

# Beyond Aprons and *Sexism in the Evangelical Church Today* Pickup Trucks

by Heather Lundy

Tradition helps us remember where we come from and who we are as a culture. We should uphold and honor tradition—as long as we don't begin to mistake it for truth.

I love aprons. I was shopping in my favorite store, Anthropologie, when I came across *the* apron. Exactly what I wanted. Little rose print, falls to my knees, rich olives, and bright reds. I love wearing it as I serve my friends dinner, especially while using the ceramic plates I made with my own hands. And, I'll be honest, I appreciate how the rich flower print hides the red sauce I somehow spilled while cooking. My friends call it clumsy; I call it passionate. Semantics. Regardless, I look good in that apron, and I like feeling feminine. I don't wear peep-toed red heels and a sundress like the ladies in those 1950s magazine ads; I prefer my Toms and torn jeans, instead. Tradition is great as long as it leaves room for my own personal flair.

If aprons are stereotypically feminine, what could be more stereotypically manly than a pickup truck? My grandfather has had a pickup truck for as long as I can remember—giving us grandkids a ride to the pool, bringing



a load of firewood to our doorstep in the winter, and hauling anything and everything to the church. Like a born and raised Texas boy, Bubba enjoys his pickup.

Aprons and trucks have long associations with feminine and masculine roles because tradition says women wear aprons and men knock around in pickups. That's just the way it is. Generally speaking, tradition is good. It provides stability and comfort in uncertain times. Tradition helps us remember where we come from and who we are as a culture. We should uphold and honor tradition—as long as we don't begin to mistake tradition for truth. I become concerned when we begin to use tradition as a guiding principle—when we insist that *all* women should wear aprons and *all* men should drive pickup trucks. That's when we first begin to lose sight of truth. When we hold tradition in proper perspective, there is flexibility. Bubba does most of the cooking, and I first learned how to drive in his pickup truck.

Mistaking tradition for truth occurs too naturally when we start assigning gender roles. I love wearing my colorful apron, and Bubba enjoys his pickup truck, but we do not define our identities as woman and a man by these traditional associations. Unfortunately, we risk making this mistake in our churches. We can become so rigid in our views of gender roles that tradition takes the place of truth, allowing sexism to take root.

According to psychologists Peter Glick and Susan Fiske (1996), sexism typically appears in two forms: “hostile sexism,” and “benevolent sexism.” Hostile sexism is what we typically imagine when we think of sexism. It is overtly negative, involving oppressive actions, attitudes, and beliefs toward the opposite gender. Benevolent sexism, on the other hand, occurs when one gender restricts or oppresses another based upon positive attitudes such as a desire to protect. For example, some men perceive women as inferior and, therefore, in need of supervision and protection. Benevolent sexism may include more covert negative oppressive actions, attitudes, and beliefs.

As of this article, nearly no research has been conducted on the manifestation of sexism within evangelical churches. However, one study conducted by Maltby, Hall, Anderson, and Edwards in 2010 shows an association between gender, religious belief and sexism. The researchers administered both the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory and the Christian Orthodoxy Scale to 337 evangelical Christian undergraduate students. They found that “gender moderated the relationship between Christian orthodoxy and Protective Paternalism.” In other words, “as men's sexist views increased, their agreement with

core tenets of Christianity increased. However, this was not the case for women” (Maltby and colleagues, 2010).

To fully appreciate the implications for the evangelical church, one must understand “protective paternalism.” Essentially, protective paternalism is the motivation to protect and provide for a specific group, a mindset expected of men toward women. This attitude, while seemingly noble, is a form of benevolent sexism and usually results in overt oppression. Research indicates a relationship between men holding traditional evangelical beliefs and maintaining sexist attitudes, usually in the form of “protective paternalism.”

More research is needed to determine why this correlation exists in men and not women. Does theology encourage men to hold sexist attitudes? That hardly seems likely. Theology derived from Scripture would not encourage oppression. Therefore, something else must be happening. Either sexist men gravitate toward orthodoxy because they like tradition, or their theology is more traditional than biblical. If one clings to traditional theology at the expense of truly biblical theology, he can become sexist, even with the best of intentions.

All of this is not to suggest that only men can be sexist. The fact is, both men and women perpetuate sexism. In the

evangelical church, a spectrum of sexist attitudes exists. On the far right end, we find what could be called “dominant men and silenced women.” This fuels an overt, hostile sexism in which women are not equal to men. Men rule church and home while women are treated like objects or property. Men vehemently pursue power at the expense of women's worth, and they defend their power over women at any cost—physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual harm. Women are slaves to men.

When people think of sexism, they often think of this extreme. Thankfully, this worldview is declining in its appeal in many parts of the world. Still, more subtle forms can be found in mainstream evangelical churches. A close friend of mine grew up in a church where they often hosted potluck meals after Sunday services. It was considered honorable for the women to serve the men instead of eating. In a very literal sense, the women were expected to put their most basic needs aside for men.

On the far left end of the spectrum, we find the opposite extreme—“dominant women and silenced men.” Dominant women fight so hard for their voice and worth that they plow through whatever and whoever stands in their way. To end oppression they become the oppressor. I have seen a woman literally hush her husband whenever he had an opinion about church issues. She had lived the first forty years of her life under the oppression of paternalistic, male-dominated churches. This woman became an elder at their new church and, in a tragic

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reversal, now perpetuates the same oppression she experienced for decades. Silencing men is not the answer to empowering women and ending sexism.

The majority of evangelical Christians fall somewhere between these two extremes. Typically, these members act with the best of intentions by treating all people equally, yet they remain silent concerning sexism in their congregations. This silent majority does little to end sexism because they aren't proud of their position on the spectrum. Consequently, they become guilty of "benevolent sexism." When assigning gender roles in church and life, the silent middle implicitly and/or explicitly encourages men as the power-holders and women as the subordinates. All the while they fail to acknowledge how this kind of language and attitude encourages oppression of women. Their language, even when they hold the best of intentions, can make a woman feel secondary, disempowered, and silenced. I know this because I have experienced it.

Sexism in the church will continue to be a problem as long as we remain tied to the spectrum I have described. Finding the right place on the spectrum is impossible because there is no right place. This paradigm views power as a limited commodity—that power given to one gender necessarily reduces power to the other. Consequently, wherever we land on the spectrum—anywhere between the extremes of "dominant men/silenced women" and "dominant women/silenced men"—demands we accept some level of oppression toward someone.

We need a new paradigm that encourages each gender to empower the other without sacrificing one's own dignity or worth. As the Balswicks' affirm in their book *The Family*, "Increasing another's person's power does not decrease one's own but, instead, multiplies one's potential for further empowering." How empowering for everyone if each person in my friend's church were to serve one another lunch and "outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:10, NRSV). How much better for the woman who became an elder to say to her husband, "Let's allow both of our voices to be heard in the church. I want oppression to end in our lives."

To get off the spectrum and find a new paradigm, "the silent middle" congregations must be willing to dialogue about the sexism infecting their churches. This might begin with a

simple acknowledgment that some people feel disempowered at times. What if a male pastor were to gain a woman's perspective on how women in his congregation might respond to his message concerning a gender-related issue? He could then hone the language he uses to empower both the men and women in his church.

We can eliminate sexism within the evangelical church with a subtle shift in our thinking, and shatter the old paradigm that has existed since the Fall. We must think of power as a limitless commodity instead of trying to gain power at the expense of others, or giving away power at the expense of self. If we can think in these terms, we are in a better place to respond to sexism rather than simply react to it. Unlike reaction, response to an issue looks intently at truth and then pursues it. Reaction looks at oppression and will do anything, even become the oppressor, to preserve oneself.

Let's begin a new paradigm of empowerment in our evangelical churches. I am empowered by my apron and Bubba by his pickup truck because the traditional gender roles they represent do not shackle us. I believe the church is up to the challenge of empowerment and can rise above sexism to enjoy freedom.



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