Wayne Grudem argued in a 2006 interview that female leaders in the church (especially pastors) are disobeying God’s Word and thus open to “the withdrawal of God’s hand of protection and blessing.”

As Grudem explains, “A woman who serves as a pastor, preaching to both men and women, is disobeying the word of God. There are always negative consequences to that.”

Female leadership, Grudem argues, leads to an erosion of orthodoxy in churches – including misinterpretation of Scripture and lack of trust in the Bible – and an erosion in proper family roles – including lack of male leadership and gender identity confusion among children.

He then provided a specific example of a female preacher who suffered the loss of God’s protection in her life. “Judy Brown … contributed a chapter to ‘Discovering Biblical Equality.’ She was an Assemblies of God pastor of maybe Foursquare, I’m not sure. And she actually, sadly, is in prison in Virginia for attempted murder. It’s tragic.”

When the interviewer asked if Grudem thought “her situation is related to her views about women preaching,” his answer was clear. “In this case, it seems to me there’s an area of disobedience to the command of Scripture regarding male leadership and teaching in the church.”

Conservative evangelicals are often ignorant of the long history of female leaders and preachers in Christian past. And the female preachers they do know about are often viewed as negative examples.

Like Grudem’s story about Judy Brown, female preachers are the feminist
boogeymen (women?) who lead Christians down the slippery slope of gender confusion and even try to murder male pastors by beating them with crowbars (see Brown’s story on the CBMW website).

*World Magazine*, when reporting on the Brown story cautioned readers “it would be wrong to generalize from this case to make conclusions about all evangelical feminists or all female Pentecostal preachers.”

But, at the same time, it emphasized the connection between feminist theology and serious sin.

After describing the Brown story as a “lurid mix of feminist theology, homosexuality and attempted murder,” the article concluded that the Judy Brown case “is more evidence – as if we needed any more – for total depravity and the mystery of iniquity.”

While I certainly can’t contest the legitimacy of tragic stories like Judy Brown, I can contest such stories as normative. The historical record is full of healthy churches who support female leadership, allowing both women and men to fill their pulpit.

Baptists, for example, have supported female preachers since the 17th century.

Baptist historian Carolyn Blevins in “Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America” writes, “The earliest reference to a Baptist female preacher in America was to Catherine Scott, who influenced Roger Williams to establish the first Baptist Church in America in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1639.”

Free Will Baptists ordained female preachers in the early 19th century, followed by American Baptists in the later 19th, Canadian Baptists in the early 20th and (finally) Southern Baptists in 1964.

Blevins admits “women did not hold positions of ministerial leadership in proportion to their membership,” yet she still demonstrates that female leadership has been a consistent part of Baptist history.
“Exercising the freedom of Baptist theology and amid much diversity, Baptist women repeatedly worked to serve God and their society in spite of the resistance they often faced in their own denominations,” Blevins states. “Their contributions to Baptist life range from the pen to the pulpit and from their homes to the other side of the world.”

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Editor’s note: This is the first of a two-part series. Part two is available here.

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