

Ministers-Both Male and Female?

by Bernard E. Seton

THE QUESTION of ordaining women will be resolved satisfactorily only by searching the Scriptures. The subject has come to the forefront of the ecclesiastical stage only recently, but it has always been present in the wings, awaiting a propitious time for exposure under the spotlight of public interest. The following article is designed to contribute views and material not included in certain studies that have already been published in the REVIEW in support of the ordination of women.

The Creation Record

The priority of men in the creation of our first parents is significant. (See Gen. 1:24-31 and 2:4-23; compare 1:26-28 with the expanded recital in 2:4-7, 18-22.) That sixth day was crowded to overflowing with spectacular creative acts. In less than 24 hours all species of animals were made and began roaming the face of the earth. Then “God said. Let us make man [Heb. *'adam*, man in the generic sense] in our image” (Gen. 1:26).

The account in Genesis I is relatively simple, but chapter 2 expands the account considerably. Chapter 2:7 elaborates on the creation of Adam, describing the manner in which he was made. This great act is followed by the planting of a garden, the placement of man as its keeper (verse 15), the prohibition regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil (verses 16, 17)—given to man alone, since woman was not yet made—and the procession of animals before Adam (Heb. *'adam*, here a proper noun), that he might name them. Not one was a suitable companion for his lonely self; “there was not found an help meet for him” (verses 18-20).

Recognition of man’s loneliness came from God, not man (verse 18), and time was needed for man to share in that recognition. Adam was not at first aware of the need. When it dawned upon him “the Lord caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam” and from Adam himself “made he a woman, and brought her unto the man” (verses 21, 22). Thus, within about half a day, in a tight schedule as we now count time, the animal world and human beings were brought into existence.

But woman was no afterthought on the Creator’s part. She was an integral feature of His total intention, even as was man; and man was made for woman no less than woman for man. Before the creation of Eve, Adam was formed with sexual potentials that needed their complement for fulfillment, and that anticipated the creation of woman. Woman must, therefore, have been part of the Creation program prior to the formation of Adam. The first human couple could have been created simultaneously, as were the lower animals, but, for His own all-wise reasons the Creator proceeded differently. He created woman later than man and so gave man the priority, not by accident, but by deliberate design.

The Bible Affirms Male Priority

The Bible thus establishes a clear difference between the creation of man and that of woman, with the undeniable distinction of priority falling upon man. This does not spell inferiority of woman, but it does indicate difference in the divine intent, and in Christian reasoning this fact must be assigned considerable weight. It postulates what is confirmed by the Scripture record, that in God's ideal plan man and woman were made for each other as two halves of one whole—not identical, but complementary halves that together make a perfect whole—equal personalities with different capacities and responsibilities, each fulfilling a distinctive role. Man is reproductively impotent without woman, and she is barren apart from her partner. Either is unutilized without the physical, mental, spiritual companionship of the other. They are, in the divine design, two parts of one foreordained whole, “one flesh,” and questions of beligerent superiority are not only noxious, they are invalid.

Equal but Not Identical

The Creation record establishes equality in value, but not identicalness. Man and woman are different, created for different though complementary purposes, so different that there are fixed lines of distinction beyond which neither may pass. The most clear-cut of these lines, the one most easily demonstrable, is in the area of reproduction. If humanity consisted only of men the race would have been doomed, for there would be no offspring. This says nothing derogatory about men; it merely underlines the biological fact that man needs woman in order to fulfill his destiny of fatherhood. Similarly, a world full of women would, in spite of their beauty and potential fruitfulness, have been barren, and human history would have ground to a halt within the original generation. Thus, neither is inferior; life, as we know it, is impossible without both: each is necessary for the preservation of the race.

It would be dangerous, if not impossible, to have two effective drivers of one car. Similarly, it was deemed best to have one leader for each human family. The husband was appointed spiritual head of the household, and the wife, as an equal personality but with different capacities, was given the role of companion and mother. This difference persists throughout sacred history and should not be ignored by those who claim to be guided by Scripture. Neither should it be explained away as a time-conditioned principle, for it is not. It is inherent in the Creation story as a part of God's predetermined purpose, not dependent on social conditions as fostered by faulty human beings, but fixed in the creation plan from the foundation of the world.

The later emergence of unmarried adults who were unable to fulfill the original intent does not negate the primal family-unit plan, and does not authorize a one-sided transfer of roles, especially those of a priestly nature, which have far deeper roots than the “to be or not to be” of marriageability. The priestly function of man, no less than the material function of woman, was planned in the past eternity that produced the continuing Creation design.

An All-Male Ministry

The Scriptures depict an all-male ministry. From patriarchal to New Testament times, priests were men. In my opinion this cannot be adequately explained by reference to local mores, nor by the low social position of women in ancient society, for there were priestesses in many contemporary pagan religions. The Biblical pattern of priesthood was established by our Lord Himself.

With the entrance of sin He made Adam the priestly head of his household. “In the beginning the head of each family was considered ruler and priest of his own household.”—*The Story of Redemption*, p. 50 (see also Gen. 3:16). He approved Noah, Isaac, and Jacob as the spiritual leaders of their families. Through instruction given to Moses (Ex. 28:1-4) He founded the Aaronic priesthood, which retained its validity until it connived at the death of our Great High Priest, God’s Son.

Throughout Old Testament history the male priesthood was augmented by a long line of inspired men, prophets who faithfully conveyed God’s messages to His needy people. True, there were a few capable and brave women who served as prophetesses over the span of 4,000 years—but they were prophetesses, not priestesses. The All-wise One could have freely utilized them as priestesses had He so chosen, but according to the record He did not appoint them to that office.

The New Testament era provided a fine opportunity to redress any supposed sexual “imbalance,” if our Lord had deemed it desirable to do so. He Himself had come into the world through the unique ministry of the most highly favored among women. He could thereafter have chosen to perpetuate His own ministry through an apostolate drawn from women, as well as from men, but He did not so choose. Instead, He called and ordained twelve men who, under His inspiration, appointed other men to minister to the growing church. That pattern has continued, with little interruption, to our own day, when, in company with many other concerns, the question of the ordination of women to the ministry has now become a widely agitated topic.

Galatians 3:28 does not advocate a female ministry, since Paul is there speaking specifically of the Abrahamic inheritance (verses 15-18) and not about priesthood or ministry. “Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. . . . There is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (verses 26-29). The subject is the believer’s inheritance, not Greek or slave or female “liberation.”

Sexuality undoubtedly plays a noticeable part in the question of women as ministers. The average man’s interest in and attraction to a woman’s physical features are much greater than the average woman’s concentration on those of the man. We naively ignore a stubborn fact of life if we believe that a woman in the pulpit will not produce more inappropriate thought in the minds of many male members of the congregation than when positions are reversed. Maybe the hazard will have to be accepted: it should, nonetheless, be considered in the question of pulpit ministry and ordination.

A sense of reverence would normally restrain a Christian from delving into what, for want of a better term, might be identified as the sexual nature of the Godhead. But since attempts have been made to change the Biblical concept of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, some defense of the traditional male image people have of Deity must be undertaken.

What follows is based on a high-level view of inspiration for the Bible. Seventh-day Adventists believe that the eternal God is well able to inspire writings that express truth for all ages. Though Scripture reflects the social conditions under which its writers lived, it is fully capable, because of its divine origin, of expressing timeless, unchangeable truths that are not subject to the fluctuations of human fantasy. And since the nature and character of God is the central theme of all Scripture, no more stable revelation can be found than the Bible's depiction of the Creator's own personality. We may need to adapt a few Biblical concepts that are associated with bygone cultures, but on that which portrays Him who says "I am the Lord, I change not" (Mal. 3:6), we must ponder long and deeply before daring to change a jot or a tittle.

From the first chapter of Scripture in all standard translations of the Hebrew text, the Almighty is spoken of as masculine. In English (K.J.V.) the record reads: "And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night." "And the gathering together of the waters called he Seas." "And God said. Let us make man in our image. ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." "And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made." (Gen. 1:5, 10, 26, 27, 31; 2:2.) Hebrew grammar permits no mistake here; the masculinity of God is irrefutably expressed.

This maleness of Deity, so far as human language and understanding are concerned, is consistently sustained throughout the entire Bible. The 31 or more inspired writers whose works were produced over the space of a millennium and a half do not falter in their depiction of their Maker. To each, without exception. God appears as a male personality. This does not create Him in man's image, but it does establish the fact that when God revealed Himself to humanity over the period of 4,000 years covered by Biblical history, He consistently referred to Himself as masculine. Had He wished. He could have employed an entirely feminine or a bisexual or a neuter description, but this He has not done. The image is masculine from Genesis to Revelation.

Nowhere is this image more clearly conveyed than in the life and teachings of Him who came to reveal God to the human family. God Incarnate appeared in the form of a Son—a Son who was a boy, who grew into a man, who became the Son of man, the Man Christ Jesus. His favorite description of the God whom He came to reveal was Father. He taught us to pray: "Our Father which art in heaven" (Matt. 6:9). He declared: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9), and His followers accepted this revelation as authentic, the ultimate instruction that humankind was

capable of receiving and understanding until eternity brings a deeper comprehension.

The evangelists and Paul took up the Father image, used it with divinely given authority as a base for their theology, and enshrined it in the New Testament writings.

Let us also consider the human types that pointed to Christ—Melchizedek, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, David, to mention only the best known. All these were male, pointing to a male Saviour, the Man Christ Jesus. It is difficult to brush aside this pattern and insert femininity in its place. We have a Great High Priest, not priestess.

We should, therefore, think deeply before seeking to change our concepts of the Godhead. We may be doing despite to the nature of the Trinity, we may be bordering on blasphemy, we may be encouraging error by transferring a human dispute over the ministerial status of women to the supernatural, ineffably sublime nature of the Eternal.

Let us also beware of attempting to create God in our own restricted image, for even the Bible's use of a masculine designation for Deity is an accommodation to our human limitations. We know no better. We cannot rightly conceive of that which lies beyond our experience. In the meantime God, through Scripture, has blessed the description of Himself as masculine, and we should not dilute or adjust it, nor presume to suggest that Deity is female. Neither should we impute human-type sexuality to God. Male sexuality, in its most refined form, may faintly reflect a little of the Father's creative power, since pregnancy and subsequent birth rest on male initiative; but such consideration is almost immediately offset by the quantitatively greater female role.

The major truth about human creative activity is the indispensability of both sexes, each being creatively impotent without the cooperation of the other: it is not either/or, but both. Nevertheless, God has delegated the decisive creative act in the reproductive process to man, and to this modest extent man is surrogate for God.

Is there, then, no place in Christian theology for the feminine element? Most decidedly, there is. The highest honor ever bestowed on a human being came to a woman—Mary of Nazareth, who became the mother of the Son of God. But that honor came once and once only: there could be no repetition of such an honor. It carries little significance and no support for a female ministry. Indeed, it rather underlines woman's traditional role. But in Biblical analogy, the church is the great feminine factor. She is the woman, she is the bride. She becomes the mother through the enabling of the Father. Within that figure, all Christians, men, women, boys, and girls, are children of Mother Church, and that rich figure should bring satisfaction to the truly feminine heart.

In addition, the Bible gives honor to womanhood and has led to the redress of many wrongs from which women have suffered throughout centuries of selfish male domination. Furthermore, there is room in God's illimitable, all comprehending nature for great maternal attributes in which womanhood can take special delight. In Him—so

great is His nature—are comprised both the paternal and maternal gifts that are necessarily distributed between men and women at the human level. His comprehensive character embraces and transcends both sections of humanity.

But let us keep an open and cautious mind on sexual identifications in the Biblical philosophy of God-centered history. There is so little known and so much to know. We serve a transcendent Being who is so infinitely greater than His creatures that we should tread softly where revelation is not indubitably clear. We must certainly refrain from pushing too far the analogies that derive from our own limited human experience. Today's brash claims may prove transient, and traditional views may yet prove more reliable than present champions for change anticipate.

The Current Scene

Though most church members favor a widening of areas in which women may serve their Lord, relatively few are convinced of the rightness of female ministers. And just as one swallow does not make a summer, so one apparently acceptable woman minister does not resolve the controversy—it may merely confirm that there are exceptions to most rules. Furthermore, so many channels of church-related service are open to women that there is no possibility of uselessness. All legitimate energies can be employed. Why, then, concentrate on a calling for which neither the Scriptures nor Ellen G. White gives clear authorization?

None of the above derives from male chauvinism. It is not a matter of bondage versus liberation. It is set in an emphatic, undeniable appreciation for Eve and her daughters and for the continuing accomplishments of dedicated womanhood. At the same time, it spells out some of the long-lived principles that must be reckoned with before radical changes in age-old, God-endorsed concepts are accepted.

This contribution lays no claim to being conclusive. It is rather intended as a caution against too facile an acceptance of nontraditional views, as a stimulant to further study, and as a firm suggestion that the church should take no irrevocable step toward female ordination until it has plumbed more deeply the depths of Biblical teaching on the topic.

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