

PART IV

The Table of the Future

We Believe

We believe that the biblical basis for ordaining women as reflected in this document is true to Scripture.

We believe that the Bible, taken as a whole, liberates women as well as men to equality, full participation in the life and ministry of the church, and exercise of spiritual gifts.

CHAPTER 14

A Table Prepared

by Iris M. Yob

"He has taken me to the banquet hall, and His banner over me is love" (S. of Sol. 2:4).

When God sets the table, the event becomes a banquet, the meal becomes a feast, and the guest list encompasses the world! The invitations read: "Come, **all** you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (Isa. 55:1).* No one is turned away hungry or thirsty, or lonely or despairing. There is acceptance and nourishment and opportunity for all.

The work of God is a welcoming work, a nurturing work, a necessary work. As the Good Shepherd, God "prepares a table before [us] in the presence of our enemies" (Ps. 23:5). As wisdom, God "has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table" (Prov. 9:2). As our heavenly Lover, "He has taken [us] to the banquet hall, and His banner over [us] is love" (S. of Sol. 2:4). As our Father, we ask Him to "give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11). We can come to God as our Mother, "nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts;... drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance" (Isa. 66:11). Jesus said "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35) and "living water" (John 4:10). Until time ends, we will celebrate the redemptive love of God by gathering around the table set with the symbols of bread and wine.

Everyone who has had opportunity to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:8), becomes a table servant, waiting on others as they satisfy the hunger of their souls. Whenever the master sees that there is still room at his table, he tells his servants, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full!" (Luke 14:23). In this way, the table of welcome is also a table of service, a table of ministry. Just as surely as there is a *place of grace* set for every individual regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, and social or political power, so there is a *place of ministry* set for all. Inspired with the goodness of God, some will perform this ministry privately, others publicly. Some will be recognized by the church as specially gifted and delegated to this work full time by the laying on of hands. Given the inclusiveness of the invitation to *come and eat* at the table of the Lord, our knowledge of the all-encompassing love of God compels us to see that the invitation to *come and serve* is just as inclusive.

In this collection of readings, the writers celebrate this compelling, inclusive love. They recognize that from the beginning, a place has been set for women in the service of God, embodying the many ministries empowered by the gifts of the Spirit.

These writers cherish the Word of God. They demonstrate their dependence on Scripture by delving into its texts with care, thoroughness, and honesty. They reveal their confidence in the integrity of its message by approaching it as the inspiration of God. Although it is expressed in human words and preserved with the limitations of the grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and semantics of ancient languages and mind-sets, they discern that Scripture consistently invites women and men to abundant life and willing service throughout the years of salvation history.

Moreover, these writers value the faith that has come to them from their Seventh-day Adventist heritage. They respect the struggles of the pioneers, the foundation stones laid by early church leaders, and the efforts and accounts of its faithful members through the years. And they alert us to the possibility that the faith once committed to humankind is not dead but alive to possibility. Like the faith of those who have gone before, our faith may be completed and perfected as we better grasp the full impact of its promises.

From the first family, across the millennia of the Old Testa-

ment, throughout the Christian era, and into the Advent movement, they show us how places at the table of service have been occupied by both women and men. They remind us that we are fundamentally one in Jesus Christ—one in redemption, one in calling, one in service, one in hope.

At Creation, we are told, male and female together-in mutuality, relationship, reciprocity, equality, correspondence-made up the image of God. Both were entrusted with dominion over the earth—to be students, governors, and gardeners. They found fulfillment, completeness, and companionship in each other. According to Genesis 2, God made an earthling, *'adam*, to care for the earth, *ha 'adama*, from which this creature was made. The single human was, for all intents, undifferentiated until man, *ish*, met the one like him, woman, *ishshah*, and the two united to be again "one flesh." "At last I see me!" said the *'adam*, "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). Eve was brought to Adam as his helper, his companion, his partner, in every way comparable to him. In Paradise, two mutual beings comprised humanity, beings equal in their humanness, their calling, their privileges, their responsibilities, and their relationship with each other.

In Genesis 3, we are shown, they were also equal in vulnerability and accountability. Eve showed initiative, however misdirected it was, but was not reproved for that. Adam followed her lead in accepting and eating what was forbidden, but was not reproved for failing to control her. Rather, they both were equally insecure and ashamed, estranged and afraid, defensive, evasive, and blaming, and they and their heirs both endured the consequences of their fatal choices. Equal in sorrow, equal in mortality, equal in need of salvation. And both carry within their natures what has been called "congenital flaws"—Eve and her daughters exhibit their tendency to sin by jeopardizing their personhood in acquiescing to man; Adam and his sons in controlling woman. Woman's subordination to man and man's presumed authority over woman are the results of sin in the world, threats to human survival and happiness to be resisted as surely as the hard ground with its thorns and thistles.

The great drama of human history began with perfection. Then humanity fell into sin, but yet is offered redemption. At the moment of exclusion from the Garden and the tree of life also

came the promise of restoration: "I [God] will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15). As the consequences of their choice became immediately apparent, so too the plan of salvation became effective. Redemption, we are reminded, is the restoration of the right relationships between God and humanity—its vertical dimension—and of the right relationships among people—its horizontal dimension. The essential vision of man and woman is fulfilled in us when human existence again comes close to the Edenic ideal of living, loving, and working together, by the grace of God.

Throughout the era of the Old Testament, through the ages of the patriarchs, judges, kings, and prophets, our writers recall place settings for women as well as men called to the service of God in significant ways. We see the liberated Hebrews on the shores of the Red Sea led by Miriam in praise after their rescue from the pursuing Egyptians. We watch as the prophetess Deborah holds court to settle disputes among God's people under the palm tree between Ramah and Bethel. We observe how the captain of Israel's army begs her to come with him when he goes out to engage the enemy. We hear the shouts of the army after she fortifies their courage. We note the words of her victory song, which commemorates the brave deeds of the army and of Jael, the woman into whose hands God delivered the enemy leader: ". . . when the people willingly offer themselves—praise the Lord!" (Judges 5:2). We see the prophetess Huldah fearlessly proclaim judgment and hope to Josiah, the king, and watch how he turns the whole nation again to God with her words ringing in his ears. And there are other women scattered through this history who risked much, believed strongly, and hoped always as leaders and liberators of the people of God.

The most compelling invitation to women for ministry was given by Jesus. Our writers point out that among those itinerating with Him were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, who not only learned from Him, but also supported His work out of their own substantial resources. Some women were privileged disciples—Mary, who sat at His feet as He opened truth to her; the Samaritan woman who learned from Him that He was the Promised One; Mary and the other women who were first to see the resur-

rected Lord and carry the good news to others. In discipling women in these ways, Jesus protested the restrictions that excluded women from temple, from Torah, and from leadership roles. He was establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth in its radical inclusiveness. By His actions He ensured that these women met the primary prerequisites of disciples and apostles: they were learners and witnesses—firsthand and personal—in His life and teachings, and they shared what they discovered.

The early Christian church, those first generations to inherit the good news of Jesus, boasted a host of welcoming places for women. We are reminded that at Pentecost, the tongues of fire did not discriminate between the genders. The power of God fell on both men and women who gathered in that place to wait on God. The gifts of the Spirit—wisdom, preaching, faith, healing, miracle-working, prophecy, tongues, ministry, teaching, leading, compassion, exhortation, generosity—were given to the men and women of the church in abundance. Among the women to be graciously gifted was Dorcas, a disciple; Lydia, a church leader, along with other women in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens; Phoebe, a deacon and overseer; the four daughters of Philip, prophets; Junta, an apostle; Priscilla, a teacher-evangelist; and Mary, Narcissis, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Perpetua, Helena, Macrina, Nonna, Marcella, Monica, Anthusa, Paula, and a host of others, all valued church workers. A full banquet table indeed.

The New Priesthood

As our writers explain, for these first Christians, the concepts of "priesthood" and "ministry" took on new meaning in the light of the cross. The old priesthood restricted to the male descendants of Levi was supplanted by the "priesthood of all believers," and the privilege of "ministry" was understood to be the responsibility of all to "serve" the church and foster its mission in the world. Ordination to service was implied at baptism, and the laying on of hands was simply an additional act chosen by the community to show affirmation and support for particular ministries. *Disciple, apostle, missionary, deacon, evangelist, elder*—these were terms that came into usage over time, often indicating interchangeable

and overlapping roles, and frequently applied to the service of both men and women. By these understandings, the first person to "minister" or "serve" in the New Testament was Mary, the mother of Jesus, who declared herself to be a "servant of the Lord."

Paul made sure there was room at the table for ministering women. According to several of our writers, he understood that the old categories dividing the family of God were out of place in the Christian community—Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. Women were significant among his converts, his home-church gatherings, and his co-workers. We have learned that the congregations that heard him talk of what we have translated as "headship" did not hear him talk about "authority," "control," or "superiority" of men over women, but understood him to be talking about "life-source"—a remarkable affirmation of the connectedness of all life in God. The women who heard him say they should be silent in church were not the women gifted with the power to preach, prophesy, or teach, but more likely the women who were newly learning the discipline of reverence and worship in church at a time when Gnostic and other belief-practices were threatening to make church life chaotic. The members who heard him speak of submission in the family were not being reminded of the hierarchical power structures in the homes of their social and cultural neighbors, but about mutual submission in Christ, love and respect for one another, caring relationships, and the mystery of mutuality that comes from being "one flesh in Christ."

Succeeding generations of Christians did not always hold onto the full significance of redeemed relationships among human beings until Martin Luther began to reclaim the welcome table by reaffirming the fundamental principle of the "priesthood of all believers." And in this respect, among others, several writers show how the Seventh-day Adventist Church is also heir to the truth that men and women have direct access to God and personal responsibility before God. Ellen White, the most influential of the early Adventist church leaders, embodied this fundamental in her own life's work. As a woman, she was also a preacher, a teacher, and a leader. In her public writing and speaking, she urged the church to appoint willing, consecrated women to various ministries. She proposed that they should be set apart for this work by prayer and

the laying on of hands, and that since this was their duty before God these women should be paid from the tithe as were their male counterparts. In fact, she even recalled the Edenic ideal of mutuality when she wrote that God intended from the creation of the world that men and women should be together in ministry.

Others in her day also worked to make a place for women in the public ministry of the church. Church leaders as early as 1871 and again in 1881 brought the proposal to the General Conference session that women should be trained, licensed, ordained, and supported from the tithe funds to participate in teaching the word of God. In General Conference sessions since then, others have brought the same proposal before church leadership. Distinguished leaders during the early years of the church, such as Uriah Smith, J. N. Andrews, James White, and G. C. Tenney, wrote articles supportive of public roles for women in the church. Many others have added their voice since then. Numerous women through the years have taken their place at God's table by undertaking to preach, evangelize, and administer the church in various capacities. We have read in these pages of Lulu Wightman, the most outstanding evangelist of her day in New York state, and Sarah Hallock Lindsey, Sarepta Irish (Mrs. S. M. I.) Henry, Anna M. Johnson, Ellen Edmonds Lane, Julia Owen, and Helen May Stanton Williams—all recognized as ministers. Between 1884 and 1915 the years when Ellen White was a strong advocate of women in pastoral roles at least 28 women held ministerial licenses, and to the best of our knowledge at least 53 were so credentialed up to 1975 and probably more than that number, since many records were inaccurate or have been lost altogether.

Today, Seventh-day Adventist women who have been gifted by the Spirit and called by God have trained for ministry and are serving the church in various capacities. World-wide, a clear majority of those women who serve as administrators of church departments, pastors, chaplains, and Bible instructors have indicated that the ordination of women is appropriate. Add to their witness the testimony of countless numbers who have responded appreciatively to the sensitive leadership these women have brought. In many ways they have undertaken the kind of pastoral services that women can best perform, as Ellen White predicted they would.

Their work and witness testify to the church that we can affirm them in their endeavors, publicly approve their role, and value their contribution by confidently ordaining them to the ministry to which they have dedicated their lives.

From the foundation of the world, the banquet table has been set. There are places reserved for all, in salvation, in spiritual giftedness, and in service. God's invitations are always wide open. God's empowerings are always unrestricted and unlimited. God's callings are always surprisingly broad and wonderfully indicative of the extent of redemption's reach. With rejoicing, God receives women and men into all the privileges of salvation. With gratitude, the church can recognize and validate all God's calls to ministry. With humility and joy, women and men can take their place together at the welcome table—the table of inviting grace, the table of responsive service.

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*All Scripture is quoted from the New International Version.

