
FOR YOUR INFORMATION

The Ordination of Women

What Are the Issues?

Helen Pearson

When Seventh-day Adventists began seriously to ask the question, "Should we ordain women to the ministry?" we found ourselves facing a number of further questions—and the answers to them were not obvious. The questions were like Russian dolls—once one was opened, there was another inside, again and again and again. Finally the questions were all out, each one staring us in the face, each one looking for an answer. To each question, supporters and opponents of women's ordination have different answers. What follows is a summary of the main answers to the questions on each side—**For** in the left column and **Against** on the right.

What can we learn from the Creation account?

When God created men and women, both were endowed with Godlike qualities, some feminine, some masculine. The creation of Eve from Adam's rib signified equality between the two. The Hebrew word for "helpmeet," attributed to God in His description of Eve, is the same word used elsewhere for God Himself in His relationship to Israel and therefore does not imply subordination. The subordination of Eve was the consequence of the Fall; equality is the ideal for Christians working to reconcile men and women to God.

The order of Creation is significant. This perspective comes from Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12-14, where he suggests that the order and manner of Creation outlines the proper biblical order for relationships between men and women. Man was addressed first by God both after Creation and after the Fall. Therefore, from the beginning, Adam occupied a headship position, with Eve as subordinate and helper. Eve sinned when she left Adam and made decisions without him. The ordination of women as ministers would subvert the order of Creation and also the proper chain of authority in the home and the church. This would threaten God's plan for men and women.

What can we learn from the Gospels?

The life of Jesus is a radical statement in favor of elevating the status of women. At a time when Jewish men thanked God publicly every day that they were not born women, Jesus treated women with respect and dignity. In a day when Jewish men denied the validity of women's testimony in courts of law, Jesus chose a woman to bear the first witness of His resurrection. But Jesus accepted the cultural limitations of His time. He did not call women as apostles—neither did He call slaves or Gentiles. He left it to His church to break down these social barriers.

It is significant that God chose a patriarchal culture in which to reveal Himself. Jesus, who represented "all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9, KJV) came to earth as a man, not a woman. He was the Son, not the Daughter of God. He taught His followers to call God Father, not Mother. Although He broke with many social traditions and initiated and foresaw the end of the Jewish priestly system, He never ordained any women as disciples. Jesus's choice of an all-male apostolic group provides evidence that even in the New Testament order, men were God's choice as leaders of the church. Women were intended to fulfill supportive roles.

Helen Pearson is completing a Master of Philosophy degree in religious journalism at the City University in London. A mother of two, Helen and her husband, Michael, teach at Newbold College, in England.

What can we learn from the Apostle Paul?

Paul's cautions about women participating in worship were designed to guard the reputation of those Christian women whose new liberation in worship was being misinterpreted. He stressed the necessity for mutuality in relationships. Writing of marriage Paul reminded his readers of the responsibilities of both partners, telling them that man is not independent of woman, and that men should give themselves for their wives as Christ gave Himself for the church. Paul worked with women and spoke highly of their contribution to the work of the ministry. He expected that they would participate in worship services, since in some of his letters he told them how to behave when they did. The statement that best summarizes Paul's attitude toward women's roles is found in Galatians 3:28—"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ" (NIV).

Paul asserts in 1 Corinthians 11 that the head of every man is Christ and the head of the woman is the man. This model for the family is a model for the church, too. In the church as in the home, women's essential roles are in the area of support, caring, and nurture. In neither place should women be found in leadership positions. There are superficial contradictions in Paul's Epistles. Paul acknowledged women as fellow-workers in the gospel. He tells the Corinthian women how to dress when they pray and prophesy in church. Three chapters later (chapter 14), he says that women should be silent in church. In his first Epistle to Timothy he tells his young associate that he did not allow women to have teaching authority. It appears, however, that the Pauline position was to allow women to teach but not to have authority over men. The ordination of women in today's world would give them authority over men. This is contrary to the biblical order.

What can we learn from Ellen White?

If Ellen White had been against ordination for women, she would not have advised ordination for physicians, some of whom were women. Nor would she have counseled that women in church work should be set apart by prayer and laying on of hands. When she felt it appropriate, she did not hesitate to outline for male church administrators what course they should take. When pioneer Adventist women served as active preachers and evangelists, there is no record that she discouraged them. In fact she wrote extensively concerning the importance of women's public contribution to the church. She encouraged women to go into ministry and urged that they should be given equal pay. In Australia, she threatened to set aside a fund from her own tithe to pay unpaid women church workers if the conference did not pay them.

Ellen White was never ordained. During her husband's lifetime, she did not preach on Sabbath morning if he was present. She gave no written or public support to the 1881 General Conference motion that recommended that suitably qualified women should be ordained. Although she was "specially charged to protest against arbitrary and overbearing action," she did not join with fellow temperance campaigners in the battle for women's suffrage. Although she encouraged women to participate in the work of the church, her writings suggest that the roles she had in mind for women were those of Bible-worker, health practitioner, and teacher rather than of minister, church leader, or administrator.

What is God like?

The most impressive qualities of God are His creativity and care. He takes people where they are and relates to them in such a way that they move toward His ideal of their own accord. He works with people in the context of their own family and cultural backgrounds and uses these for His purposes. The strength of God lies in His unpredictability and His sure touch. He speaks sometimes from a throne and sometimes from a cross. He expresses His purposes in fiats and edicts as well as in poems and parables. He speaks now through a king, now through a housewife, sometimes through children and angels, beggars and donkeys. He turns values on their heads: "Whoever wants to become great . . . must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (Mark 10:43-44, NIV).

The most impressive qualities of the God of Scripture are His power and consistency. He protects and orders the lives of his people. He rules over an orderly universe. He creates men in His own image to rule over the earth and subdue it. He gives men authority over women and over His church, to initiate, to lead, and to direct. The God of Scripture is the Master of the universe—the same yesterday, today and forever. In His kingdom, all human beings have clearly defined roles. Each person has certainty, clarity, focus—all know who they are and what they should do.

What is the relationship between the Bible and culture?

Human ideas from any culture are inadequate to express the ideas and nature of an infinite and mysterious God. However, in biblical times God allowed His ideas to be expressed in terms of the Bible writers' patriarchal culture. Nevertheless, the Bible suggests that its writers were moving away from the presuppositions of the patriarchal culture in which they lived. The direction of much biblical teaching is away from hierarchical relationships of any kind, including male-dominated hierarchies.

Many of the Mosaic laws gave women more freedom and dignity than that enjoyed by women in other contemporary cultures. In His treatment of women, Jesus moved toward elevating rather than subordinating their status. Paul's willingness to involve women as fellow-laborers and to acknowledge their contribution shows that he had already moved beyond his strict Jewish training, in which they were considered inferior and subordinate to men. Paul's concerns for women's silence and subordination in public meetings were born of a wish to protect their reputation—and the reputation of the church—in the wider society where the liberation of Christian women was likely to be misinterpreted. He was not advocating a permanent subordinate role for women in the Christian community.

To preserve His message, God chose and formed a culture through which He could best communicate His will for mankind. The specific situations chosen and described make God's point directly through the cultural circumstances described in the Scriptures. Communion, footwashing, baptism, and the distinction between clean and unclean meats are examples of cultural practices as valid now as when they were first written about. They still convey truths meaningful to modern society despite the passing of years. Why should cultural understanding of the roles of men and women be any different? If God had so wished, He could have commanded Moses to ordain women priests from among the children of Israel. If Jesus had intended women to be ordained, He could have commissioned women apostles in a patriarchal society. Paul, inspired by the Spirit, could have found ways to give women an equal role in the church at Corinth. But they did not so choose.

Social and sexual hierarchy is a God-given means to combat anarchy and establish order in the family, the church, and the wider society. The stability of social systems, in which well-defined roles give people clear ideas of what is expected of them, depend on this understanding of the social order.

What shall we do when the Bible is silent?

The Bible is God's revelation of Himself and His will. In it, God has given us all the light we need. When the Bible is silent, the church has the opportunity to come to an understanding of the will of God for itself using biblical principles. A similar situation existed when the early church recognized its need for a type of ministry for which the Old Testament Scriptures and the example of Jesus provided no specific precedent. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church developed the ministries of deacons and later elders. Although the Bible depicts slavery as a social reality, Christians—acting on the basis of biblical principles—led the abolitionist movement. From pioneer days, Seventh-day Adventists have used forms of ministry and personnel appropriate to those whom they were serving. Today the Spirit is calling women to ministry and guiding the church to ordain them.

The Bible is God's revelation of Himself and His will. In it, God has given us all the light we need. When Scripture is silent, the church should proceed with caution. It should not do anything without a plain "Thus saith the Lord." Bible study on complex topics requires a careful inspection of those statements that Scripture does provide and an explanation of difficult texts on the basis of those which are clear. While the Bible supports the active participation of women in private and public religious life, it provides no clear mandate for ordaining them to the ministry.

What will happen to the church if women are ordained?

The church is a community of believers—the body of Christ on earth. Its task is to live out in a corporate fashion the message of God for the world. Ordination is the recognition among a group of believers that an individual has the gifts to make a particular contribution to that witness. Those gifted and ordained men and women are thus affirmed (at

The church is a community of Christians with authority to teach the Word of God both inside and outside the community. Ordination is a symbol that an individual has been set aside for the task of teaching the Word of God on the authority of the church. It is the symbol that those chosen have the right to speak for God and the church, and to conduct

least in part by the recognition and support of their community) in their desire and ability to serve the church and the wider world with their varied gifts.

The ordination of women is a step toward wholeness and justice in a church bearing witness to a God who has both male and female qualities. With a ministry including both men and women, the church will be expressing God-given ideals of equality and gender-inclusiveness. As a result, men and women of the world will be attracted to join us. The history of the ordination of women in other Christian communions suggests that it is bad management of the ordination decision rather than the decision itself that creates tensions in churches. The church's maturity and commitment to unity are the most significant factors in determining the success or failure of the decision.

whatever services and exercise whatever roles the church deems necessary to fulfil its mission.

In ordaining women, the church would be moving away from scriptural ideals and therefore away from a position where God can use it effectively. To ordain women is to encourage the erosion of other convictions that may also be seen as culturally determined like the distinction between clean and unclean meats, the sanctity of marriage, even the Sabbath. The ordination of women will open the way for the acceptance of unbiblical positions on other questionable issues like divorce and homosexuality. The history of women's ordination suggests that ordaining women has created disunity and schism in those churches that have adopted the practice.

Conclusion

Now the questions are all out and we are faced with continuing decisions relating to all of them. In 1989, the church's Annual Council of the General Conference Committee considered the subject of women's ordination again. To avoid the dangers of "disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the church," the world representatives decided not to recommend the ordination of women to the General Conference session due to meet in July 1990. Instead, the committee allowed that theologically trained women, ordained as elders and authorized by their divisions, might perform in their own churches all the tasks performed by ordained ministers. It recommended that "those who have, without regard to gender, been recognized as commissioned ministers or licensed ministers may perform essentially the ministerial functions of an ordained minister of the gospel in the churches to which they are assigned." The Annual Council also recorded a list of "thirty significant concerns" on matters other than ordination expressed by women at the 1989 meeting of the Role of Women Commission.

These issues are complex; the discussion is likely to continue. The dilemma it raises challenges all Seventh-day Adventists to know their God, their church, and themselves.

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When the early Christian church also faced a divisive issue without the benefit of a clear scriptural directive, the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) reached a decision, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that allowed the gospel to forcefully move forward. God's Holy Spirit will again guide in resolving this dilemma and help us carry out together the global mission Christ entrusted to all His followers. — *The Editors*

Shalom!

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with Jews, if they agree. First, it can give them the intellectual evidence that God exists because of the way the prophecies of Daniel 2 and 7 have been fulfilled. Daniel 7, in my case, was especially powerful, for the study of the identity of the little horn helped answer many questions I had about Christianity. "If this is the religion of God, why then did they persecute the Jews?" Once I studied those prophecies, however, things became much clearer to me. It really helped me to understand that this persecution was from a power that God specifically condemns. Then,

when I studied the book of Revelation, and saw this same power depicted in the "Christian" Bible, the effect was powerful.

Use Publications

As you begin to study with Jewish people, don't be quick to give them Ellen White's books. While we love her writings, there are concepts and statements in them that Jews may misunderstand

in their initial contacts with us. Later you will find opportunities to share her insight with them.

Other literature, however, is available. *Shabbat Shalom* is the church's outreach magazine for the Jews. Coming out quarterly, this journal is designed to present articles on topics in which Jews are interested, and then, as much as possible, in a way not to offend them, give the principles of truth. It's a low-key approach, but it seems to be working, because the Jews are reading it. If you have a Jewish friend who is willing to listen, talk, and exchange ideas, then

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