)."<sup>2</sup>

The group's neutrality on women's ordination as a "non-essential" was significant, mirroring earlier mainline attitudes, allowing for women's ordination but not mandating it for all churches, nor excluding ministers who held traditional views. The group's position was an explicit rejection of "Overture L" of the UPCUSA which forced congregations to have women elders. This position also set the group apart from the existing conservative Presbyterian denominations – OPC, PCA, ARP, Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod (RPCES) and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA), which did not allow women elders. Charting this *via media* on women's ordination was

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<sup>1</sup> Manuscript, "Message Delivered by Dr. Bartlett L. Hess to the Presbytery of Detroit," June 30, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> John Maust, "United Presbyterian Breakaways Lay the Foundation for Uniting," *Christianity Today* (October 10, 1980): 68. These affirmations became the "Consensus of St. Louis."

attractive to evangelicals for whom this was not an essential of ecclesiastical fellowship.<sup>3</sup> Pastor Jim Dixon, who was present at the St. Louis meeting, recalled the winsome spirit on women's ordination:

There wasn't extensive discussion because nobody seemed to want anything more than just freedom. Those who had no women on their elder board and didn't want to ever have women on their elder board, and understood the Bible to really disallow women in leadership – all they were requesting is, not that everyone think like them, but that they be free to live that out. And then those who wanted women on their elder board and felt like there was that freedom within the Bible, they wanted the freedom to live that out. So it didn't take long to reach a heart-felt consensus of freedom on this.<sup>4</sup>

The principle of maintaining liberty in non-essentials was a foundational value for the EPC. The first Moderator, Calvin Gray, captured the essence of that vision in a piece he wrote in April 1982. He exhorted the EPC family to stay the course:

Since the inception of the Evangelical Presbyterian Denomination, we have claimed to have the right balance between faith and freedom.... This balance is sure to be tested. Like a marriage relationship is tested after the honeymoon, the second and third Assemblies may well have the potential to divide us or to deepen our commitment.... The desire to preserve general spiritual freedom within the given framework of our essentials is critical. I urge a genuine willingness to listen and learn from each other rather than the attitude that we must win others to our point of view.... I believe we have the right balance and pray we will maintain it. If we do, there is no limit to what we can accomplish for the Lord.<sup>5</sup>

When the first General Assembly of the EPC met at Ward Church in 1981, Dr. Francis Schaeffer addressed the Assembly with a message entitled, "To Be God's Church in the Midst of the Twentieth-Century Confusion." Schaeffer addressed the issue of women elders toward the end of his presentation, acknowledging that while he believed only men should be elders, he knew there were those in the audience who believed the Bible allowed for women to serve in church office. Schaeffer exhorted the EPC that if the new denomination was going to allow for women elders, "make doubly plain that your view of Scripture is of the highest order." This clarity was necessary, said Schaeffer, because there are feminists who devalue and bend the Bible to fit culture. Schaeffer spoke about his personal efforts to find balance on the issue of female Christian leadership, telling the crowd of 1,700, that his wife Edith Schaeffer's fruitful ministry of writing and public speaking was addressed to both men and women.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout its 36-year history, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church has attracted evangelicals who affirmed women's ordination and had done so on what they understood as biblical grounds. It has also attracted those who hold the traditional views limiting women's roles in church leadership. As new ministers entered the EPC, the ecclesiastical make-up of the EPC had maintained a rather consistent equilibrium on the women's ordination issue. All Presbyteries of the EPC consisted of members that shared a diversity of views and most presbyters had been satisfied with EPC neutrality on the women's issue. On the local church level, congregations were entirely free to choose women elders/deacons or not. Most presbyteries had dealt with the issue amicably, a number of them developing special policies/procedures for handling women candidates/ordinands in order to safeguard liberty of conscience on a "non-essential."

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<sup>3</sup> A few churches that withdrew from the UPCUSA chose not to be a part of the new group. Dr. James Boice, pastor of Tenth Presbyterian (Philadelphia) sympathized with these evangelicals but was opposed to starting a new denomination. He led his congregation to unite with the RPCES which joined the PCA in 1982. Tenth Presbyterian had women deacons but had to surrender that freedom in the new denomination, although they had hoped to influence change on this issue.

<sup>4</sup> Transcript of Jim Dixon interview with Jeff Jeremiah, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin Gray, "The Moderator's Corner," *This Month in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church* (April 1982): 2.

<sup>6</sup> CD audio recording of the First General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, 1981.

In the last decade tensions over EPC practice began to emerge from three sources: younger ministers with no mainline experience being ordained in the EPC, ministers transferring into the EPC from denominations which mandated traditionalist views, and a fresh influx of mainline ministers who had come to the EPC from an ecclesiastical environment which dogmatically rejected the traditionalist view. Some of these more recent EPC members appeared to have a certain level of discomfort with EPC neutrality on women's ordination. Long-time members of the EPC were increasingly concerned because the influx of new folks appeared to be dissipating the historic non-dogmatic spirit of the EPC. The issue would eventually come before the General Assembly in 2009, and the EPC would again have to grapple with its distinctive neutrality on the subject.

The Assembly approved the appointing of two persons from each presbytery to serve on an Interim Committee on Women Teaching Elders to find a way forward. Each presbytery was represented by one person opposed to women's ordination, and one person in favor. Jim Dixon and Sandy Willson agreed to serve as co-chairs of the committee. As the committee discussed personal perspectives on the EPC, and potential solutions to the current dilemma, it appeared that committee members fell into three groups – those strongly opposed to women's ordination, those strongly in favor of women's ordination, and those on both sides of the issue who were non-dogmatic. The group was fairly representative of the EPC as a whole.

The committee proposed a plan that would permit ministers and congregations to transfer to an adjacent presbytery. It was also decided to recommend including an excerpt from the EPC's *Position Paper on the Ordination of Women* into the Book of Government, thus giving the EPC's historic position constitutional status. Moderator Nate Atwood, who participated in all the committee's deliberations, offered the Assembly his perspective on the committee's work:

They've crafted a proposal which seems to work for almost everyone and how could that be anything less than a miracle? I was especially impressed with not only the skill of those on the committee but their heart. I witnessed Philippians 2:3-4 in action time and again as those with opposing sides of the issue had each other in mind and kept looking for ways to "prefer one another in love." It was the best of the EPC in action.<sup>7</sup>

A key part of the proposal was the recommendation to add a paragraph from the *Position Paper on the Ordination of Women* to the existing statement. This was a crucial reaffirmation of the EPC's historic position on the issue. The paragraph declared,

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church believes that the issue of the ordination of women is not an essential of the faith. Since people of good faith who equally love the Lord and hold to the infallibility of Scripture differ on this issue, and since uniformity of view and practice is not essential to the existence of the visible church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church has chosen to leave this decision to the Spirit-guided consciences of particular congregations concerning the ordination of women as Elders and Deacons, and to the presbyteries concerning the ordination of women as Teaching Elders.<sup>8</sup>

All the amendments to the *Book of Government* passed by overwhelming majorities, with only a few "nays" heard on the 2010 Assembly floor. The amendments then became "descending overtures" sent down to the presbyteries for voting over the next year. All of the overtures received affirmative votes from the required 3/4 of the presbyteries. Now the constitutional amendments went back to the 2011 Assembly for ratification. The final vote at the Assembly was unanimous.

As one can discern from this brief overview of EPC history, our unity on the issue of women's role in the ministry of the church has been tested over the years. It has not always been easy, but it has been worth the effort to keep a charitable spirit on a subject we do not believe is worthy of ecclesiastical

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<sup>7</sup> "Moderator's Report," *Minutes of the General Assembly*, 2010, 205.

<sup>8</sup> Report of the "Interim Committee on the Ordination of Women 30<sup>th</sup> General Assembly," *Minutes of the General Assembly*, 2010, 192.

separation. EPC churches over time have collectively affirmed the wisdom of our founders to put this issue in the non-essential category. Freedom from coercion, and liberty of conscience on this issue are values we hold dear. Agreeing to disagree on non-essential issues is God-honoring from an EPC perspective, and we pray for the PCA to experience the same kind of unity among themselves as they contemplate where they will allow liberty on these issues.