

Women, and of

A MORE COMPLETE MINISTRY FOR A COMPLETED WORK

A Response to Willmore Eva's Biblical Position Paper

by Louis Venden

I

Drawing upon the work of other scholars, Willmore Eva has provided a review necessary for the essential reflection and the decisions we must make regarding women and ministry. While not exhaustive, his work lays a firm groundwork for our thinking.

Eva first calls us to face the question of understanding how Scripture relates to contemporary issues. His paper takes seriously both specific Biblical statements and also Biblical principles disclosed by a careful examination of the Bible's message as a whole. He asks that we listen faithfully to both the parts and the entirety of Scripture. His paper reflects his own commitment to this sound approach.

Building on this foundation, Eva has called our attention to several important points:

1) The creation account found in Genesis 1 and 2 teaches that male and female were created by God as equals and that the image of God is expressed only in their equality and unity. Suggestions that the account in these two chapters contains implications of male priority and "headship" by virtue of the chronological order of creation or other factors in the story, are, in my opinion, totally unwarranted and undercut by careful attention to all the details of the story. (In addition to Eva's work, members of the Committee should give careful attention to Gerhard Hasel's thorough study of Genesis 1-3

in the Symposium on the Role of Women in the Church, pp. 11-27. A clear understanding of these chapters will affect everything that follows.)

2) In the Genesis 3 account of the origin of human sin, it quickly becomes clear that the consequences of sin are enormous as far as the relationship of men and women is concerned. To an important degree the Creator's statements regarding that which follows the entrance of sin must be understood as a description of the consequences resulting from sin. Matters of dominance and submission related to these consequences, and the divine counsel regarding them, fit the pattern of the God revealed throughout Scripture who deals with the less than ideal in as redemptive a way as possible. He meets people where they are! He accommodates to the tragic "hardness of heart" which sin has caused and works to minimize its effects while redemptively calling His children back to the ideal—to the way it was "in the beginning." (Matthew 19:8).

3) It is in the coming of Christ that all barriers which separate and isolate human beings—barriers which produce issues of dominance and submission—are broken down. Serious, tragic barriers of Christ's time included those connected with the relationship between men and women. Walter Specht's study (Symposium, pp. 78-96) surprises us with the large amount of material from the life of Christ which bears directly upon this subject. Eva helps us sense the impact of Jesus over against the social norms of his day.

This is an impact we too easily miss because we naturally expect Jesus to be "Christlike" in the way He treats all people. We need to realize that Jesus' attitude and actions contrast sharply with the background of a Jewish and Graeco-Roman world. We should recognize the confronting, radical nature of Christ's words and life in the time and setting of the New Testament. While

Jesus does not negate the distinctions between male and female, there is no essential difference in His approach to a man or a woman. For that matter, neither does the New Testament portray or support any difference in the way women and men relate to God or the way God relates to them.

Christ's effort to demolish barriers of all kinds and to make clear the unity and equality of God's children created problems for His ministry and hastened His steps toward Calvary. In spite of this, His life models a courageous and costly confrontation with both social and religious norms which resulted from and also perpetuated sin's consequences. Our Lord's words and acts should forever jar us loose from fear or inaction which may seek solace in the argument that "it's not the right time and people simply aren't ready yet." Jesus has opened the door to the full participation of women in His Church. He has laid the groundwork for the full, unhindered exercise of ministry on the part of both the men and the women He calls to serve His Church in earth's closing hours.

4) Following our Lord's life and the proclamation of His gospel, we see the wonder of re-creation in the birth and growth of the Christian church, the Body of Christ. Rather than being spoken into existence ex nihilo, the church is created through the miracle of people being drawn together from every background into a fellowship that transcends all barriers to become the family of God. This creation is not instantaneous, nor is it without birth and growing pains. The great universal principle inherent in the gospel and stated in Galatians 3:28 provides a radically different light in which Christ's followers can view ethnic (Jew/Gentile), social (slave/free), and gender (male/female) relationships. The Church is called to live in harmony with Christ's saving and liberating act—to do everything in its power to resist and remove the isolating, alienating effects of sin.

The genius in Christianity for erasing distinctions which give advantage and priority to some over against others is powerfully symbolized by the entry rite of baptism. This very act serves as a great equalizer, both then and now. This truth is further confirmed through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the bestowal of spiritual gifts which are given with total disregard for national, social, or gender distinctions.

The New Testament closed with the work not yet complete in all its manifestations. The church, including some of its most notable leaders, had struggled with the relationship of Jew and Gentile. As Eva emphasizes, the issue of slavery was not decisively addressed by the Christian church for many centuries, and it is even now at this late hour that we are being challenged to consider the third element of Galatians 3:28, the relationship of male and female. Adventists, long nurtured with a sense of call to "complete the Reformation," should have little trouble with Eva's call for the Church today to be faithful to the gospel—to the groundwork laid by Jesus Christ—and to the carrying out of His redemptive purpose in the earth.

5) As God Himself has related to people and situations distorted by sin, (giving instruction, for example, regarding divorce because of the hardness of people's hearts), so Paul, under the guidance of God, addresses the church at Corinth and his pastoral colleague Timothy with specific instructions appropriate to particular times and places—places and times suffering from particular consequences of sin. Paul's example means that we must take the concrete situation of the church very seriously wherever we find it. At the same time it is equally important that we take the ideal inherent in the gospel just as seriously, and that we work as vigorously as possible for the realization of that ideal in God's Church everywhere.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has never literally followed Paul's instruction regarding what women should or should not do in church. Women have spoken, taught, and worshiped with uncovered heads in Seventh-day Adventist churches from the beginning. It is therefore unnecessary and inappropriate to object to the ordination of women on the basis of Paul's writings.

Furthermore, we dare not allow our proper concerns over the excesses or distortions of contemporary movements for social change which are not rooted in the gospel to destroy our vision of what we as the family of God must do in the light of our understanding of creation and redemption.

II

The Biblical position on the role of women in ministry is thus firmly anchored not only in creation, but also in the re-creation wrought by Jesus Christ. Our Lord Himself sets a direction which we see beginning to be worked out in the New Testament church. We believe the time has now come to move forward in affirming the unity and equality of men and women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is time to extend the truth of this unity and equality to include the recognition and authorization of women who by divine call and appropriate preparation are ready, able, and committed to serve the cause of God fully.

It is important for us to understand what this means and what it does not mean.

1) This proposal in no sense ignores the fundamental differences between men and women. In fact, it is precisely in taking account of these differences and utilizing them that the inclusion of women in the full exercise of ministry becomes so necessary and promising.

The ministry of women will not be identical to that of men. Indeed, in the exercise of a more complete ministry, women can and need to do some things which men cannot do; and of course men can and need to do some things that women cannot do. There are other things which both men and women can and need to do, but they will do them differently—because of the differences between women and men. We are not saying that either will do them better, but we are emphasizing that they will do them differently, and in this very difference the total ministry of the Church will be enriched. The call for the ordination of women is, therefore, not a call for women to take the place of or to usurp male ministry. Rather, it is a call to complement and complete the essential ministry of God's Church. There is a good deal of truth in the observation that "God's family needs to be both mothered and fathered."

As one of the pastors of a church family which has been blessed by the ministry of women pastors and by a group of dedicated, capable women elders, I would like to bear my personal testimony to what their ministry has meant for us all. I welcome the encouraging prospect of women being able to serve to the fullest extent.

2) This is not a demand that women be ordained. No conference, union, or division can or should be compelled to ordain anyone. In those areas where there is reason to believe that the work of the Church and the gospel of Jesus Christ will be benefited and advanced, we believe a Conference should be authorized to recognize by ordination God's gift to the Church of a woman's ministry.

3) Some suggest that while there is no Biblical or theological stricture against the ordination of women, there is no command for it, and that to ordain women is therefore to "go beyond Scripture." But God's will in this

matter must be discerned from the total witness of Scripture and based upon principles inherent in creation, redemption, and the gospel. The New Testament does not command the abolition of slavery; yet the church, on the basis of principles proclaimed in the New Testament, eventually came to a clear conviction as to God's will regarding the sin of slavery. In the same way, to ordain women is not to go beyond Scripture but to be true to it.

4) The call for the ordination of women is not a change of direction. On the contrary, it is consistent with the direction in which the Church has been moving. For years women have been invited and encouraged to prepare for ministry in God's cause through study in college and at the Seminary. An official recognition of women's ministry has been given in their designation as "associates in pastoral care." In this pastoral ministry, women do all of the most important things that ordained men have done: they proclaim the word of God with power, they lead people of all ages to Christ and prepare them for baptism, and they minister in situations of personal crisis.

The leadership of our world Church has thoughtfully considered and approved the ministry of women elders, and has called for the recognition of the ministry of deaconesses through a service of ordination. Advances in these matters have varied, appropriately, with time and place; but it is fair to say the Church has been moving in the direction of affirming the ministry of women. This is understandably disturbing to some because it involves new relationships that are unfamiliar and the unfamiliar is always disconcerting. To see things in a new way is not easy and this is precisely why we must move carefully here and take account of the difficulty some may have in this time of change. At the same time we must recognize that the provision for the ordination of women is consistent with God's continued leading in this direction.

Such a provision is also consistent with our understanding of the meaning of ordination. Raoul Dederen's valuable paper (Symposium, pp. 183-196) helps us understand that ordination is not the conferral of some special essence or divine gift. Committees do not vote the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's ministry. Committees recognize what God has already done and in that grateful recognition authorize a person—whether man or woman—to act in behalf of the Church. Since we Adventists have always understood ordination as a recognition of a divine calling, and since we would wisely hesitate to claim that God cannot call a woman, we must not arbitrarily rule out the ordination of women.

It has been argued, of course, that it is not time and that the Church is not ready for the ordination of women. This argument must face the fact, however, that in many places women are actually doing the kind of work that ordained pastors and evangelists and Bible teachers do. The real question has to do with the willingness of the Church to recognize and rejoice in this more complete ministry. If we cannot ordain such women, we ought not to employ them in the roles in which they now function. If there is something about them which means that ordination is not appropriate or possible, then there must be something about them which means they cannot and should not do such work.

5) The ordination of women need not be a divisive issue in the Church. It should occur only in those situations where it is needed and wanted and where it will strengthen the Church. Building up the work of God surely ought not to divide the people of God. On the one hand, in many matters, God's world-wide family has recognized some variation in what best builds the Church at different times and places. Unity cannot be based on or demand uniformity. On the other hand, it should also be noted that the very existence of this

Committee testifies that interest in and concern for this subject is not limited to one part of earth.

III

Having considered some potential misapprehensions regarding the ordination of women, I would now like to summarize the major reasons why I believe the Church should move in the direction of allowing it.

1) The path the Church must travel is lighted by the truth of creation; only through both male and female is the image of God complete. In earth's final hours, when it is our sacred mission to reveal to the fullest extent God's character of love (Christ's Object Lessons, p. 415), His image and character can only be reflected in their completeness through a ministry encompassing both male and female with neither dominating over the other. Now is not the time to hold back. Now is the time to rejoice that in many places of earth the way is open for this more complete ministry.

2) The glorious work of re-creation and redemption, which removes all barriers that isolate and alienate, calls us forward to this further healing of the consequences of sin.

3) Our Church gratefully recognizes the key role played in its birth and growth through the prophetic, evangelistic, and pastoral ministry of a woman—Ellen G. White. While the prophetic dimension was certainly unique, the evangelistic and pastoral dimensions also made a vital contribution to her total ministry in our Church. In addition, numerous other women have exercised leadership at various administrative levels of the Church. While we regret that time and place did not make possible the full recognition of God's gifts to women and His work through them, their service and experience in our past help us to understand where the future lies.

4) Not only in the past but also in the present the service of women is absolutely essential to the health and survival of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The leadership of talented and dedicated women is indispensable to the work of our Sabbath Schools around the world. As teachers and administrators in elementary and secondary schools and in colleges and universities, women provide needed and effective spiritual leadership. Just as the Church has benefited from their contribution in these areas, it will also benefit from their full participation in pastoral and evangelistic ministry.

5) In many parts of the earth today women occupy positions of importance. Women are heads of governments. Women are judges of high courts. Women are presidents of universities and large corporations. Ours is a world that is aware of the increasingly important contributions that women are making in many areas. To move ahead with the ordination of Adventist women, based upon the principles of Scripture, will add significant strength to our witness in the world. It will exemplify the proper approach to the God-given equality and unity of women and men, because it is not based on a struggle for power.

6) Of greatest importance is the growing conviction of the leading of the Spirit. If there ever was a time when the Church needed to exercise the most complete ministry to all men and women, both inside and outside the Church, it is now. A survey of God's work in the earth today reveals many instances of women in pastoral and evangelistic ministry; and the evident fruitfulness of their labors raises the question of whether we should further withhold the Church's recognition of ordination. God has called and is blessing them through His Spirit with a ministry that obviously knows no distinction between male and female.

IV

We all love this Church. We are committed to the finishing of the work. That is why we long for the Church to use every resource as fully as possible, and to move forward where the Lord has opened the way.

This is a time for unity. We cannot afford to be divided. We must trust each other and work together. We need each other.

It is a rich and vital part of our Adventist heritage to follow the leading of the Lord. We have always believed that there is new light and that God's leading takes us beyond old frontiers into new and exciting territory. It was a dedicated woman of God who counseled us long ago: "Whenever the people of God are growing in grace, they will be constantly obtaining a clearer understanding of His word. They will discern new light and beauty in its sacred truths. This has been true in the history of the Church in all ages, and thus it will continue to the end" (Counsels to Writers and Editors, pp. 38, 39).

What an important time this is! Here is an opportunity to help our Church take an important step toward that great day in which we are all free to be the persons that God intended us to be—when no distinctions and limitations of race, social status, or gender will bind or blind people. We look forward to the full, free, and recognized exercise of the talents of women and men, as God leads us to a more complete ministry for a completed work.

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