

# Social Changes and Religion's Response: An Analysis of the Symbolism in the Controversies Surrounding the Ordination of Women in Korea\*

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*This study analyzes the symbolism of the long-standing controversies surrounding the ordination of women in Korean Protestantism from the 1930s to the present day. How did internal and external changes in religious resources lead to a noticeable shift in the subject and resources of the debate on the female pastor? Moreover, what conflicts and divisions can we observe within religions when it comes to interpreting and accepting these changes? Lastly, how has this entire process altered the symbolism behind the current disputes surrounding the ordination of women? Active feminist movements in the 1980s, the introduction of feminist theology, and the experience of solidarity among women played a significant role in constructing alternative interpretations of the Bible as well as a "female-centered" religious discourse. To the female believers who turned to activism, the issue of ordaining women became emblematic of the need to reform the church whose patriarchal customs stemmed from secular society. Notwithstanding, certain groups dismissed this feminist movement as a secular trend, thereby reinforcing their exclusivity through strict adherence to the concept of biblical inerrancy. Fundamentalists, in particular, expressed apprehension about ordaining women, fearing that it would signify capitulation to contemporary values and compromise the authority of the Bible. Some also believe that it could lead to sanctioning homosexuality. To them, ordaining women symbolizes an immense wave of secularization that breaks the taboos of the Bible, and therefore must be prevented at all costs. The history of the controversy surrounding women's ordination serves as a vivid illustration of both the transformation and resistance experienced by religions in response to modern social changes.*

**Keywords:** social changes, Korean Protestantism, ordination of women, symbolism, fundamentalists, transformation

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## Introduction

Women constitute a considerable portion of a nation's religious population. According to a study conducted in South Korea in 2021, while 34% of men identified as religious, 56% of women claimed the same (Gallup Korea 2021). Setting aside a general decline in religiosity in today's generation, there is still a significant "gender gap" in the country's religious population, even as women have made strides in education and careers. Religion is still an area of gender discrimination. Despite significant changes in the status of women in society, religious clergy remains one of the last taboo areas for women. This gap suggests that female believers often take on more active roles in volunteer work and other activities around the church, compared to their male counterparts. Within the church, women typically take on responsibilities such as cleaning, organizing events, evangelizing at hospitals, and participating in the choir (Presbyterian Church of Korea Women Ministers Association 1992a, p. 148).

Heightened levels of education and improved job opportunities have also influenced women's perceptions and aspirations regarding their status within the community. Women have begun to question traditional gender roles, where they often have played a supporting role to men. This discontent is reflected in their doubts and antipathy toward the existing system, which has led to demands for providing legal provisions for the ordination of women to higher offices and the priesthood in the church. In most Protestant churches, women are barred from becoming pastors or elders. Similarly, there are no women priests, bishops, or cardinals in the Catholic Church. In Buddhism, women are allowed to become nuns who must abide by a strict and discriminatory set of regulations. What religious logic justifies the taboo on women in the clergy?

The question of whether women can also become pastors raises a multitude of debates within the religious community, necessitating a thorough exploration of several key aspects. Firstly, it prompts a discussion on whether women possess the qualifications to attain a "sacred" status that has historically been exclusively reserved for men. Secondly, it requires an examination of the role and dynamics between women and men as defined by religious doctrine. Lastly, it calls for scrutiny of the prerequisites for holding leadership positions. The ordination of women has been a long-debated topic in both Western and non-Western societies. As Western theological education became increasingly accessible to women, starting with

Harvard and Yale Seminary in 1956, the number of women receiving theological education more than tripled from 1972 to 1979 (Grenz and Kjesbo 1995). Consequently, there have been numerous discussions on ordaining women. This topic is intertwined with the examination of gender inequality within religious organizations, as well as the definitions and regulations that govern each gender within their respective religious systems and laws. In a broader sense, the same topic is related to the interpretation and acceptance of religion in the context of human rights and equality, which are the core values of modern society, as well as to the transformation of religion for its relevance and survival as more and more people shift away from religion in today's age.

Ordaining women has become an indicator whether a particular denomination identifies with religious conservatism or religious liberalism (Wuthnow 1988, p. 228). In an opinion piece, Kang Namsoon<sup>1</sup> (2017) highlighted the ordination of women, along with abortion and homosexuality, as one of the most controversial topics in Christianity today.

This study aims to explore what the history of the controversy over women's ordination in Korea symbolizes. First, it examines what kind of "resource" both the proponents and opponents of ordaining women draw from in their arguments. Second, it explores how this resource changes along with the shifts observed in religion both internally and externally. Third, it analyzes the resulting responses and how the symbolism of women's ordination changes or remains unchanged as a result.

The ongoing debate surrounding women's ordination in Korea holds significant value for research as it has a long history and represents the conflicts and negotiations between a denomination's adherence to orthodoxy and conformity to societal changes. The topic of women's ordination shows us the process of internal and external changes in Korean Christianity and how each distinct entity responded to it. In other words, it is a key issue that illustrates the transformation of both society and religion. Moreover, the recent debate on the ordination of women raises the issue of homosexuality, acceptance of which is one of the most controversial topics among religions not only in Korea but also in many other countries. The issue of homosexuality is central not only in religion but also in conservative discourses. Certain conservative denominations view the acceptance of women's ordination as a steppingstone toward embracing homosexuality. By examining these debates, we can gain insight into how religious fundamentalism that resists the change

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of secularization, such as equality or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues, reinforces itself and its core logic.

## The Symbolism of Ordaining Women

The prohibition against women pursuing priesthood causes numerous real-world problems. Despite having received the same theological education as men, women who are unable to become ordained priests often find themselves in peripheral roles in the community. Male-centered hierarchical organizations, sexual harassment, labor exploitation, wage inequality, and a lack of retirement planning are all real-world issues related to the topic of ordaining women. According to a 1988 report on the state of female ministers in Korea the 40-49 age group constituted the largest demographic of female ministers working in churches. The report further revealed that 76.1% of female ministers were unmarried, and their wages barely met the minimum cost of living for urban workers. Additionally, 66.5% had no viable plans for retirement (Korean Association of Women Theologians 1988). Female church workers who cannot become pastors in Korea take on the role of *jeondosa* (unordained ministers). In the context of Korean churches, a *jeondosa* denotes a position preceding pastorship for men but serves as the final position attainable for women. Unlike pastors, *jeondosa* often hold non-regular positions, receive significantly lower wages, and frequently work part-time.

Yet, these issues, though significant, cannot serve as a legitimate basis for ratifying the ordination of women, since religious logic based on the Bible is the only true source of authority in the church. Secular logic cannot interfere with religion, and religious doctrine more often than not conceals and perpetuates these problems within its own set of rules and system of thinking.

International studies on women's ordination include works by Welch (1982), Aldridge (1994), Chaves (1996), and Grenz and Kjesbo (1995). Aldridge, drawing on Mary Douglas's group/grid concept, explained differences in women's ordination among religious groups in terms of compromising and exclusive church models (Aldridge 1994, p. 502). Welch argues that women are excluded from central roles in religion because their resources in the religious sphere are not recognized. However, as religion becomes increasingly confined to the private sphere, women's roles in the religious domain expand (Welch 1982, pp. 82-84).

Studies on women's ordination in Korea have primarily been conducted

by women theologians. Representative works include those by Jang (2005), Ch'oe (1988), Kim (2005), Kang (1998), Son (1997), and Park (1992). These studies analyze the oppressive nature of traditional views and provide women's theological perspective justifying women's ordination. However, it is challenging to find sociological studies on women's ordination in Korea. Despite the significance of religion and gender as sociological subjects and the pivotal role of women's ordination in revealing issues related to religion, gender, institutions, and power within religious organizations, it remains an underexplored area. In particular, the debate on women's ordination is crucial as it illustrates social changes and the corresponding religious responses in South Korea. Through this discourse, one can observe how religions either adhere to their traditional religious logic or undergo transformations to gain legitimacy and adapt to contemporary social changes.

This study does not focus on whether the ordination of women should be accepted. The ordination of women is a matter of institutional practice that has shown flexibility over time. For instance, the first Anglican-Episcopal ordination of a female priest occurred in 1944 in the Diocese of Hong Kong as male priests were unable to travel during World War II. Although the Anglican Church in the United Kingdom did not recognize it, the great majority of the Hong Kong Diocese supported ordaining a female priest (Mei 2017, p. 40). The Catholic Church, on the other hand, only began to rule out ordaining women in the mid-twelfth century. That same prohibition has since carried over into the present Code of Canon Law (Urbaniaka and Willman 2022, p. 278).

This fact makes Chaves's point more convincing: the ordination of women should be considered in terms of what it symbolizes. Chaves explains that the ordination of women is related to a religion's interaction with liberalism; opposing the ordination of women should be understood as resistance against liberal ideals (Chaves 1997, p. 108). The core of the debate lies in the changes in religion both internally and externally, as well as how religions internally interpret external changes and respond to them.

In addition, it is crucial to recognize that the ordination of women does not necessarily reflect the status of women within a specific denomination. Chaves (1996) uses the example of the African American Pentecostal Church in the United States to show that certain denominations actively recognize women's leadership without allowing their ordination, while others exclude women despite having adopted the practice early on. Formal institutions that claim gender equality do not necessarily demonstrate actual gender equality in practice. For example, in Hapdong, a denomination of the Presbyterian

Church of Korea that prohibits women from ordination, women hold the position of jeondosa and perform virtually the same duties as men. Female lay leaders play the role of leaders with the title, kwonsa. Although there may not be official positions for female pastors or laywomen leaders, in reality, women play leadership roles within the church.

On the other hand, the Korean Methodist Church (founded 1930), which was the first denomination to allow the ordination of women, produced its first female pastor only in 1955, more than 20 years after adopting the idea. As of 2019, there are approximately 750 female pastors in Korea's Methodist Church. This is by no means high compared to other denominations that embraced the ordination of women much later. In addition, the Methodist Church added a clause to its bylaws in 1972 stipulating that married women could not serve as senior pastors; this rule was abolished only 17 years later. Rather than representing women's status in their communities, it is much more likely that most Korean church denominations followed the policies of their mother denominations abroad.

As such, the ordination of women does not by itself indicate the status of women in a particular denomination. And yet, ordaining women is such an incendiary issue because it symbolizes something crucial to all denominations. Those that embrace the practice are seen as holding an egalitarian perspective intended by God, while those that oppose it are seen as protecting an immutable religious principle that is unaffected by the values of the world. In other words, even though we recognize that ordaining women may not directly or significantly impact the status of women in religious institutions or result in a significant increase in the number of female priests, its symbolic implications make it a subject of intense debate.

Thus, as Chaves explains, opposition to the idea of ordaining women is a sign of anti-modernism and associated with emphasizing biblical inerrancy. From this perspective, the ordination of women is less a gauge of women's status within the church, and more a conscious enactment of the church's position on the liberal and modern agenda of institutionalizing individual rights (Chaves 1996, p. 869). In other words, the issue of women's ordination is not simply about the status of women but is an issue that reveals the church's response to the social agenda in modern society. The matter of whether Protestant denominations have introduced women's ordination should therefore be examined from this perspective.

## Reproduction of the Position of Women in Religion

Globally, solidarity and movement for women's ordination began in earnest in the 1970s, inspired by the second wave of feminism. It was in the 1980s when women in Korea formed a group to advocate for women's ordination. There have been, however, numerous demands and discussions in previous decades. Struggles for women's ordination are notably prevalent in the history of the Presbyterian Church of Korea (hereafter PCK). The PCK has long upheld a provision established by a governing body consisting of 33 missionaries and 36 Korean elders, which stipulates that "pastors and elders must be baptized men," as seen in the following, from the Presbyterian Church of Korea, Women Ministers Association (1992a).

### **Article 25 of the Constitution, Qualifications of Pastors**

To qualify as a pastor, all of the following paragraphs must be applicable:

1. A person who has been a blameless member of the church for over 7 years.
2. Men over 30 years of age. Does not apply to military chaplains.
3. A person whose faith is sincere.

### **Article 3, Section 5 of the Constitution, Qualifications of Elders**

Must be a man over 27 years of age, who has been a blameless member of the church for 5 years, with distinguished knowledge and ability to lead.

Officially, the PCK's first formal debate on the issue of women's ordination occurred in 1932, caused by an amendment in the policies of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Between the 1920s and 1930s, the Lutheran Church, the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church (USA) adopted women's ordination. Table 1 shows the year each major denomination in Korea adopted the ordination of women, and the year it first produced a female pastor. Currently, it is estimated that there are about 10,000 female pastors in Korea. Although the number increased significantly as denominations embraced the practice, women still only make up about 10% of all pastors in the country.

In 1930, when it was reported that the Presbyterian Church (USA) allowed female elders, in 1932, a presbytery belonging to the Presbyterian Church of Chosun (1912-1943) inquired why there was a difference in policy within the same denomination at a General Assembly. Later, in 1933, 103

**TABLE 1**  
**YEARS MAJOR KOREAN DENOMINATIONS EMBRACED ORDINATION OF WOMEN**  
**AND ORDAINED THEIR FIRST FEMALE PASTORS**

	Korean Methodist Church	Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea	Presbyterian Church of Korea (Tonghap)	Assemblies of God of Korea	Anglican Church of Korea	Jesus Korea Sungkyul Church
Embraced ordination of women	1930	1974	1994	1996	1999	2003
Ordained a female pastor	1955	1977	1996	1997	2001	2004
	Korea Evangelical Holiness Church	The Presbyterian Church in Korea (PCK: Baekseok)	Korea Baptist Convention	Presbyterian Church in Korea (Hapdong)	The Presbyterian Church in Korea (PCK: Koshin)	The Korean Presbyterian Church
Embraced ordination of women	2004	2011	2013	×	×	×
Ordained a female pastor	2005	2012	2013			

women from the South Hamnam Women's Evangelism Association submitted a proposal to allow women to hold the position of elders. This was the first-ever inquiry and formal demand for female eldership related to women's ordination. However, it was not until 1977 that official discussions about female pastors within the denomination began.

The answer of the PCK's General Assembly to the inquiry regarding the policy change by the Presbyterian Church (USA) was as follows: "We have nothing to do with the establishment of female elders in the Presbyterian Church in the United States. The Presbyterian Church of Korea cannot appoint female elders." In 1934, a theological controversy surrounding the ordination of female elders took place in the *Kidok Shinbo* (*Christian Messenger*) issue No. 977 (August 22, 1934). The *Kidok Shinbo* was founded in 1915 as a joint newspaper of Presbyterians and Methodists in Korea.<sup>2</sup> In

<sup>2</sup> It was the only Korean newspaper published in 1915. It shut down on July 28, 1937, with its last



this newspaper, pastor Kim Chun-bae contributed an article titled, "The Issue of Female Rights" regarding the ordination of women. "There are no reasonable grounds for rejecting women's petition for eldership," argued pastor Kim. "Silencing women and refusing to teach them were customs of the local church 2,000 years ago. How can this be an unchanging truth? It is contradictory to deny extending women's rights after forming a discriminatory constitution."

The subsequent counterargument against pastor Kim's article read as follows:

Adam was created first, and Eve was created later. In the order of creation, woman is considered inferior to man. God created man first and then woman as his helper. This means that women cannot teach or minister to a congregation that has men in it. Additionally, Eve's temptation and fall into sin before Adam signifies that women are inherently less discerning than men. That was a stronger reason to prevent women's religious authority. Many Bible scholars argue that a woman's role is primarily in caring for the household, and this perspective is worth considering. What is commanded based on the principles and principles established by God must be the eternal truth. Yet, as discussed above, the teachings of Apostle Paul are by no means ignoring women's religious talents. It is acknowledged in the Bible that a woman, with devout faith, can assist in church affairs, and teach. Nonetheless, the authority to teach and govern with legal power is believed to be reserved for men, as taught in the Bible, and this belief is universally upheld by all churches. Therefore, pastors, elders, and other teaching positions in the church requiring ordination cannot be held by women. (Presbyterian Church of Korea Women Ministers Association 1992a, pp. 9-10)

As evident from the arguments in 1934, the opposition to women's ordination centered around three main points: (1) the belief that women held a subordinate position in the order of creation, (2) the perception of women's lack of discernment demonstrated in the story of the fall, and (3) the notion that women's natural vocation was in housework, rendering them unfit for teaching men. Opposition to these views is equated to destructive Bible criticism by succumbing to the trends of the times. The hierarchical relationships and roles of women and men, determined at the time of

creation, are taught as timeless truths.

In the end, the General Assembly took issue with pastor Kim Chun-bae's argument, which raised questions about women's rights in the church, and set up a research committee to investigate it. The committee concluded that the pastor's interpretation contained significant errors and was entirely unacceptable. Faced with disciplinary action, pastor Kim retracted his claim. This incident confirmed who truly had the power to interpret the Bible, as well as their far-reaching authority, regardless of the subject matter.

When the demand for women's right to ordination began in the 1930s, there were significant limitations in terms of resources. The General Assembly, the highest governing body of the denomination, was an organization composed only of men. Women had no choice but to passively submit their petitions. In the Presbyterian Church, each church forms a session composed of pastors and elders. The sessions of each church come together to form one presbytery. These presbyteries gather to form the General Assembly of the denomination. Each denomination holds a General Assembly twice a year during which about 1,500 commissioners convene. Commissioners refer to the delegates who can attend the General Assembly. They can only be pastors and elders, and they are each assigned and elected by the presbytery. In other words, the General Assembly is a gathering of people who have the authority to discuss and make decisions on various matters of the church. In denominations that do not permit ordination of women, all members of the General Assembly are naturally male. Women who demand ordaining women had no way to attend it. They had no choice but to wait for the male commissioners to make their decisions while standing outside, trying to persuade or demonstrate to the delegates in the church.

This situation has persisted since the 1930s. In other words, at a time when there were no resources to challenge the existing traditional religious interpretation, the existing system of religion could be maintained without facing internal divisions. This means that the doctrines, discourses, and institutions that make up religion operate as a mechanism to consistently reproduce a certain status of women within its boundaries. This mechanism was maintained through three factors: (1) the exclusive authority of men to interpret the Bible, (2) the production and reproduction of education and sermons based on sexist stereotypes against women, and (3) the legal exclusion of women by religious organizations (Yi 2006). Women lacked the authority to interpret the Bible, the resources to challenge or resist sexist perceptions, and the administrative qualifications to bring about systemic change. As a result, this limiting mechanism persisted over time.

The right to interpret the Bible is the most central power in Christianity. In religions, only the most powerful group's interpretation of the holy text is recognized as truth, and all other interpretations are excluded from the orthodox truth (Ch'oe 2005, p. 55). Until women were given equal academic rights with men, only men were given the power to formulate and judge these religious doctrines. Based on traditional theological education, men produced and reproduced religious knowledge about men and women. The order between men and women, the order within the family, and the order of the church and society were explained and taught according to the traditional interpretation of the Bible. It had become a truth that women were responsible for childbirth and raising children, and that women could not teach men. The fact that Jesus, the 12 disciples, and the apostles were all male further solidified the notion of a masculine "head," i.e., male leadership. Two representative passages from the Bible used as the basis for opposing women's ordination are as follows:

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (1 Corinthians 14: 34-35)<sup>3</sup>

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. (1 Timothy 2: 11-12)

The power of biblical interpretation is given only to a specific group whose qualifications are recognized in the process of the religion's institutional specialization. Religious specialization means that persons with official qualifications proclaim and teach doctrines according to their principles, conduct rites, and govern organizations. In the process of specializing religion as an institution, uneducated women have gradually been marginalized and relegated to informal roles within religious communities.

McGuire (1987) explains that the justification for women's marginal position within religion is achieved through symbolic systems, myths, moral norms, and ritualistic representations. When religious leadership is exclusively held by men, the divine image portrayed in religious scriptures

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<sup>3</sup> All Bible passages that appear herein are taken from the New International Version.

becomes masculinized, reinforcing and solidifying gender roles. As women continue to be excluded from religious rituals, their status within religious organizations remains fixed. In essence, the position of women in religious institutions is justified and perpetuated through biblical interpretations, sexist perceptions, and institutional practices. Given that the authority to interpret the Bible, teach, establish moral norms, and conduct ceremonies is concentrated among men, the likelihood of significant change becomes slim.

The biblical interpretation against ordaining women that is presented is based on the position that the Bible is infallible. Denominations that oppose the ordination of women still insist on the inerrancy of the Bible. Biblical inerrancy fixes the authority of interpretation and blocks the possibility for change. Biblical inerrancy emphasizes literalism and believes in the Bible as the literal and immutable truth. It believes that the Bible is not only the infallible authority in matters of faith and practice, but also accurate in all historical accounts and scientific statements (Lee 1995, p. 14).

Since the passages presented in the Bible are defined as an absolute that transcends history and culture, challenging them is a grave sin. In a situation where women do not have the authority to interpret the Bible, it is impossible to challenge or argue theologically based on the Bible for the ordaining of female priests. That is why, for decades, the church could deny any request for the ordination of women based on the interpretation of the Bible.

In Korean Presbyterian Church (Tonghap), following the issue of female eldership raised for the first time in 1932, women requested the right to be ordained at the General Assembly every year, but the General Assembly said, at the 40th general meeting in 1946, that it would hold off women's eldership until a general consensus was formed. It then proceeded to block women from further requesting the ordination of women. In 1955, the Presbyterian Council decided that women would not be allowed to hold the office of elder, but would instead be given the title of *kwonsa*. This is a position unique to Korea and is, in effect, a female lay leader equivalent to a male elder. The decision was an appeasement of sorts. However, from 1961 onward, women continuously requested the General Assembly to allow female elders, and the agenda for female ordination had been rejected at the General Assembly for 32 years until 1993.

Without the power to interpret the Bible, the most central authority in their religion, women had little opportunity to change their status in the Christian church. This monopoly on biblical interpretation was subject to change as religious and social resources changed.

## Internal and External Changes in Religion: Alternative Biblical Interpretation and Transformation into a Movement

### *Introduction of Feminist Theology*

The earnest discussions on women's ordination in Korea gained momentum in the 1980s. The most significant change during this period was the emergence of an alternative biblical interpretation framework that could counter traditional theology. Influenced by the women's movement and women's studies in the West, studies challenging traditional Christian theology began to surface in the 1960s. In 1960, Valerie Saiving published her seminal essay, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View." In it, Saiving revealed that traditional theological thinking and concepts were entirely androcentric. She emphasized that women's experiences that varied from men's experiences were more than often ignored or overlooked, and consequently, theology was interpreted and forced based only on men's experiences (Jang 2005, p. 17). Subsequently, in 1968, Mary Daly published *The Church and the Second Sex*, in which she criticized the Catholic Church's oppression of women and explained that the concept of God in institutional religion serves as a patriarchal mechanism to justify male domination. According to Daly, the new concept symbolized by men is used as a justification for domination and conquest and reinforces patriarchal culture. Women's problems are often trivialized, treated as something special, and spiritualized or generalized to lose focus, she argued. Daly asserted that the expression of "God the Father" played a role in structuring the sexist oppression of women to be recognized as legitimate.

Feminist theology points out that traditional theology is patriarchal and excludes women's experiences. It views this kind of theology as devastating women's lives. Women must reconstruct theology as the subject of theology, the feminist thinking went, and women's experience must be included in the fundamentals and norms of modern Christian theology (Kang 1998, p. 72). During this trend, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, edited by Carol Christ, was published in 1979, as well as "Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives," written by Nancy Falk and Rita Gross in 1980. Based on studies criticizing traditional theology, feminist theology began to spread.

Feminist theology analyzed traditional theological doctrines and religious traditions, criticizing androcentrism and exposing patriarchalism in

the Bible and Christian tradition. According to Rosemary Ruether, feminist theology is developed based on women's experiences. Ruether (1993) explains that feminist theology uses women's experiences, which were largely shut out in the past, to criticize and expose existing codified traditions and myths. It also focuses on the subject of human liberation. She defines feminist theology as women's liberation theology, like black theology and *minjung* (people's) theology in Korea.

Feminist theology criticizes that in traditional theology, Mary, the icon of saints, was regarded only as a woman of obedient faith and the mother who gave birth to Jesus, and was idealized as an impossible model of a "virgin-mother." It further explains that Mary was highlighted as a typical patriarchal chaste woman, a gentle woman who embraces everything and was therefore used to oppress women (H. Kim 1997; Korean Association of Women Theologians 1994). The emergence of women's studies and the introduction of women's theology had a great impact on Korean religion. Above all, these changes directly became a new resource for the debate on the ordination of women.

In the 1980s and 1990s, women's demand for ordination and criticism of male-centered religious organizations gained substantial traction. Although feminist theology had not been recognized as mainstream theology, a growing number of women were researching it, providing Bible-based logic to women of faith in opposition to traditional theology. Going back to the debate on women's ordination in 1934, we can see feminist theology as responding to the biblical interpretation that had been presented as a basis for opposing the ordination of women.

Although feminist theology was not formally incorporated into theological colleges in Korea, women formed feminist theology clubs and engaged in independent study groups. When asked why she refused to leave the church even if she were not allowed to be part of the church's decisions and teachings, Fiorenza responded: "No Christian feminist would give up the right to define biblical religion and the Christian church. We must not give up the religious power to define a feminist religious vision of justice and liberation" (1997, p. 15-16). Feminist theology served as a basis for the belief that women in a sexist structure can be recognized for their religious experiences as women without leaving the church (Yi 2006, p. 51).

During the late 1970s, women who encountered feminist theology became advocates for its spread. Korea Church Women United, established in 1968, was the sole women's organization actively involved in the democratization movement, human rights movement, and labor movement of the 1970s. Lay

**TABLE 2**  
**DIFFERENCES IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION BETWEEN TRADITIONAL THEOLOGY**  
**AND FEMINIST THEOLOGY ON THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN**

	Traditional theology	Feminist theology
	Since man was created first, and woman came from the man, man is superior.	God culminated His creation in woman, who was created last after the garden, trees, animals, and man.
Nature	Woman was created as a helper to man.	The original meaning of "helper" is the same way God helps mankind
	The fact that the woman was tempted by the serpent means that woman is inferior.	Man was with the woman when the serpent tempted her.
Biblical evidence for women's ordination	Needing to interpret certain verses of the Bible according to the specific time they were written implies a denial of the Bible as being divinely inspired.	It is entirely unreasonable to apply Paul's statement intended for women in the church of Corinth in the 1st century to all women today.
	It is nonsensical to claim that the word "head" was used in an entirely arbitrary sense.	"Head," as used in the Bible, is closer to "foundation," instead of someone in charge.
	Those who theorize that content was "added" to the Bible are no different than the liberalists who contributed to thoroughly disintegrating the Church.	Inconsistencies found in parts of the Bible where Paul talks about women are because they were added to the Bible at a later date.

*Sources:* Bak (1992), Lee (1994), Christian Today (2005a; 2005b).

women in this organization requested National Council of Churches in Korea to establish a women's committee, which was subsequently established in 1982 (Kim 1996, p. 46). It was through Korea Church Women United that the first lectures on feminist theology were introduced in the country. The organization also established seminars on women's theology and held regular meetings, providing members with access to translated materials and fostering the creation of new study groups that focused on feminist theology. Women who encountered feminist theology created the Korean Association of Women Theologians (KAWT) in 1980 with the support of the Asian

Church Women's Conference. Operating as a non-denominational organization, the KAWT brought together women who had graduated from theological colleges across various denominations. They engaged in activities that blended theory and practice from a feminist theological perspective. The KAWT established an academy to introduce Western feminist theologians' discussions, interpreted the Bible through a feminist theological lens, rediscovered the significance of female existence, and explored feminist theological approaches and interpretations of women's daily lives. As a result, it managed to obtain resources for alternative biblical interpretations that supported the legitimacy of the ordination of women.

### *Activating Social Movements and Women's Solidarity*

The 1980s witnessed not only changes in religion's internal resources but also a growing resistance against the dictatorship that lasted throughout the 1970s and 1980s in Korea. This resistance gave rise to several movements demanding democratization, including the labor movement, the urban poor movement, and the women's movement. As the 1980s progressed, a movement for the democratization of religion also grew. Some Christian groups formed to resist the dictatorship, and the Myeongdong Cathedral and the Korean Christian Building in Seoul became gathering places for the democratization movement. Religious gatherings held in cathedrals or churches naturally became the epicenter of the democratization movement, with priests, nuns, and pastors actively participating alongside students and other citizens. This social environment provided fertile ground for the growth of the women's movement within religious circles.

Since the 1980s, with the increasing in women's activism in society, several women's movement organizations have been established. These included the Foundation of Women and Family and the Women's Hotline in 1983, Another Culture in 1984, and the Korean Women's Associations United in 1987. These groups aimed to address social contradictions, inequality, and the need for fundamental social transformation to achieve women's liberation. In religious communities, Christian women's movement organizations based on feminist theology also emerged during this period. In 1985, the Korean Association of Women's Studies was established, followed by the Korea Association of Christian Women for Women Minjung in 1986, and the Christian Women's Peace Institute, Asia Women's Theological Institute, and Women's Churches in 1989, one after another. The Christian women's movement played a role in theorizing women's issues within religion and



raising consciousness in the community, and actively participating in social movements such as by supporting women workers, protesting against sex tourism, and advocating for atomic bomb victims. Established in 1985, the Korean Association of Women's Studies made extensive efforts to introduce feminist theology into society. Some universities established women's theological research institutes as a result. Based on feminist theology, the association newly conceptualized and theorized the issues of women's experience, ethnicity, church, and sexuality. In addition, it actively pursued exchange activities with overseas Christian women, raising agendas related to religion and women.

With these changes in society, Christian women were able to strengthen their solidarity and exchanges both within and outside of religious contexts. In particular, following Korea's democratization in 1987, activism underwent notable transformations as various social movements advocating for democracy began to diversify and address fragmented agendas. The feminist movement faced a similar dilemma, questioning whether to continue aligning with the national democracy movement of the 1980s or to pursue an independent women's movement (Jo 1996, p. 162). Eventually, the Christian women's movement also shifted its focus in the 1990s to address practical issues faced by women rather than solely pursuing overall social change. As a practical response, the Women's Church emerged, challenging the traditional church's hierarchical structure and male-centered rituals (Lee 2009, p. 44). The Women's Church explored ways to integrate feminist theology into concrete practices, such as using the Women's Lord's Prayer that reflects women's experiences and introducing traditional culture into worship.

Another noticeable change was the emergence of a more active entity following a diverging trend within the women's ordination movement. As mentioned earlier, initially, the request for the ordination of women in the Presbyterian Church in 1932 focused on the appointment of female elders. The call for female pastors did not come until much later, in 1977. In the beginning, Presbyterian Church of Korea Women (PCKW) was the key player in requesting the ordination of women. Although PCKW used to comprise of both female ministers and female lay worshippers, female *jeondosa* separated from it and created the Women Ministers Association (WMA) in 1973.

However, when it came to revitalizing the women's movement and adopting feminist theology in the 1980s, the PCKW and the WMA varied in their reception and interpretation. It was the WMA that proactively accepted the change in the movement's resources. Since the 1980s, the WMA has been

pursuing its own way of campaigning for women's ordination, distinct from the PCKW's direction. The most important thing in this process was teaching feminist theology and raising awareness in the community. In 1986, the WMA established the Women Ministers Training Center and formed a women ministers training program based on feminist theology. The training center was part of a program in which the *EZE* (Protestant Development Service in Germany, now called EED) provided financial support for education to developing countries WMA applied through at the recommendation of the National Council of Churches in Korea, and operated with permission. Through this initiative, the WMA implemented various forms of education, including counseling education, welfare education, women's counseling, and women's theology at the national level. The project was carried out in three phases, aiming to recognize and overcome the patriarchal Confucian culture and conservative biblical and theological views that discriminate against women (WMA 1992b, p. 235; p. 254).

These initiatives led women to prioritize the reform of undemocratic and discriminatory systems within the church. In 1984, the WMA established a "seven-person research committee for legal status improvement" and submitted a proposal to amend the law at the general meeting, but it did not pass. These changes reflect the increased activism of women in challenging traditional interpretations of the Bible, initiating religious discourse on women's experiences, and proposing alternative institutions. It represents the transformation of women in the church from being mere petitioners to becoming active agents in advocating for women's ordination.

Since the 1980s, women's involvement within religious contexts has transformed the significance of women's ordination. Women in religion began to prioritize the reform of sexist church structures from the perspective of biblical interpretation through feminist theology. As a result, the issue of women's ordination became more than just a concern for individual denominations; it was recognized as a broader problem rooted in the pervasive sexist culture and systems present within religious organizations. Starting from the late 1980s, women from various denominations joined forces to advance the movement for women's ordination, aiming to bring about reform within religious organizations and challenge the prevailing gender biases.

The methods employed by advocates of women's ordination also underwent a change. They shifted from holding meetings and lectures to more assertive actions, including signature campaigns, distribution of pamphlets, protests, raising questions at general meetings, engaging in

discussions, hosting public hearings, and organizing street marches. Additionally, the network of organizations involved in the movement for the ordination of women expanded significantly. This network encompassed women associated with denominations like Methodism and the Presbyterianism, where women's ordination had already been introduced, as well as groups such as the Youth Union Women's Committee and the National Association of Women Theological Students. Women advocating for the ordination of women moved beyond the argument that there is no biblical issue with the ordination of women and asserted that opposing the ordination of women in fact *distorts* the Bible.

God, in the beginning, created man and woman in His own image, establishing equal and mutual relations between them and granting them stewardship to maintain peace in all things. But these biblical messages are distorted by humans who constantly desire subjugation and domination. Patriarchal culture has also permeated the church system, resulting in the enactment of prejudiced legislation that restricts ordination to men and denies women the priesthood bestowed by God. In this way, the laying on of hands, which was originally a sign of servanthood, was transformed into a means of ruling, and the church as a witness of the gospel to the world became the symbol of the most undemocratic authoritarianism.

Participants in a women's ordination seminar on July 14, 1988. (Presbyterian Church of Korea Women Ministers Association 1992a, pp. 358-361)

Throughout the 1980s, social movements based on democratic activism and solidarity between women outside and within the church led to cracks in longstanding biblical interpretations and cultural and institutional changes in religion. Whereas before the 1980s the issue of women's ordination was seen as a purely religious one, in the 1980s and 1990s it increasingly became a social issue. In particular, in the 1990s the issue of sexism in the church began to be covered by the media, and public interest in women's ordination grew. These changes outside the church put pressure on the church system to change. Women's ordination was symbolized as a means of reclaiming the true meaning of the Bible, which had been distorted by human desires and correcting the legacy of patriarchal structures deeply rooted in religious organizations.

## The Final Bulwark of Fundamentalism: The Link Between Female Ordination and Homosexuality

The Korean Presbyterian Church (Tonghap) officially permitted the ordination of women at a General Assembly in 1994, more than 60 years after the issue was raised within the denomination for the first time in 1932. This decision followed similar approvals by other major denominations in Korea, including the Korean Methodist Church and the Korean Christian Presbyterian Church. Once Tonghap embraced women's ordination, other denominations such as the Assemblies of God in Korea, the Anglican Church of Korea, the Holiness Church, the PCK (Baekseok), and the Baptist Association also followed suit. As of 2023, the Hapdong, Koshin, and the Hapshin denominations of the PCK remain the only denominations that continue to deny women ordination. Notably, Hapdong, the largest denomination in Korea, separated from Tonghap in 1959. Since then, petitions for the ordination of women have been submitted to the General Assembly seven times, yet none have been put to a vote. The denomination has only formed a research committee on the ordination of women three times thus far (Ku and Na 2022, p. 58).

From the 1980s to the present, various factors have exerted pressure on religion to change, including the empowerment of the women's movement, the advancement of women's social status, shifts in societal awareness regarding women's issues, and criticism of the sexist conservatism within religious contexts. Yet religious resistance to change has also grown stronger. In the 2000s, the arguments against the ordination of women became simpler compared to previous decades. This is because justifications based on women's temperaments, physiological differences, and human rights concerns lost their persuasive power within religious organizations due to evolving social norms. These changes are evident when comparing the rationale used to oppose the ordination of women in 1971 with that of the 2000s. In addition to the biblical verse "women should not teach, but be silent," the following grounds were cited in 1971.

The above Table 3 highlights how opposition to the ordination of women is rooted not only in biblical interpretation but also in stereotypical views of women and elements of misogyny. It is evident that in 1971, such openly expressed remarks carried little consequence. However, in the 2000s, direct sexist remarks against women began to be frowned upon. From the late 1980s to the 1990s, the issue of women's ordination began to be addressed

**TABLE 3**  
**ARGUMENTS AGAINST ORDAINING WOMEN (1971)**

Issue	Description
Ministry	Women are emotional and prone to bias and therefore more likely to cause problems in the church.
Physiology	Physiologically, women cannot be ministers.
Human rights	What matters is the Bible, not human rights.
Time	It is still too early in Korea to discuss ordaining women.
International relations	There is no need to imitate others; appointing female elders is unbiblical, and introducing a humanitarian bias into theology.

*Source:* Presbyterian Church of Korea Women Ministers Association 1992a, pp. 13-14.

not only in the church but also in society, and various media outlets published articles on the issue of perceived gender inequality within religion. As society's awareness of women improved and social sensitivity to gender discrimination grew, the basis for denying the ordination of women based on emotions, physiological differences, and claims of inferiority have gradually weakened.

This change is well illustrated in the so-called "diaper incident" in 2003, where, during a chapel session at Chongshin University, the general president of the Presbyterian Church of Korea (Hapdong) made a controversial statement, declaring that it was unacceptable for a woman to be ordained as a pastor in their denomination. He went on to ask, "How could a woman dare to come up to the podium wearing diapers?!" This remark caused a significant uproar and widespread criticism from the public, students, and fellow Protestants. In response to this incident, 32 Christian women's associations and women's human rights groups, including the Korean Women's Theological Association and the Women's Peacemaking Association, released a statement chiding the church leader's remarks, calling them "verbal violence and life-threatening behavior that degrades, insults, and humiliates women" (*OhmyNews* November 28, 23). This incident widely revealed to society the antiquated view Korean churches held of women and their sexist structures, which had long gone unnoticed.

Ultimately, the primary basis for opposing the ordination of women is the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. With constantly changing women's social status and growing criticism of religion for gender inequality, there has been

a yet stronger movement for the literal interpretation of the Bible based on the theory of biblical inerrancy. Adhering to the doctrine of inerrancy is depicted as defending tradition and truth, while allowing the ordination of women is portrayed as an act of secularization, compromise, and depravity. Advocates for the ordination of women argue that the Bible must be reinterpreted according to its context in modern society, while defenders of biblical inerrancy see this as a grave error and sin.

Conservative theology views the feminist movement and feminist theology as modern and secular influences. Opponents of the ordination of women criticize denominations that support women's ordination for having overly broad and contemporary theological perspectives, questioning whether they can truly be considered Christians (Seo 2005, p. 8). "The feminist movement is causing a revolutionary wave within Christianity, and some evangelical churches are also succumbing to the pressure of the secular feminist movement and opening up the ordination for female pastors and elders" (U. Kim 1997, p. 11). In other words, they expand the issue of women's ordination to a matter of whether the church acknowledges the authority of the Bible.

The ordination of women is itself only a ritual. However, opening up priesthood to women poses a direct challenge to the teachings and authority of the Bible. It can also be seen as admitting that our previous teachings were flawed. Determining whether the ordination of women is really the truth taught by the Bible, or whether the church is in reality yielding to the pressure of the times—is certainly one of the biggest issues faced by the church today. (U. Kim 1997, p. 11)

According to this line of argument, permitting the ordination of women is seen as endorsing what is deemed "taboo" in the Bible in order to conform to current social norms. A "new interpretation" of the Bible that allows women's ordination will eventually lead to a demand for recognition of homosexuality, and later even for gender-neutral references to God, critics argue (Kim 1997, p. 20).

Religious fundamentalism seeks to distinguish itself by separation from the secularized world (Ammerman 1987). While originally rooted in the evangelical tradition, fundamentalism has developed its own set of defining characteristics in the twentieth century, demonstrating resistance to evangelicalism. Fundamentalists believe in the literal Bible as the absolute truth according to the theory of biblical inerrancy (Lee 1995; Jang 2019).

They also defy modernity and secularization, believe in premillennial eschatology, and engage in dualistic thinking based on the confrontation between holy and secular, and good and evil. They also reject not only people of other religions or unbelievers, but also liberals and modernists within the same religion, and also view the ecumenical movement as betraying their principles (Lee 1995, p. 16). Fundamentalists actively involve themselves in political matters, advocating for public measures against homosexuality, abortion, communism, religious education, and Islamism (Jang 2019, p. 211). They uphold strong anti-communist ideology and exhibit hostility toward the theory of evolution, communism, homosexuality, and Islam. Additionally, they view religious pluralism, abortion, and the ordination of women as adversaries (Yoon and Oh 2021).

Even today, the debate on ordaining women remains a bone of contention. However, a recent trend is the merging of the logic against the ordination of women with the logic against homosexuality. Conservative denominations strongly believe that allowing women to be ordained will inevitably lead to accepting homosexuality. In September 2020, at the 105th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Korea (Hapdong), the Department of Theology concluded that women's ordination was impossible, citing its absence in the Bible, its violation of biblical inerrancy, and its potential to pave the way for the acceptance of homosexuality (Kang 2020). In 2020, the Presbyterian Church in Korea (Koshin) announced that it was severing ties with its partner, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands-Liberated, for adopting women's ordination. Koshin also argued that conforming to the culture of society and re-interpreting the Bible will eventually lead to recognizing homosexuality (*News N Joy* October 6, 2020). They observed the progression of events in Western societies, where homosexuality was embraced following the ordination of women, culminating in the acceptance of same-sex marriage within the church and the ordination of homosexuals.

The logic behind the introduction of the women's ordination system and the acceptance of homosexuality that they advocate is connected as follows:

- 1) Although the Bible does not allow women to hold public positions, women today are capable, so they should also be allowed to hold public positions.
- 2) Since women have a leadership position in society, the church can communicate with society and spread the gospel well by giving women a leadership position.

3) Bible passages can be interpreted differently than before.

- 1-1) Unlike the homosexuals of the early church, today's homosexuals live faithfully as a couple for their entire lives.
- 2-1) Since society accepts homosexuality, the church can communicate with society and spread the gospel well by allowing homosexuality.
- 3-1) Biblical passages prohibiting homosexuality can be interpreted differently. (*News N Joy* October 6, 2020)

The concerns raised by these conservative denominations in Western societies demonstrate the ongoing trend of changes. The Presbyterian Church (USA) changed its definition of marriage from “one man and one woman” to “a union of two people” at the General Assembly in 2015, and recognized the same-sex marriages within the church, and approved amendments to the church constitution. The churches that belonged to the Presbyterian Church (USA) that opposed homosexuality, subsequently, withdrew from the denomination. As of today, the denominations that de facto recognize homosexuality in the United States include the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Episcopal Church. On the other hand, the American Baptist Churches USA, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the Southern Baptist Convention strictly oppose homosexuality. Observable divisions and secessions appear even within these denominations due to this issue. Internal conflicts are particularly being reported within the United Methodist Church, the largest denomination in the United States, as it recently shifted its stance on homosexuality.

The core of the debate, even with the issue of homosexuality in the United States, largely lies in the conflict between biblical inerrancy and modern interpretation. Ordaining women and embracing homosexuality inevitably require a modern interpretation and revision of the text of the Bible, which traditional theology has strictly forbidden. Opponents of homosexuality argue that going against what is considered taboo in the Bible cannot be justified by notions like human rights, peace, equality, and tolerance. Proponents, on the other hand, contend that persisting in prejudice, violence, and discrimination against minority groups contradicts the love commanded by God. American churches are moving towards accepting homosexuality. Simultaneously, fundamentalists opposed to it are raising their voices. Two polarized churches coexist today: one adapting to the changing times, and the other vehemently rejecting change altogether.

Currently, Korean denominations that oppose the ordination of women



view homosexuality and the ordination of women as equally grave sins. To them, preventing the ordination of women is a crucial bulwark that must be defended at all costs against the wave of secularization.

## Conclusion

The debate on women's ordination in Korea has persisted since the 1930s. Following the historical progression of the controversy shows how women's status is shaped and perpetuated in religious logic, discourse, and institutions. Women's ordination in Korea, before the 1980s, mainly consisted of appeals and subsequent rejections. Without the resources to challenge the existing biblical interpretation, discourse, and system, women had no other option but to submit their requests to men in positions of authority.

Yet, social movements, women's studies, the introduction of feminist theology, and a heightened sense of solidarity in the 1980s brought about a shift in the subject and led to an influx of new resources to challenge the enduring church structure while retaining their identities. While some groups embracing transition accepted these internal and external changes in religion as valuable opportunities and resources, other groups resisting change viewed these as a wave of secularization that called for resistance and alertness. These tensions and confrontations lead to transformation in religious discourses, symbols, rituals, and institutions, and accompany conflicts and changes in power relations. In sum, the issue of ordaining women is not merely a matter of promoting women, but an illustration of how religion is conducting itself in terms of its survival, adaptation, transformation, and resistance in the face of a secularized modern world that is ever-increasingly marginalizing faith. In the secularization process, religions secure their legitimacy and survival by adhering to specific religious discourses, symbols, and logic, while simultaneously undergoing changes.

By the 1980s, the call for the introduction of women's ordination was symbolized by a religious movement aiming to transform the misguided patriarchal culture of religious organizations by reforming sexist church structures, rather than merely advocating for a change in the traditional authority of religion. On the other hand, in the fundamentalist logic opposing women's ordination, it is not just a matter of changing church institutions or laws; instead, women's ordination symbolized the introduction of secular waves, such as homosexuality, that divide and destroy religion.

Recently, opposition to women's ordination in Korea has become a more

fundamentalist core issue, intertwining with the logic opposing homosexuality, surpassing previous levels of staunch conservatism. Fundamentalists have come to define the ordination of women as a grave sin and a threat comparable to homosexuality. Based on biblical inerrancy, fundamentalists are increasingly determined to safeguard their truth from the secular world and other Protestants, who, in their eyes, have compromised and become likewise corrupted.

Even among denominations in Korea that have already introduced women's ordination, there is a predominant opposition to homosexuality. Opposition to homosexuality within Protestantism has surfaced as a political issue, particularly in the context of resisting the enactment of anti-discrimination laws. The issue of anti-discrimination laws has become a prominent political matter championed by conservative Protestant groups in Korea. The Christian Council of Korea, a conservative Christian organization, has played a central role in various far-right activities since the 2000s, producing political discourse. Fundamentalist groups within Korean Protestantism have actively opposed the proposed enactment of anti-discrimination laws since the 2000s, leading protests in public spaces and producing, consuming, and disseminating anti-communist, Islamophobic, and homophobic discourses, as well as those opposing pro-Americanism.

Consequently, despite global trends accepting women's ordination and recognizing homosexuality, it can be predicted that the far-right fundamentalist discourse and political activism in Korean society will strengthen in its own way.

However, the possibility of religious conversion cannot be ruled out. While voices advocating for homosexuality within Korean Protestantism are still a minority, conflicting positions and tensions have already emerged within major denominations such as the Presbyterian Church of Korea and the Korean Methodist Church regarding homosexuality. On the other hand, the process of de-religionization in South Korea is occurring at a rapid pace. Recent census data indicates a swift decline in the religious population of Korea. In the era of secularization, the issue of the survival of religion becomes the most crucial factor driving religious transformation. It is yet to be determined whether South Korea's religious institutions will adopt a strategy that strengthens their fundamentalist attributes during this era of de-religionization or if they will undergo transformation in alignment with broader societal changes.

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