

THE ROLES OF WOMEN

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Introduction and Overview

The Biblical Research Institute (BRI) of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has been involved since 1972 with committees, councils, and research papers on the roles of women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. At times they were encouraged to believe that the papers written on the subject could be published for the benefit of concerned individuals within the church and the information of similar persons outside the membership of the church.*

Until the present time there have been various factors which have led the administrative leadership of the church to postpone such publication. The general reason given for the reluctance to publish was the fear that certain countries in the world family of Adventist churches would be embarrassed, if not offended, by actions that could result in placing women in leadership roles in the church, the home, the school, or the family.

Persons or organizations hearing of the existence of these papers could purchase copies from the Biblical Research office. Some copies have been distributed under these terms. Now the BRPs Administrative Committee has voted to publish this set of papers. The following provides an overview of them so that the reader may better anticipate their contents.

One of the issues receiving the attention of Christian churches in the past fifteen years has been the roles that the women of these churches can best fulfill. This subject is of particular concern to those women who feel that they have been, or are, prevented from carrying out certain roles in the church, for which they believe they have a competency or a potential capacity. Others share their concern.

It is of interest also to those—both men and women—who are aroused by present-day agitation in society for women to be freely admitted to those areas from which custom and tradition have hitherto excluded them. Such persons want to know whether and how the church is affected by, and is relating to, this general movement in society—how it is treating its women. For many, the church's profession of Christ is judged on this issue.

It is also of interest to those in the church—both the leadership and the general membership—who have a genuine interest in all those elements making up the total church, and who sincerely desire and urge that such shall have every opportunity to contribute their full potential to the completion of the church's mission in the world. Discerning leaders who believe in the NT concept of the “priesthood of all believers” have been asking themselves if they have adequately sensed and thoughtfully related to the fact that at least 60 percent of those “believers” are women—and in many

*Although this set of papers was basically completed in 1975, it is felt that their publication has value for the church living in the eighties.

local and smaller congregations they may make up 75 to 90 percent of the membership.¹

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has always seen itself as a reforming body, one that is interested in the fullest potential of men and women, boys and girls, everywhere. It has had a worldwide vision that has courageously leaped many barriers to the communication of the gospel message. It is encouraged by its outreach to more races, tribes, and languages than possibly any other single Protestant body in the world.

It has traditionally carried a great burden for the health of the family as an institution—the foundation unit of society and the church. This is reflected in its system of weekly Sabbath Schools, and its complete system of day schools (many K-12) and other aspects of its educational outreach. Those women who have opportunity for marriage, home, and family, and desire its joys and responsibilities, have always been urged by Adventists to consider that sphere the most sacred and influential that they could occupy.²

Some demographic factors of today, however, challenge the church to reassess the family situation and reconsider the roles which the women of the church might fulfill. For example, within the membership of the Adventist Church—for a number of reasons—outnumbering of men by women in the general population is particularly marked. Unfortunately, no available demographic studies provide statistics; but a fair estimate might be, as mentioned above, that there could be twice as many women as men in the church. The disproportion could be even more marked away from the large denominational centers.³

Marriage and family within their own faith are therefore not available to thousands of Adventist women. This fact needs to be considered by those who note that the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy both stress woman's calling in the home and family—that there she is queen. One has neither to deny nor diminish the sacredness of the role of wife and mother when admitting the plain, undeniable fact that this particular calling is available to only a limited proportion of Adventist women, especially in some countries, and more particularly in some areas of those countries.⁴

It is a fact, also, in the industrialized nations at least, that women complete their family role much earlier in life than ever before, and yet they are living longer than ever before—outliving men in general almost everywhere. So it is not uncommon today—with the diminishing number of children whom parents find that they can adequately support and educate—

¹See LaVonne Neff, "The Role of Women in American Protestantism, 1975" (chap. 9 in this volume).

²See Betty Stirling, "Society, Women, and the Church," 3T 483; WM 158 (chap. 10 in this volume).

³See E. Marcelle Anderson, "The Roles of Women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: A Study of E.G. White Writings" (chap. 8 in this volume).

⁴Anderson.

for the wife to have 20 to 30 years between the close of her child-rearing responsibilities and her years of complete retirement. And for the most conscientious, it is a serious and significant issue as to what they shall do with these afternoon and evening years of life. There is so much that they could and would like to do in the church.⁵

It is likewise a fact today that wage scales virtually assume that the wives in families will be wage earners in addition to the husbands. The relentless pressures of high interest rates and other economic factors give little prospect of relief in the foreseeable future to the need for wives to work, if a reasonable standard of living is to be maintained.

Thus the church of today should take measure of the fact that women in general are thinking more and more in terms of a career, with marriage and family as a possible element or interlude in that career. The church may need to be more aware of this fact and consider how best to use this new situation to the better fulfillment of the church's urgent mission.

There may be some Adventist women caught up in the strong feelings of certain segments of the women's liberation movement in some countries (and again there are no valid studies to cite), but it does not seem as though the majority are directly involved or more than mildly concerned from a personal point of view. This may not be as true for those under 30, and that could be a factor in the near future.

There was a persistently voiced conviction—even on the part of non-supporters of “liberation”—that wage discrimination (overt or covert) against women in the church's employ constituted a denial of the basic sense of justice and fairness which should mark all Christian transactions. But the church has taken steps to bring itself into line with national wage policy. Discrimination that is based on sex alone never enhances the church's image.

It remains an indisputable fact, however, that women have had little or no role in the decision-making functions of the church. There are those also (some women as outspoken as some men) who declare that this is as it should be because, they say, it is just not in a woman's nature to weigh matters objectively and to be able to reason and debate without deep emotion and personal involvement.

Then a whole battery of premises begins to be invoked at this point—the woman is supposed to be subservient to the man; no woman was ever called to be a priest, nor head of a tribe in Israel, nor an apostle of Jesus Christ; nor were they to speak out in church; therefore!—and the conclusions drawn have been interesting both for content and variety. Even the fact that all three Persons of the Godhead are spoken of in the masculine gender in the Scriptures is seen to have some bearing on the limitations of what a woman can do in the service of God (although no one quite wants to attribute “maleness” to the Persons of the Godhead).

There is a factor that needs to be considered carefully by the church as it continues to study the whole question of women's roles—that is that

⁵ Ibid.

the leadership of the worldwide church tends to run in the 45-65 age bracket, and that factor governs the background against which leadership attitudes toward the roles of women have developed. To fail to be appropriately responsive, however, to reasonable concerns of women is to risk a deepening loss of credibility in church leadership on the part of the “under-thirties.”⁶

So where does this leave us in the search for legitimate, scriptural, appropriate, permissible, or tolerated roles for women in the church? If we survey the OT, we find a mixed status for women after Eden. A Hebrew woman had some rights to call her own (she fared better than her contemporary “Gentile” woman). She was under the jurisdiction, and therefore protection, of her father or husband (and possibly her owner in some cases). Given a bill of divorcement even for a trivial reason, she was returned to her father's jurisdiction unless marriage should come again.⁷

It is Graeco-Roman world against which the times of Jesus and the apostles must be seen. Jewish women may have been better off in some respects, but the way Jesus related to women was quietly revolutionary—likewise for Paul, even in declaring that in Christ “there is neither male nor female” (Gal 3:28, RSV).⁸ The fuller development of this concept had yet to be fulfilled—as with “neither Jew nor Greek, ... neither slave nor free.” These were then ideals, not realities, even “in Christ Jesus.” But they pointed toward a goal For in Christ Jesus, “you are all sons of God, through faith” (vs. 26, RSV). Perhaps the full weight of these words has yet to be perceived and translated into the restored partnership not only of husbands and wives, but of men and women.⁹

Could it be then that the message and the example of Jesus were intended to restore the partnership of man and woman as it was before sin? Genesis 1:27 and 5:1-2 declare the unity, the oneness, the partnership of the male and female within generic mankind. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them. and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created” (RSV).¹⁰

Adam and Eve were first male and female, then husband and wife. It was after sin that the woman as wife was told, “he shall rule over you” (Gen

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See Kenneth Vine, “The Legal and Social Status of Women in the Pentateuch” (chap. 2); Jerry Gladson, “The Role of Women in the Old Testament Outside the Pentateuch” (chap. 3).

⁸ See Julia Neuffer, “First-Century Cultural Backgrounds in the Greco-Roman Empire” (chap. 4); Walter F. Specht, “Jesus and Women” (chap. 5).

⁹ See Frank B. Holbrook. “A Brief Analysis and Interpretation of the Biblical Data Regarding the Role of Woman” (chap. 7).

¹⁰ See Gerhard F. Hasel, “Man and Woman in Genesis 1-3” (chap 1); also Fritz Guy, “Differently But Equally the Image of God” (chap. 11).

3:16, RSV). In the biblical picture of the man-woman relationship, it is significant that most often the subordination factor was presented in the context of the marriage relationship. It is illuminating to see how often God called a woman to sacred leadership—interestingly in the prophetic role more than others. What Jesus did for women and allowed them to do for Him (Paul likewise) is highly challenging. One could justifiably see in these relationships a pointing toward a greater partnership relationship between men and women in the Lord, just as there was also a pointing to a diminution of the distinctions between Jew and Gentile, slave and master, in Christ.

Here it could be highly informative to note in what ways the apostolic church dealt with these three relationships and what their vicissitudes have been since. Has the worldwide Christian church really emancipated the slave? What is the tolerance quotient of Christians toward Jews? And how far has the church come from more primitive attitudes toward women? It is the writings of Paul that are invoked most by those who feel that the limited role a woman plays in the church is a matter of divine commandment. And it is true that some strong prohibitions are laid upon the woman in a few Pauline expressions, especially if taken in isolation from context, or generalized without consideration of other relevant statements. One has to consider also whether prohibitions called for in the NT setting were intended to be universal principles. Frequently there are time and place factors that demand consideration.

How carefully, then, are all the words of Paul concerning women considered? For example, if Christ declared of Himself, "But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27, RSV), and Paul states that a husband is to love his wife the way Christ loves the church, who really is subservient to whom in the marriage? Are the constraints in the marriage relationship to be carried into church life without modification? Is the man-woman relationship in the church identical to the husband-wife relationship?

There were some problems in the Corinthian church in general and some especially involving women. They were departing in some particular ways from the acceptable patterns of womanly conduct in the Christian assemblies, and Paul was addressing the problems without describing them exactly. He was answering some inquiries from anxious people in the Corinthian church; but we do not have their questions, and it is hazardous to generalize from an attempted assessment of the answers only.

We can read Paul as silencing women in the assembly forever and everywhere (1 Cor 14:34-36; Eph 2:11-15). But if we will be fair to Paul, we must also point in the Corinthian letter to ch. 11:13-16 where he is reminding the Corinthians of the conditions and/or customs to be met by a woman who would pray or prophesy (vs. 5) in the assembly of the saints. And that is not only the same apostle writing to the same church, but it is testimony within one letter.¹¹

¹¹See Sakae Kubo, "An Exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and Its Implications" (chap. 6); also Holbrook; Specht.

Apart from scriptural injunction (to which only elementary allusion has been made here), it is extremely difficult to filter out all the sociological influences that have affected the thinking and attitudes of each human being—of each church member. What impact do all these strands of influence from the past have on our reading the Bible?

In the Seventh-day Adventist Church organization women have served effectively in such roles as nurses, secretaries, and teachers. Bible instructors, welfare leaders, Sabbath School teachers, literature evangelists—no question. But in management, as members of boards or commissions—seldom. On local, union, or General Conference committees—a sprinkling. One may wonder why. Has the womanly approach to issues nothing to offer? Should her difference from man be seen as inferiority? Is that Christ's view? The "priesthood of the believer" concept is limited, in women, to the more supportive roles. Where leadership roles are concerned, the priesthood of all believers is limited to males. And yet Peter gives no intimation of such a limitation. (See 1 Pet 2:5, 9.)

In this respect it is interesting to contemplate denominational history. Women were quite frequently treasurers and departmental leaders in conferences—local, union, and general—more so than today. Not a few carried a fruitful pastoral and evangelistic role—short of conducting a baptism—even though they labored under some other designation. One wonders why the retrogression since then. Were there problems or was it just that more men were getting theological training?

It is pertinent to consider the role of the best-known woman among Seventh-day Adventists—Mrs. Ellen G. White. Some might wish to minimize the significance of her being a woman since the call to a prophetic ministry among us was first given to two men—one of them "a mulatto"—before Ellen Harm on was called. Should this fact be understood to show that God would have preferred a man? Or should it be presented to show that God was equally willing to call a woman? Might it even be used to show the greater willingness of a woman to bear the cross involved?

Be that as it may, this church has been taking various readings on this question of the roles of women during the past five or ten years. And invariably the question of ordaining women to the ministry seems to become the focal point at issue. And what the church, through the Annual Councils of 1973 and 1974 and the Spring Meeting of 1975, has so far decided on that question is "indicated" in the following:

VOTED, 1. That we continue to recognize "the primacy of the married woman's role in the home and family, as repeatedly emphasized in the Scriptures and the Spirit of Prophecy. . . ." (1974 Annual Council actions, page 13, paragraph 5), and that

We also recognize that there are many women in the church without family responsibilities who are capable and free to dedicate their full time to the service of the church in many spheres and on many levels.

2. That we agree that potential leadership roles, on all levels of administration not requiring ordination to the gospel ministry, be open

to suitably qualified women whose home and family responsibilities make this possible.

3. That, therefore, we request church and institutional administrators on all levels to make continuing efforts to place qualified women, as well as men, in the categories of work referred to in the preceding paragraph.

4. That the way be opened for women elected to serve as deaconesses in our churches to be ordained to this office and that the Church Manual Committee be requested to give study to a statement of the qualifications of deaconesses and suggestions in regard to a suitable ordination service.

5. That in harmony with the spirit and intent of paragraph 3 of the Annual Council 1974 action (pages 12-14) the greatest discretion and caution be exercised in the ordaining of women to the office of local elder, counsel being sought in all cases by the local conference/mission from the union and division committees before proceeding.

6. That we recognize that the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church provides precedents for women to fill roles of leadership. However, on the matter of the ordination of women to the gospel ministry we believe that the world church is not yet ready to move forward. Therefore, until this question becomes clearer we recommend that every endeavor be made to use women in the numerous positions many of them are well qualified to fill.

7. That we further recognize the considerable contribution that women have made to the church as Bible instructors and in other soul-winning capacities, and recommend that where Bible instructors or other women with suitable qualifications and experience are able to fill ministerial roles, they be assigned as assistant pastors, their credentials being missionary license or missionary credential. (1975 Spring Meeting actions, p. 153.)

As the church looks at the broader aspects of the roles of women, it is interesting to contemplate that for nearly 90 years the church has had inspired counsel to set apart by prayer and the laying on of hands selected women who could give leadership in a type of welfare-deaconess lay role.¹² The church has yet to implement this counsel.

In 1898 and 1899 the church was counseled that (a) a woman who engaged in soul-winning work, and (b) a minister's wife working with her husband (making satisfactory arrangements for the care of their children) should be paid separately in addition to the salary of her husband.¹³ This counsel, generally, has yet to be implemented.

The church was instructed that women, as well as men, were to be called as physician-pastors or pastor-physicians. In fact, women were to be preferred as physicians ministering to women. Physicians showing the

¹² RH, July 9, 1895.

¹³ See Ev 491-93.

Lord's call to medical missionary work in soul winning and spiritual responsibility were to be ordained as ministers (no exclusion of women ever implied). But Adventists have apparently no greater proportion of female physicians than the world around them.¹⁴

Is it conceivable that if Adventists had followed the inspired counsel on the roles of women in these three areas 85 years ago they might have been led into further areas during the remaining 20 years of Mrs. White's life? In any case, had they been obedient to the light given, would they not have been so far in advance of the "liberation" movement that it could have lost its appeal? There might well have been no basis for government agencies to accuse Adventists of discrimination.¹⁵

The ordination of women to the ministry is an integral part of the present context, even if an individual's personal preferences would not include it. Let it be noted at the outset that inspired writers, ancient and modern, nowhere explicitly discuss the matter of ordination of women. Neither are there examples or principles that would have the same weight as explicit divine prohibition or endorsement today. There are favorable arguments that some would deduce from certain considerations, but there are countering arguments.¹⁶

It is, however, a serious matter for the church to consider that able, humble, and earnest young women present themselves as college or seminary candidates for degrees in theological and ministerial training and some of them claim to have heard the call of the Lord to the ministry. As with all callings, the church has to weigh such a conviction most carefully, lest it be out of touch with leadings of the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, as with men, the church has to be able to recognize the call of the Lord that the ministerial candidate claims. A conference committee has to be able to extend a call. Churches or institutions have to be ready to welcome the candidate. There would need to be additional General Conference internships available to young women, or at least discrimination removed from present general practice.

Annual Council actions have taken the position that the whole world field should be open to calling women as ministers before they could be called to any part of the field. Who could not agree that it would be ideal for the world field to be united on the proposal at the outset? On the other hand, we make regional or divisional distinctions on other matters of church polity. (The position on the wedding ring is an example.)

Some might ask why anyone should have to contend his or her way into the ministry. It does not seem ideal to think of urging one's way into the ministry; but, on reflection, one must note that men now in church leadership may have done so. Since history is replete with accounts of the struggles of women to break into male-dominated callings and professions, the ministry might be no exception.

¹⁴See MM 246; CH 524

¹⁵See Anderson.

¹⁶See Raoul Dederen, "A Theology of Ordination" (chap.12).

But again—why women in the ministry? Perhaps it is because women sense that in the Seventh-day Adventist Church acceptance to the ministry of even a few women would symbolize their complete acceptance to partnership with the men of the church.

But today it is asked, Should we risk splitting the church over the question of ordination of women? Or even splitting a few congregations? These are solemn questions. Unity is the supreme evidence to the world of the reality of the church's spiritual contact with Jesus Christ (John 17:21) and should be of the highest priority in church objectives. But is the unity of the Adventist Church fragile enough to be shattered by this matter?

With all the hurdles between women and the ministry, perhaps only a handful of candidates would even wish to make the attempt to gain acceptance (especially if as many as 100 men were waiting to be placed after all regular quotas had been filled). They could be placed only when a combination of persons would be willing to provide the necessary openings.

In other areas and on other issues the church has been willing to conduct a pilot program, to experiment. This particular experiment would be quite involved and could be fraught with disappointment. (Many men, however, have found that the call to the ministry did not work out for them, and they had to adapt to a different vocation.) But one wonders, Could the church consider a pilot program for women in the ministry? If it were tried for five years, there could then be presented to an Annual Council a realistic recommendation on this subject. A door of opportunity could thus be opened without leaving it untended.

The above observations, tied to the work done over a period of several years by the BRI and an associated study committee, provide the consensus of those involved that there is neither theological mandate for nor objection to ordination of women to any level of responsibility for which ordination is indicated. At the same time it is recognized that the church has to be led of the Spirit into such new areas and the BRI has neither desire nor intention to become the prime or sole advocate. The BRI sees its responsibility to be that of giving church leadership the benefit of the trained scholarship of the church. How to share such knowledge with the church at large and how and when to move is seen as the responsibility of church leaders at all levels.

There is a factor that carries weight with all followers of Jesus Christ. It is that while each member of the church has freedom in Jesus Christ, he or she will be willing to restrict that freedom in the interest of the mission and unity of the church, which is Christ's body. So personal preferences and viewpoints will always be held in subservience to the goals of the gospel commission.

On one other aspect of the matter the BRI and its standing committees have been clear, and that is that the full potential of the women and the men of this church for a finished task has yet to be harnessed and endowed with “latter rain” power. For that climactic development we work and pray.

