
Biblical Questions on Women and Ministry

By Richard Davidson and Skip MacCarty

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

No. The Creation account in Genesis 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 Genesis 2 is not from superior to subordinate, but from incompleteness to completeness.

Only after the Fall was the principle of submission to headship introduced, and this was restricted to the wife-husband relationship.¹ 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.²

Furthermore, Paul uses carefully chosen and rare Greek terminology for “male-female” in Galatians 3:28, as opposed to his choice of words that can be translated either “man-woman” or “husband-wife” in 1 Timothy 2:12, 13; 1 Corinthians 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 Genesis 1-2 equality of men and women

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“in all things” as the divine ideal for the church.³
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 Ephesians 5:21-23, which is sometimes 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 that is the 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

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of the biblical model.

Does the Bible call elders “fathers,” and would that therefore exclude women from being elders?

No. Paul once refers to himself as a “father” to the believers in Corinth (1 Corinthians 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” (Matthew 23:9, NIV). 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.⁴ 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

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counter that bias.⁵ 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 Timothy 2:11, 12, and 1 Corinthians 11:3ff. 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 own husbands, not the submission of all women to the headship of all 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 Corinthians 11:3 is a precise parallel to Ephesians 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 Corinthians 11 was a sign of the wife’s submission to her husband’s authority, not to the authority of all men.⁶ In light of this evidence, the RSV has correctly translated 1 Corinthians 11:3: “The head of a woman is her husband [not men in general].” This is the position adopted by *The SDA Bible Commentary* on this very verse.⁷

In 1 Timothy 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.”⁸ The meaning of 1 Timothy 2:11, 12 is illuminated by a parallel passage in 1 Peter 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 Peter 3:5 unambiguously refers to the submission of wives to their husbands and not submission of women to men. Likewise, the submission of women called for in 1 Timothy 2:11, 12, and all the other parallel Pauline passages (1 Corinthians 14:34, 35; Ephesians 5:22-24; Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5) is the submission of wives to their husbands.

When 1 Timothy 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 Timothy 3:4, NIV). In the time and place in which these texts were written, it was *presumed* that the candidates for elders would be married men with children. But this was *not being prescribed* as a commandment.

The same phrase, “husband of one wife,” is used a few verses later (1 Timothy 3:11, 12) for the qualifications for a deacon (*diakonos*); yet in Romans 16:1, Paul makes reference to “our sister Phoebe, a deacon [*diakonos*] of the church.” Bible translators usually translate *diakonos* as “deaconess” or even “servant” in relation to Phoebe. 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?

Paul’s list of qualifications for elders framed in the masculine gender does not exclude women from serving as elders any more than the masculine gender throughout the Ten Commandments exempts women from obedience.⁹ Rather, 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.¹⁰

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

1. The immediate context in Galatians 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 (Galatians 2:11), and in this larger context he proclaimed that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, free or slave, male or female (3:28).

2. To say that Galatians 3:28 speaks only of our status before God violates the comprehensive biblical context that never divorces belief from practice (e.g., James 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.¹¹

3. Galatians 3:28 identifies the three primary social inequities 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 Galatians 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

The Galatians 3:28 principle led the early church to ordain Gentiles as elders, brought down slavery in society and racism in the church, and is leading in the ordination of women as local elders in the SDA church.

now included as ordained elders. And it is now leading in the ordination of women as local elders in the SDA church.

Does the theology of ordination as defined by the Bible and the writings of Ellen White support the church’s position to ordain women elders?

Yes, it does. The formulation of the church’s theology of ordination in the early 1970s 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,”¹² 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.¹³ Their “commission from God” becomes evident when the church observes the fruits and gifts of the Spirit manifested in their lives.

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.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Genesis 3:16; Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1890), pp. 58, 59.
2. Compare 1 Corinthians 11:3ff. with 1 Timothy 2:14.
3. See "The Bible Supports . . .," pp. 4, 5.
4. Luke 10:33; 17:16, et cetera.
5. Luke 7: 36-47; John 4:7.
6. See Strack Billerbeck, 2:427-429.
7. See *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 6:724.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 793.
9. Exodus 20; see especially verse 17.
10. See "Sound Principles . . .," pp. 2, 3; "The Bible Supports . . .," pp. 4, 5.
11. James 1:27; 1 John 3:16-18; 4:20, 21.
12. Gottfried Oosterwal and Raoul Dederen, Supplement 24, "A Theology of Ordination: A Seventh-day Adventist Interpretation," *Ministry* 51:2 (February 1978).
13. Acts 13:1-3; Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911), pp. 161, 162.