

**EQUALITY IN MINISTRY:**  
**The Bible Supports**  
**the Ordination of Women as Local Church Elders**  
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After extensive study on the issue, in 1975 the SDA Church approved the practice of local congregations ordaining women to serve as elders. After further study and using North America as a trial base, the SDA Church in 1984 reaffirmed the official position in favor of the ordination of women as local elders. What were some of the clear Biblical principles that led the world church to approve and affirm this practice?

**1. Gen 1 teaches us that male and female participate equally in the image of God.** "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Gen 1:27).

This basic passage gives no hint of a divine creation order. Here man and woman are fully equal, with no subordination of one to the other. We find that this description of the relationship between man and woman holds throughout Scripture and beyond. No inspired writer—no Moses, Jesus, Paul, or Ellen White—teaches the creation headship of man over woman. Nor has this position ever been accepted in historic Adventism.

Those who oppose the ordination of women ultimately base their argument on the creation headship of man over woman. Their case, however, rests on the fundamental misinterpretation of Gen 1-3.

**2. Gen 2 reinforces Gen 1.** In Gen 2 woman is the climax, the crowning work of creation. She is created from a rib from Adam's side, to show that she is "to stand by his side as an equal" (Gen 2:21-22; PP 46). She is man's 'ezerV negdo ("helpmeet for him," Gen 2:18 KJV), which in the original does not denote a subordinate helper or assistant. Elsewhere in Scripture it is most often God Himself—who is called 'ezer ("helper") (Exod 18:4; Deut 33:7, 26; Ps 33:20; 70:5; 115:9,10,11). The phrase 'ezer V negdo in Gen 2 means no less than an equal counterpart, a "partner" (Gen 2:18, 22 NEB).

Contrary to popular argument, Adam does not name the woman (and thereby exercise authority over her) before the Fall (Gen 2:23). Three points make this clear: (a) The naming formula (with the essential noun "name")—used consistently throughout the O.T. when a superior shows authority over a subordinate (person or animal) by naming him or her (see Gen 2:19-20; 3:20; etc.)—is not present in this passage (even in Gen 35:18, the one alleged exception to the Hebrew naming formula rule, the essential noun "name" (sem) is present in the naming formula in the first half of the verse, and in the Hebrew economy of words need not be repeated in the second half for the meaning to be clear); (b) the word "woman" (issah) is, in fact, not a name or proper noun; (c) the word "woman" appears in the story before she is "called" woman by Adam (vs 22).

In short, Gen 2 contains no creation order subordinating woman to man or restricting her from entering into full equal participation with man in any ministry to which God may call her.

### **3. Subjection or submission of wife to husband comes about only after the Fall.**

A subjection of Eve to Adam is mentioned in Gen 3. God says to Eve: "Your desire shall be to your husband and he shall rule over you" (Gen 3:16). But it is crucial to recognize that the subjection of Eve to Adam comes after the Fall.

Futhermore, it is limited to the husband-wife relationship, and therefore does not involve a general subordination of women to men. This is precisely the consistent interpretation of Ellen White (see especially PP 58-59, IT 307-08, and 3T 484) and The SDA Bible Commentary.

**4. Paul's writings maintain the Gen 1 relationship.** Paul gives much instruction regarding the relationship between husbands and wives. As can be seen in particular by 1 Tim 2:14 (see also 1 Cor 14:34 and PP 58-59), it is ultimately in light of Gen 3:16 that he indicates the "head of a woman is her husband" (1 Cor 11:3) and calls upon wives to "be subject in everything to their husbands" (Eph 5:24). Such passages as 1 Cor 11:3-12, 1 Cor 14:34-35, and 1 Tim 2:11-12 all concern the issue of the submission of wives to their husbands and not of women to men in general. (For a careful analysis of the evidence for this conclusion, see N.J. Hommes, "Let Women Be Silent in Church," Calvin Theological Journal 4 [1959]: 5-22.)

Paul's counsel for husbands and wives cannot be extended to the relationship of men and women in general. The apostle himself shows how the marriage relationship applies to the church. Husband headship in the home is not equated with male headship in the church. Rather, the Husband of the church is Christ, and all the church-including males-are His "bride," equally submissive to Him (Eph 5:21-23).

Paul's statements regarding husbands and wives (in particular, 1 Cor 11:8-9 and 1 Tim 2:13-14) also do not indicate that a "divine order" was operative before the Fall. Paul does indeed refer to creation in discussing the submission of wife to husband. But he does not say that the submissive role was in effect from creation. Often overlooked is the fact that Paul refers not only to creation but also to the Fall as reasons for Eve's submission to her husband (1 Tim 2: 14). If Eve was subjected to Adam partly because she was the first to sin, then that subjection cannot have taken place until after her sin (or else the reason would be meaningless, coming after the fact). Therefore, statements regarding creation order are made with reference to their applicability after the Fall. Paul is in effect arguing that after the Fall, when a submission of one spouse to another was necessary to preserve union and harmony in the home. God chose the husband as "head," because Adam was created first and Eve fell first. In other words, it was only after the Fall that the creation order is relevant for headship in the home. Headship was not prescribed at Creation. This is consistent with the clear statements of Ellen White (especially PP 58-59; 3T 384).

**5. In the Old Testament we see numerous women in leadership roles over men, thus confirming Genesis 1.** Witness Deborah (Judges 4 & 5), one of the judges over the people of Israel-women and men. Witness the leadership role of Miriam (Exod 15:20-21), Huldah (2 Kings 22:13-14; 2 Chron 34:22- 28), Esther, and others (e.g., Exod 38:8; 1 Sam 2:22).

Although in OT Israel there did exist social inequalities for women, reflecting a perversion of the divine ideal set forth in Gen 1, yet nonetheless there are no legal

restrictions barring women from positions of influence, leadership, and authority over men.

Even regarding the priesthood, God's original plan was that all Israel be a "kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:6). Because of Israel's sin, an alternate plan was given in which most men were also excluded—except for one family in one tribe in Israel. Yet in the New Testament the Gospel restores God's original plan. Not a few male priests, but once more the "priesthood of all believers" (1 Pet 2:5,9; Rev 1:6).

**6. Jesus called His people back to the original plan regarding the role of women.** In the NT Jesus Himself set the tone for the Gospel restoration by pointing His hearers to God's original plan "from the beginning" (Matt 19:8). He did not move precipitously, upsetting the very fabric of Jewish culture; He did not ordain women as His immediate disciples, just as He did not ordain Gentiles. But He pointed the way toward the Edenic ideal in His revolutionary treatment and exaltation of women (see John 4:7-30; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:1-3; Matt 15:21-28; John 20:1-18, etc.).

**7. The Gospel ideal is the return to Gen 1.** Paul emphatically declared: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). This is not merely a statement on equal access to salvation among various groups (cf. Gal 2:11-15; Eph 2:14-15). Rather, it specifically singles out those three relationships in which the Jews had perverted God's original plan of Gen 1 by making one group subordinated to another: (1) Jew-Gentile, (2) slave-master, and (3) male-female. By using the rare NT terms "male-female" {arsen-thely} instead of "husband-wife" (aner-gune) Paul establishes a link with Gen 1:27 and thus shows how the Gospel calls us back to the divine ideal, which has no place for general subordination of females to males. Thus, Paul's choice of terminology upholds the equality of men and women in the church, without changing the position of the husband as head of the family.

Within the cultural restraints of his day, Paul and the early church (like Jesus) did not act precipitously. The subordination of Gentiles was difficult to root out (even in Peter! [Gal 2:11-14]). Slavery was not immediately abolished in the church (see Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22; Phm 12; 1 Tim 6:1). Likewise, women did not immediately receive full and equal participation with men in the ministry of the church, although the wide participation of women in the fellow-ministry with Paul (e.g., Priscilla, Phoebe, Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis in Rom 16; Euodia and Syntyche in Phil 4:2,3) set the tone for an eventual completion of the Gospel goal.

Paul's list of qualifications for elders framed in the masculine gender ("husband of one wife" [1 Tim 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9]) does not exclude women from serving as elders any more than the masculine gender throughout the Ten Commandments (Exod 20; see esp vs. 17) exempts women from obedience. Rather, these passages are again upholding the Edenic ideal—the principle of monogamy (Gen 2:24).

God does not speak directly to the question of the ordination of women in the NT, just as He does not deal directly with the abolition of slavery, with vegetarianism, abstinence from alcohol, and many other issues based on principles set forth "from the beginning." But He has given clear Biblical principles to guide our decision-making.

In these last days, when the fullness of the everlasting Gospel is to be preached, God has called His church to return to His original blueprint for every area of our lives: our diet, our day of worship—and the three human relationships mentioned in Gal 3. Our

church has already taken courageous stands against slavery and racial prejudice. God also calls us to return to the Edenic ideal for male-female relationships that allows women equal access to the gifts of the Spirit of ministry (Joel 2:28-30; Eph 4:11-13).

God has heretofore preserved the Seventh-day Adventist Church from extreme views of interpretation. The church has rejected the "relativistic" interpretation that sees divine standards as time-bound, culturally determined, and expendable. At the same time, the church has rejected the "literalistic" interpretation that in the past has used the "divine order" argument to defend slavery and such texts as 1 Tim 2 and 1 Cor 11 to discredit the woman Ellen White. God has again led His world church in the recent decision to approve the ordination of local women elders, guiding us to a position that is faithful to the Bible teachings. Members of PMC can confidently implement this Biblically-sound, officially-endorsed position without further delay.

### **Challenging Questions Biblical Questions**

**Does the fact that Adam was created before Eve (Gen 2) indicate that a headship of man over woman was operative from the beginning?**

No. The creation account in Gen 2 is cast in a literary structure called a "ring construction," in which the creation of man at the beginning of the narrative and the creation of woman at the end of the narrative correspond to each other in importance. The movement in Gen 2 is not from superior to subordinate, but from incompleteness to completeness. Rather than a submission of Eve to Adam's headship at creation, God designed that "in all things she should be his equal" (3T 484). Only after the Fall was the principle of submission to headship introduced, and this was restricted to the wife-husband relationship (Gen 3:16; PP 58-59). Paul's allusions to an order in creation are clearly made with reference to their applicability after the Fall and only to the submission of wife to husband (compare 1 Cor 11:3ff. with 1 Tim 2:14).

Furthermore, Paul uses carefully chosen and rare Greek terminology for "male-female" in Gal 3:28, as opposed to his choice of words which can be translated either "man-woman" or "husband-wife" in 1 Tim 2:12,13; 1 Cor 11:3; 14:34,35. In so doing, he upholds the post-Fall headship-submission relationship of the husband and wife in the home, while maintaining the Gen 1-2 equality of men and women "in all things" as the divine ideal for the church (see "The Bible Supports...", pp. 1,2).

**In the Bible is the home considered the model for the church?**

There are many parallels between the home and the church. But a careful reading of Eph 5:21-23, which is used to prove that the home is the model for the church, shows just the opposite. It is the church and Christ's headship over it which is the role model for the home. Therefore, we should model our husband-wife relationships after the Christ-church model, not vice versa. This means that we should not use the home model to structure the man-woman relationships in the church. To attempt to do so is an inappropriate reversal and backward application of the Biblical model.

### **Does the Bible call elders "fathers," and does that therefore exclude women from being elders?**

No. Paul once refers to himself as a "father" to believers in Corinth (1 Cor 4:15). Perhaps he had been instrumental in their conversion to Christ. But elders were never called "fathers" of the church in the Bible. In fact, Jesus expressly forbids it: "Do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and He is in heaven" (Matt 23:9). Therefore, while a Catholic will refer to his priest as "father," Adventists refer to their leaders as brothers and sisters. And it is precisely as brothers and sisters that the whole church, including leaders, as the family of God looks to God as its Father.

### **Why did not Jesus choose at least one woman to be one of His apostles?**

We might also ask, why did He not choose at least one God-fearing Gentile to be one of His apostles? Bitter biases were common. For example, Samaritans were held in extremely low esteem by the Jews; so in a variety of ways, Jesus sought to counter that bias (Luke 10:33; 17:16; etc.). A master stroke against the prejudice would have been to choose a Samaritan as one of His apostles-or so it appears.

Similarly, women were held in extremely low esteem; so in a variety of ways, Jesus sought to counter that bias (Luke 7:38; John 4:7, etc.). A master stroke against the prevalent bias would have been to choose a woman as one of His apostles-or so it appears. But this final step He did not take. Was there a good reason? Surely. Do we know what it was? No. But it is unsafe to extrapolate an abiding principle of role-relationships from either of these circumstances.

### **Do such passages as 1 Tim 2:11-12 and 1 Cor 14:34-35 support the headship of men over women in the church by insisting that women be silent and refrain from teaching or having authority over men?**

No. These passages are referring to the submission of wives to the headship of their husbands, not the submission of all women to the headship of men. The possible ambiguity arises because in the original Greek the words for "man" and "woman" {aner and gune} are "swing" nouns-they can be translated either "man-woman" or "husband-wife." The immediate context of these passages, and comparison with parallel passages, makes it clear that Paul is dealing here with the wife's submission to her own husband's headship (both in private and in public) and not the submission of all women to all men. 1 Cor 11:3 is a precise parallel to Eph 5:23, where all agree the reference is to husband-wife relationships. Study of first-century Jewish practice further shows that the wearing of the veil described in 1 Cor 11 was a sign of the wife's submission to her husband's authority, not to the authority of all men (see Strack- BiUerbeck, 2:427-429). In light of this evidence, the RSV has correctly translated 1 Cor 11:3: "the head of the woman is her husband [not men in general]." This is the position adopted by The SDA Bible Commentary on this very verse (see SDA BC 6:754).

In 1 Tim 2:11-12, again the issue is the maintenance of proper reverence of wives for their husbands within the first century setting, in which "both Greek and Jewish

custom dictated that women should be kept in the background in public affairs" (SDA BC 6:793). The meaning of 1 Tim 2:11-12 is illuminated by a parallel passage in 1 Pet 3 which follows the very same order of logic and thought. Both passages move from a discussion of women's wearing of jewelry to the question of submission. The wording in 1 Pet 3:5 unambiguously refers to the submission of wives to their husbands and not general submission of women to men. Likewise, the submission of women called for in 1 Tim 2:11-12 and all the other parallel Pauline passages (1 Cor 14:34-35; Eph 5:22-24; Col 3:18; Titus 2:5) is the submission of wives to their husbands. The Williams translation seems to have captured the intent of 1 Tim 2:11-12: "A married woman must learn in quiet and perfect submission. I do not permit a married woman to practice teaching or domineering over a husband; she must keep quiet."

### **What "law" is Paul referring to in 1 Cor 14:34?**

In this passage Paul clearly refers to Gen 3:16, not to the Old Testament as a whole, nor to the New Testament, which had not even been written yet. Only in Gen 3 do we find a divine OT prescriptive commandment regarding the submission of women. More precisely, Gen 3:16 refers to the submission of wives to their husbands, not women to men in general. Likewise, 1 Cor 14:35 refers to husband-wife relations ("let them ask their husbands at home").

This interpretation is widely recognized by Biblical scholars. For example, Krister Stendahl points out that in 1 Cor 13:34 "it is still Gen 3:16 which is alluded to" (The Bible and the Role of Women, p. 29). This is also the position of The SDA Bible Commentary on the "law" of 1 Cor 14:34: "Law. The Scriptures teach that, on account of her part in the fall of man, woman has been assigned by God a position of subordination to her husband (see Gen 3:6,16; Eph 5:22-24; 1 Tim 2:11-12; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet 3:1,5,6...): (SDABC 6:793; emphasis supplied).

### **When 1 Tim 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 include as qualifications that an elder be "the husband of one wife," are women elders thereby excluded?**

Only for the interpreter who would also rule out all widowers, unmarried men, and married but childless men ("must see that his children obey him," 1 Tim 3:4). In the "time and place" in which these texts were written, it was presumed that the candidates for elder would be married men with children. But this was not being prescribed as a commandment.

This idea is especially strengthened when it is noted that a few verses later (1 Tim 3:12) the same phrase, "must be husband of but one wife," is used for the qualifications for a deacon (diakonos); yet in Rom 16:1 Paul makes reference to "our sister Phoebe, a deacon [diakonos] of the church." Bible translators have difficulty translating diakonos in Rom 16:1 because it is a male term used in connection with a female. They usually translate it as "deaconess," or even "servant." But it is clearly the masculine Greek word diakonos that is used. How could there be a female deacon if the "husband-of-one-wife" qualification was to be interpreted in a prescriptive, literalistic manner? It is reasonable to conclude that the "husband-of-one-wife" requirement was meant to rule out polygamy in

a position that was generally held by men (see "Sound Principles...", pp.2,3; "The Bible Supports...", pp. 1,2).

### **How can we know that Gal 3:28 does not refer just to our status before God?**

1. The immediate context in Gal 2:11-13 shows it. Peter had accepted Gentiles as having access to God (Acts 10:34, 44-48), but he had not yet fully accepted them as equal in all things in the life and ministry of the church. Paul rebuked him for this (Gal 2:11), and in this larger context he proclaimed that in Christ there is no Jew nor Greek, free or slave, male or female (3:28).

2. To say that Gal 3:28 speaks only of our status before God violates the comprehensive Biblical context which never divorces belief from practice (e.g.; Jas 2:14-24). While some do mistakenly argue that true religion deals primarily with one's status before God, Scripture never speaks of status with God apart from the essential human response-obedience to God expressed through love to others (Jas 1:27; 1 John 3:16-18; 4:20-21). SDA theology has always stressed this. "Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:21).

3. The SDA Bible Commentary holds that Gal 3:28 "proclaimed a new and glorious freedom in the gospel. That proclamation had in it the seeds of the Christian principle of the dignity of womankind and her release from the low estate in which all women were held in pagan lands" (SDA BC 6:754-55; see also 1:234).

4. Gal 3:28 identifies the three primary social inequalities of the first century-racial (Jew-Gentile), social class (free-slave), and gender (male-female). It proclaimed an equality of status for each of these groups before God, but its proclamation of equality also dealt a mortal wound to social prejudice and the subordination of one group to another among all true believers. The Gal 3:28 principle eventually led the early church to ordain Gentiles as elders. It eventually brought down the institution of slavery in society and racism in the church so that Blacks are now included as ordained elders. And it is now leading in the ordination of women as local elders in the SDA Church.

### **Does our Adventist heritage support the SDA Church's position to ordain women as local church elders?**

SDA Church leaders believe it does. In Ellen White's day many women were active in ministry and church leadership at the local, union, and General Conference levels. She made many appeals for women to be active in both part-time and full-time ministerial work, and thus indisputably considered such involvement to be within the Christian woman's "sphere" and "position." She called for women to engage in ministries that are traditionally considered to correspond to the ministry of elders ("visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor") and appealed to them to be ordained "by the laying on of hands" (RH, July 9, 1985).

Some may interpret Adventist heritage in a different way than our leaders do. But with extensive study, the General Conference Committee felt it was being faithful to our Adventist heritage when in 1975 it approved the practice of congregations ordaining women to serve as local church elders, and in 1984 reaffirmed this position at the Annual Council.

### **Does the theology of ordination as defined by the Bible and the writings of Ellen White support the SDA Church's position to ordain women elders?**

Yes, it does. The formulation of the church's theology of ordination in the early 1970's was a significant factor that led to the 1975 Annual Council's decision to approve the ordination of women elders in the SDA Church.

In a special supplement to the Ministry magazine in 1974 (Supplement 24) titled "A Theology of Ordination: A Seventh-day Adventist Interpretation," Drs. Gottfried Oosterwal and Raoul Dederen presented a thorough Biblical discussion of the subject. Ordination was seen as the church's public recognition, signified by the laying on of hands, that certain of its members have "already received their commission from God Himself" to the ministry of the church (Acts 13:1-3; AA 161-162). Their "commission from God" becomes evident when the church observes the fruits and gifts of the Spirit manifested in their lives.

In the addendum to the "Theology of Ordination" Ministry supplement referred to above, Dr. Dederen addresses "The Ministry of Women." He concludes:

"On the basis of the Biblical concept of the priesthood of all believers, and on the basis of an exegetical study of the relevant scriptural data on the subject which takes into full consideration the entire Biblical tendencies regarding the man-woman relationship, and the role of women in the church, I have been led to conclude that there is no conclusive theological argument to deny the ordination of women to the gospel ministry."

**Thus, the theology of ordination based upon the Bible and the writings of Ellen White contributes to the church's position of encouraging the election and ordination of elders based upon character qualities and evident gifts of the Spirit, regardless of race or gender.**

### **Practical Questions**

#### **How can Bible scholars disagree so strongly on this subject?**

Actually, the disagreement among our Bible scholars is not as pronounced as some would have us believe. A survey conducted by the Institute of Church Ministry revealed that 93 of all SDA college and seminary Bible teachers in North America agree that the church's position to ordain women elders is the Biblical position. It's a nearly unanimous consensus.

#### **Would a vote to ordain women elders be divisive?**

Only for those who would make it so. A vote in favor of women elders should be no more divisive than a vote against them. The church board has set a minimum 60 vote in favor of women elders, to establish a "clear consensus" before implementing this practice. We trust that whichever way the vote goes, advocates of both positions will accept it and remain loyally committed to each other and the PMC mission.

### **Is the church's position approving the ordination of women elders presently being restudied by the General Conference?**

No, it is not. Some have mistakenly confused the issue of women serving as local church elders with the issue of women being ordained to the full-time gospel ministry. But the diardi has dedded upon the former, while still studying the latter. Elder Warren Banfield, Director of the GC Office of Human Relations, has stated it this way: "The ministry, the responsibilities and the authority of the local church elder and the church pastor are not the same. For this reason it is understandable, and I can support the fact, that the church can at the same time delay the decision to ordain women as pastors until further study, while permitting the ordination of women as local elders."

### **Why can't talented women serve the church effectively without being ordained?**

A few dedicated women with unusual gifts of preaching and leadership have been given the opportunity to serve their church. But the very scarcity of women leaders at the local church level testifies to the restraining effect of the lack of a recognition mechanism for women in ministry. In this age of credentials and formal recognition, a woman without the official approval of her church will be handicapped in effective service.

### **Why not just be safe and ordain women to other ministries than the ministry of elders?**

We have no authorized policy in the SDA Church that would encourage such. SDA theology and policy suggest that for the same reasons we ordain men in the local church as deacons and elders, we need to ordain women as deaconesses and elders. The SDA church today no longer makes a distinction on the basis of gender. To attempt at this point to create alternate ordained ministries for women seems to us to perpetuate the same sort of "separate-but-equal" reasoning which made racism so insidious and difficult to root out of the church.

When qualified members, regardless of race or gender, bear evident fruits that God has called, gifted and commissioned them to the very same ministries that the church considers the ministry of local church elders, then it is the church's privilege and duty to recognize this calling by ordination. This is the very meaning and purpose of ordination.

### **Would ordaining women as elders abolish role distinctions between men and women in the church and the home?**

When men help in the kitchen or with vacuuming at home, it doesn't abolish role distinctions. Neither does it when women serve the church as elders. In either case, men

are still men and women are still women. But it is to the benefit of both home and church when men and women share as partners assisting one another in both spheres. Serving the church as local elders will not take women out of the home or away from their children. It will rather add their special gifts to the elders' council and enrich the ministry of the church.

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