

A Theology of Woman

by Beatrice S. Neall

I once attended a Christian seminar that stressed the subjection of women in the “chain of command.” A wife should put herself under her husband’s umbrella even if it leaked, we were told, for God would honor her obedience even if her husband were wrong, as he rescued Sarah from Abraham’s mistake. I thought this a romantic view that it might be fun to try, especially since it relieved me of responsibility. But when I checked Ellen White’s position, I was shocked out of all my romantic ideas. She stated forcefully that each person was accountable to God; that no one should merge her individuality in that of another; that the abuse of male supremacy had made the lot of women bitter; and that husbands should treat wives as equals the way they were created to be, not quoting Scripture to defend their headship.¹

It soon became clear that our favorite author and the seminar leader were using Scripture differently. Which one should I believe? Christians today are similarly divided over the issue of the role of women. How to interpret the Bible and apply it to our day is a critical issue.

Interpreting and Applying Scripture

Some say, “You don’t have to interpret the Bible—just do what it says!” Yet not even the most conservative Chris-

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tian would stone a rebellious son, though Deuteronomy 21:20, 21 gives such a command. Since the Bible was written in ancient languages to people of ancient times and cultures, there is no way to avoid the task of interpreting it. Our first step must be to understand what the text meant when it was written. This task, called *exegesis*, is the attempt to determine the original intent of the writer and to hear the Word as the original recipients heard it. It is important to discover the circumstances the writer was dealing with. There are often clues in the book itself or in other writings by the same author. Why, for instance, did Paul command women to be silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:34)? Was there a special problem he was facing?

Secondly, we need to apply the text to our own time. This process is called *hermeneutics*. It is not always possible to relate the text directly to ourselves. Even in our use of Ellen White’s writings, we have been taught to “consider the time and place.” Her counsel of the 1860s that skirts should be shortened would have been disastrous in the era of the miniskirt! Is Paul’s statement, “I permit no woman to teach” (1 Timothy 2:12) a universal command, or a counsel for a specific situation? Here is a task for hermeneutics.²

Further, we must realize that the pre-Fall state is the ideal to set before men and women today. Certain practices such as slavery, polygamy, meat-eating, and use of alcoholic beverages, while common in Scripture and not specifically forbidden, do not represent God’s ideal for humanity. Typically, the Adventist mission is to call the world “back to Eden.” We must also realize that Jesus, as the supreme revelation of God, is the supreme example of how human beings should relate to one another. These two factors—

the Eden ideal and the example of Jesus—should both be carefully considered in our study of the role and status of women.

If Scripture is silent about, or does not directly address, an issue, as is the case in the study of the role of women, it is often necessary to look at the “trajectory” of Scripture. In other words, if one can see the direction a missile is pointed and calculate its velocity, one can predict where it will land. For example, on the issue of slavery, the Bible assumes its existence and gives no command to abolish it (Paul even tells slaves to obey their masters); but the biblical principles of brotherhood, the dignity of humanity, freedom to choose, and the need to develop one’s gifts, all lead in the direction of abolition. Concerning both slavery and the role of women, it is necessary to determine the trajectory of Scripture.³

As a check upon our interpretation of Scripture, we need to ask the question, “What is God actually doing?” Peter believed on scriptural grounds that Jews should not associate with Gentiles (see Leviticus 20:26 and Nehemiah 9:2), and that Gentiles could not be saved without first becoming Jews. The Holy Spirit demolished his theology by acting contrary to his expectations (Acts 10:28, 44, 45). God was moving, and Peter had to learn to move with him. How is God moving today? Does he use women to teach, to lead, to exercise authority? The Adventist church recognizes that God called a woman to be his messenger in these last days. God’s actions should be a check on our interpretation of Scripture.

Woman as God Created Her

God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth. . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26, 27).

Since man is in the image of God, it is necessary to discover what God is like. The text indicates that he is not a lone being, but a union of

more than one. God (Hebrew *Elohim*, plural form) says, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”⁴ Hence, the next verse, which reads, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (Genesis 1:27), indicates that man as male and female constitutes the image of God. *Man* (Hebrew *adam*) means *them*.

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As God is a fellowship of three beings who live in a love relationship, so man, in God’s image, was created to be a fellowship of male and female and child living in a love relationship.⁵

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While most of us recognize that God is not a sexual being, we usually think of him as male because he is our Father, King, and Bridegroom. Yet a careful study of the Bible reveals that God often uses feminine figures to describe his personality and actions. He often compares himself to a woman in childbirth (Deuteronomy 32:18; Isaiah 42:14), or a nursing mother (Isaiah 49:15). The name *El Shaddai* can mean “God, my breasts”—that is, God the source of my nourishment and comfort.⁶ God’s divine compassion is expressed by a form of the Hebrew word for womb, the place of protection and care where God carries his people.⁷ God also compares himself to a mother eagle or a mother hen caring for her young

(Deuteronomy 32:11, 12; Matthew 23:37).⁸ Since God describes himself by male and female attributes, it takes both male and female to image him.

The task of subduing the world and ruling over earth, sea, and sky was laid upon both man and woman (Genesis 1:26, 28). Rulership and authority were commanded for both. For one to rule alone would be to disobey God's command.⁹

The creation account of Genesis 1 indicates that both man and woman were created in the image of God to have dominion over the earth. There is no evidence that one is superior to the other. They were created equal.

Genesis 2 narrates the story of the creation of man and woman in greater detail. God created the man first and then gave him the task of naming the animals. This was intended to arouse in him a

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sense of loneliness and need—in all creation “there was not found a helper fit for him” (v. 20). So God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a helper suitable for him” (v. 18, NIV). Some have concluded from the word *helper* (*ezer*) that the woman was inferior to the man—his servant. But in the divine reckoning, service is a mark of honor (e.g., Matthew 23:11). The Old Testament repeatedly refers to God as our *help* (*ezer*) in time of need.¹⁰ Also the word *suitable* is significant in Hebrew. Literally it means “as if in front of him [the man]”—“I will make a helper as if in front of him.”¹¹ If woman had been created in an inferior position the writer would have used a preposition meaning *after* or *behind*.¹²

Neither man nor woman was spoken into existence—both were formed by God himself, Adam from the dust of the earth, Eve from something much nobler—the rib of Adam. The creation of woman from the rib of man does not imply a position of subordination on her part, but that she was made to stand by his side as his equal, his

companion, his “helper suitable for him.” But there is a much deeper meaning in the manner of Eve's creation. Husband and wife were *created* one flesh (“bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”) and then told to *become* one flesh (“A man . . . cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh,” Genesis 2:23, 24). The unity of substance was to be constantly nurtured by an even closer unity of relationship. Though it is possible to argue the priority of one over the other by reason of the order of creation [the male because he was created first (1 Timothy 2:13) or the female because the higher creations came last], the spirit of rivalry for highest place is foreign to the spirit of the Creation narratives.

Whether the man or the woman was created superior to the other is ambiguous in Genesis, depending upon how the data are interpreted. Following is a summary of both sides of the question:

The Man Is Exalted

1. The man was created first.
2. Woman was derived from man, hence is inferior.
3. Woman was a helper for man.

The Woman Is Exalted

1. The higher creation came last.
2. Woman had a higher origin than man, who came from dust.
3. *Helper* indicates high status.
4. Woman was to be *in front of* the man.

It is more likely that man and woman were created to be equal, though differing in function and role.¹³ The only time it becomes necessary to involve arguments for superiority is when one sex loses its respect for the other. Then the Genesis story yields evidence in both directions.

The Fall and the Curse

The entrance of sin brought tragic changes to the human family. God's original commands to the man and woman were altered. At Creation man and woman were

commanded to have dominion over the earth. Now, the man was to rule over his wife. They were to be fruitful and multiply. Now, after the Fall, woman's part in procreation was to be accompanied by pain and sorrow. The man was to till and dress the garden. Now, he had to fight the ground to support his life from it.

Commentators have tried to discover some mitigating factors in the dismal picture of Genesis 3. First of all, women as a whole were not subjected to men as a whole, but only wives to their own husbands. The hierarchy existed only with the marriage relationship. Secondly, in the statement "he shall rule over you," the word for rule (*mashal*) was not as strong as the word used for ruling the animal kingdom (*radah*) in Genesis 1:28. Thirdly, the New Testament turns ruling into serving, of which we shall say more later.

How should the church today relate to the Fall and its results? Are the pronouncements of Genesis 3 God's command for the human race, or are they a description of the results of sin? Is "the curse" prescriptive or descriptive? Is it the mission of Christ and the church to perpetuate the results of sin or to redeem the race from the curse?

The sentence imposed by Genesis 3 is death. Is it permissible to try to extend or enhance life? The sentence of Genesis 3 is toil and sweat. Is it permissible to invent ways to lighten work and avoid sweat? The sentence of Genesis 3 is pain in childbirth. Is it permissible to find ways to reduce or eliminate such pain? The sentence of Genesis 3 is subjection of the wife to the husband. Is it permissible to find a better method of living in harmony?

The answer is unequivocal. Jesus came to take away the curse. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13, NIV).

Women in the Old Testament

After the Fall, man's abuse of his powers debased womanhood. Women were reduced in some societies to little more than goods and chattels—property owned by the man as he owned a house, land, animals,

and slaves. Monogamy changed to polygamy, and easy divorce of wives by their husbands added to the suffering of women. The patriarchal structure of society placed a woman under the authority of men all her life, first under her father, then her husband, and if he died, her husband's brother. Men were dominant, as reflected in social, religious, and legal affairs.

Hebrew women generally fared better than women in the rest of the Near East, as is shown by

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a comparative study of the Semitic laws. While the 10th commandment identifies a wife as property (Exodus 20:17), the Israelite woman was a member of the covenant community. While women were considered less valuable than men (27:2-7), and daughters less desirable than sons (12:1-5), some laws treated men and women as equals: both adulterer and adulteress were put to death (Leviticus 20:10); and both mother and father were to be revered (Leviticus 19:3).

Even in that patriarchal society, women were sometimes leaders. There were female prophets such as Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), and Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3). Women such as Ruth and Esther became national heroes. Yet the Bible stories are predominantly about men.¹⁴

Jesus and Women

Judaism in Jesus' day had a prayer that went like this:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God,
King of the universe,
who hast not made me a heathen.

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God,
King of the universe,
 who hast not made me a bondman.
Blessed art thou, O Lord our God,
King of the universe,
 who hast not made me a woman.

Men looked upon women not only as inferior and foolish, but also as a source of temptation to be shunned. Into such a social environment Jesus was born and lived. Yet he never looked down on women or spoke of them as inferior.

Although numerous rabbinical parables have been preserved, women seldom appear in them, or if they do, they appear in a bad light. But Jesus spoke of women often in his teaching. He com-

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pared the kingdom of God to a woman making bread (Matthew 13:33); he likened God to a woman looking for a lost coin (Luke 15:8-10); he spoke of ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), and of a persistent widow pleading for justice (Luke 18:1-8). He also praised a poor widow who dropped all her money into the offering box (Mark 12:41-44).¹⁵

The Pharisees asked Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” (Matthew 19:3). The Pharisees wanted to see which rabbinic school he would side with, that of Shammai who believed only moral failure was a reason for divorce; or that of Hillel, who allowed divorce on the most trivial grounds, such as the wife’s burning food or putting too much salt in the soup. In his reply Jesus upheld the marriage institution by pointing to the ideal state at creation: “A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one” (Mark 10:7, 8). Jesus added, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (v. 9). In not allowing men to divorce their wives, Jesus

elevated the position of women.¹⁶

Jesus raised some eyebrows the day he associated with the woman of Samaria. The Jews regarded Samaritans not only as enemies, but as unclean. Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus said, “Eating Samaritan bread is like eating swine’s flesh.” And the Mishnah said, “The daughters of the Samaritans are menstruants from their cradle.” This meant that not only was the Samaritan woman unclean, but everything she handled was unclean also—including her waterpot. To make matters worse, she was morally polluted as well. Yet Jesus requested water from her, brought salvation to her, and visited her village.¹⁷

The rabbis had a saying, “A man shall not talk with a woman in the street, not even with his own wife . . . on account of what men may say.” But Jesus spoke to women publicly in defiance of Jewish custom, comforting a widow in a funeral procession (Luke 7:13), demanding to meet the unclean woman who had touched him in the crowd (8:45), and touching and healing a hunch-backed woman in the synagogue (13:13). Jesus favored open association between the sexes.

In Judaism women were generally not allowed the privilege of studying under a rabbi. “Some of them may have been taught by their fathers or their husbands at home to read the Bible, but since this involved the learning of the ancient Hebrew language, it is probable that such cases were rare.”¹⁸ Some rabbis strongly opposed efforts to teach women. According to an old tradition, “If a man gives his daughter a knowledge of the law it is as though he taught her lechery.”¹⁹ She might become active in public life and liable to seduction.

Jesus, on the other hand, favored the instruction of women. When he visited the home in Bethany, Mary took her place at his feet—the customary position of a learner with a rabbi (as Paul was instructed at the feet of Gamaliel). Though Jewish women were exempt from learning the law, and though Martha needed Mary’s help in the kitchen—women’s traditional domain—Jesus defended Mary’s right to learn. He would not allow Martha or tradition to stop Mary from learning as his male disciples did.²⁰

Though Jesus respected women and was not

afraid to ignore the conventions of his day, he did not choose women to be among the 12 disciples. As the founder of the new spiritual Israel, Jesus chose 12 men to correspond to the 12 sons of Jacob. Women would not have fit the model he had in mind.

Yet Jesus did have a group of female disciples who were with him all during his ministry, from the early Galilean tours until the closing events of his life.

And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene . . . and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means (Luke 8:1-3, RSV).

These women were with Jesus through his crucifixion (Matthew 27:55, 56; Mark 15:40, 41), burial (Matthew 27:61), and resurrection (Matthew 28:1; John 20:1, 2; 11-18). They stayed by him when the men forsook him and fled. They were present at the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:13, 14). They fit the criteria for discipleship listed by Peter, except that they were not men (Acts 1:21, 22).

Though Jesus originally chose 12 men whom he named apostles (Luke 6:12-16) and sent them out with power to heal and cast out devils (Luke 9:1-6), he later commissioned 70 whom he sent out two by two with the same power (Luke 10:1-12). It is reasonable to assume that among the 70 were the women disciples who had previously joined themselves to the group during Jesus' Galilean ministry (Luke 8:1-3). At Pentecost the number had increased to 120. Luke tells us specifically that the women disciples were among the 120 (Acts 1:13, 14; 2:2-4). These 120 received the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit that had been promised, of which the earlier experiences were a token (Luke 3:16). The gospels give no technical term for ordination (Jesus made, chose, or appointed the Twelve and the Seventy). The empowering each time was the fullest evidence of ordination.

Peter in his Pentecost sermon emphasized the importance of the Spirit's descent upon the women:

I will pour out My Spirit upon *all* flesh,
Your sons *and your daughters* shall
prophesy,
Your young men shall see visions,
Your old men shall dream dreams,
And on My menservants
and My maidservants
I will pour out My Spirit in those days;
And they shall prophesy (Acts 2:17, 18,
quoting from Joel 2:28, 29; emphasis supplied).

This text, long a favorite of Seventh-day Adventists in defending the call of Ellen White, asserts that the gift of the Spirit in the last days is universal (*all* flesh): there is no sex discrimination (sons and daughters), or age discrimination (young men and old men), or class discrimination (menservants or maidservants).²¹

Paul based his claim to apostleship on the grounds that the risen Christ had appeared to him (1 Corinthians 15:4-9). Interestingly, in his list of those to whom Jesus appeared, he omits the women, though they were the first believing witnesses of the resurrection.

He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time . . . Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (1 Corinthians 15:5-8).

In the manner of his day, Paul mentioned only men as being significant witnesses of the resurrection. At that time a woman was not allowed to testify, because it was concluded from Genesis 18:15 that she was a liar.²²

Jesus did not evaluate people in that way. Even though the disciples did not believe their witness (Luke 24:10, 11, 22-24), Jesus gave the most stupendous message of history—the news that he had risen—to women. Women were a mighty force in the rapid spread of Christianity over the world.

Women in the New Testament Church

In the New Testament church we see profound changes in male/female relationships brought about by the gospel. Women were emancipated to serve and lead out in proclaiming the good news.

There are three categories of texts dealing with women in the New Testament.²³ The first could be called *prescriptive*, because they prescribe or mandate “the way things are to be.” The second are *descriptive*—they describe what was actually going on in the New Testament churches. And the third category are the *corrective* texts, telling how Paul corrected certain abuses that had crept into the church.

Prescriptive texts include the account of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost introducing new power and freedom in the proclamation of the gospel.

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy (Acts 2:17, 18, NIV, emphasis supplied).

In his famous Pentecost sermon, Peter an-

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nounced that a new order had been introduced—the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy of the last days. Instead of only the leaders having the Spirit and prophesying as in Moses’ day (Numbers 11:24-30), all God’s people could receive the Spirit, prophesy, and proclaim the gospel. The word *all* means women as well as men, young as well as old, slave as well as free.

Paul was as emphatic as Peter about the great change the gospel made in male/female relationships.

There is neither Jew nor Greek,
there is neither slave nor free,
there is neither male nor female;
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
(Galatians 3:28, NKJV)

This proclamation rebukes the prevailing prejudice of those who thanked God they were not

Gentiles, slaves, or women, which differentiation had died in Christian baptism (see v. 26).²⁴

Some try to weaken this great declaration by limiting it to one’s standing before God in matters of salvation. But Paul indicated that he was concerned about social as well as spiritual equality. In the same letter he roundly rebuked Peter for practicing social discrimination against Gentiles (Galatians 2:11, 12). He made it plain that in Christ there are neither sexual, racial, nor social distinctions.

Paul’s understanding of the marriage relationship was also profoundly affected by the new freedom in Christ.

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his body, but the wife does. Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control (1 Corinthians 7:3-5).

Here Paul declares that Christian marriage involves complete mutuality. The old male dominance of woman and female manipulation of man are replaced by consideration for the wishes of the other. Paul’s statement, “there is neither male nor female” does not eliminate sexuality, as some were teaching (1 Timothy 4:3), but instead eliminates the chain-of-command mentality common to the patriarchal societies of the day.

In the same chapter, Paul affirms singleness for both men and women as a special gift from God, leaving one free to pursue one’s calling unencumbered by the burdens of family life (1 Corinthians 7:32-35). This perspective was unusual in a society where women received their identity and security from the men in their lives, and where their chief role was to marry and bear children.

There were some in the Corinthian congregation who were blurring or confusing sexual distinctions in their practice of religion (1 Corinthians 11:3-15). They may have thought that to be spiritual they should overcome sexuality²⁵ (see 1 Timothy 4:3). Or they may have introduced ritual sex change as was practiced in the licentious worship of Dionysus, with men dressing as women, and women as men.²⁶ Whatever the problem, Paul

insisted that men and women retain their sexual identity in dress and hairstyle. He quoted Genesis 2 to make it clear to Corinthian Christians that sexual distinctions were part of God's plan, beginning with Eden.

Another dimension of the problem surfaces here. It appears that women, in their new-found freedom in Christ, were attempting to dominate men (see 1 Timothy 2:12). To counteract this trend, Paul quoted the arguments from Creation that support the elevated status of man (see vs. 1 Corinthians 11:8, 9). (As mentioned earlier in this article, the Creation account gives equal support to the elevated status of woman.) Then, to restore a balanced view of the sexes, he once again affirmed the equal status of men and women in Christ:

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God (1 Corinthians 5: 11, 12).

"In the Lord" there is a mutual interdependence of the sexes and a mutual appreciation for the special gifts of each, because both equally "are from God."

The second category, *descriptive texts*, are found in a number of New Testament references to women exercising leadership in the Christian churches. The casual nature of some of these texts indicates that such practices were common and accepted, with no need to justify them.

Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head, but *any woman who prays or prophesies* with her head unveiled dishonours her head (1 Corinthians 11:4, 5; emphasis supplied).

Here is a casual reference to the fact that women were praying and prophesying in the Christian congregations. This needs to be remembered in connection with the "be silent" passages that we will discuss later.

On the morrow we departed and came to Caesarea; and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. And he had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied (Acts 21:8, 9).

This text can be seen as a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy cited by Peter at Pentecost that "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy".

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. And I ask you also, true yoke-fellow, help these women, for they have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life (Philippians 4:2, 3).

Euodia and Syntyche were leaders in the Philippian church, fellow workers who labored side

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by side with Paul. It was important for the church that their differences be reconciled.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a *deaconess* of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a *helper* of many and of myself as well (Romans 16:1, 2; emphasis supplied).

The translation *deaconess* is misleading, since it has modern connotations not present in the Greek. The word is actually masculine and means servant, deacon, or minister. Paul uses this word to describe himself and Apollos (1 Corinthians 3:5) and those with the office of deacon in the church (1 Timothy 3:8-10). Phoebe is also called a helper, *prostatis*, which in its verb form describes the work of an overseer or manager (1 Timothy 3:5). She was an important member of her congregation.

Prisca (called Priscilla in Acts) and Apollos were associates of Paul until his death (2 Timothy 4:19), leaders of a home church (1 Corinthians 16:19), and teachers of the word. Priscilla is listed ahead of her husband several times, probably because she had a more outstanding personality.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also the churches of the Gentiles give thanks (Romans 16:3, 4).

Priscilla even helped to instruct Apollos, the apostle, who was himself “an eloquent man, well versed in the scriptures” (Acts 18:24-26). To make a significant contribution to his knowledge, she must have been an accomplished scholar herself. Priscilla is a clear example of a woman having teaching authority over a man.

Junia was truly remarkable, a woman apostle. Though most modern translations make the name masculine—Junias—early church fathers, Origen (185-253 A.D.), Jerome (340-419), and Chrysostom (344-407), regarded the name as feminine. It was not until the 13th century that the name was understood as masculine.

Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was (Romans 16:7, NIV).

Chrysostom eulogized, “Oh! how great is the devotion of this woman, that she should be even

Religion was the major sphere of public life in which women participated, functioning as priestesses, temple prostitutes, and oracles. . . . Paul’s converts came out of heathen cults. . . . Under such circumstances it is understandable that he would insist that women be silent in church.

counted worthy of the appellation of apostle!”²⁷

In his letter to the Romans, Paul lists no less than 10 women colleagues of his who were prominent missionaries and leaders of the early Christian communities.

Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. . . . Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord (Romans 16:6, 11, 12, NIV).

These texts make it clear that in the New Testament churches the leadership of women was a fact of everyday life.²⁸

The remaining category, *corrective texts*, can describe the two passages that appear to contra-

dict the evidence cited above. We need to determine whether these texts describe God’s plan for all women in all times, or whether they relate to problems in Paul’s day. First, there is the passage in Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians, in which he admonished women to be silent in church.

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church (1 Corinthians 14:33-35).

It is important to notice here that women are the *third* group in the church of Corinth whom Paul commands to be silent. Tongues-speakers without interpreters are told to be silent (v. 28), and prophets are to be silent to allow others to speak (v. 30).²⁹ Women are not the only ones singled out for rebuke.

Since Paul does not give a reason for the silencing of women, it is helpful to consider the circumstances he faced. In that day, girls received little education, were married off at puberty to men twice their age, and were confined to the home. Religion was the major sphere of public life in which women participated, functioning as priestesses, temple prostitutes, and oracles for fortune-telling.³⁰ Paul’s converts came out of heathen cults practicing wild orgies, ritual sex changes, and frenzied prophesying in which women were major participants.³¹ His letters indicate that there was immorality, drunkenness, and mad disorder in the church of Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:1; 11:21; 14:23), apparently with the newly liberated women leading out. Under such circumstances it is understandable that he would insist that women be silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:34, 35), and that both sexes preserve their sexual identity in dress and decorum (1 Corinthians 11:6-15).³² However, the same letter mentions that women may pray and prophesy in church if they are properly attired.

The other problematic text is found in a letter Paul wrote to Timothy regarding the church in Ephesus.

Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed

first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet a woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty (1 Timothy 2: 11-15).

Paul was concerned about false teachers bringing speculative doctrines into the flock (1:3-7). Since he forbids women to teach, it is possible that some of them, untaught in the law, were not only being led astray, but were promulgating “doctrines of demons,” “silly myths,” and “old wives’ tales” (1 Timothy 4:1, 7, RSV); hence Paul asked that they learn in silence and not teach in the church.³³

Some of these teachers were attacking the home by forbidding marriage (1 Timothy 4:3). Paul took the position that women should stay with their husbands (1 Corinthians 7:12-16) and find their place among the saved by bearing children (1 Timothy 2:15) and taking care of the home (Titus 2:4, 5). To women who aspired to teach, but were themselves deceived by false teachers, Paul spoke of Eve’s vulnerability to deception.³⁴ His use of Genesis was illustrative rather than normative for all time.³⁵

Paul achieved balance in the midst of extremes by throwing his weight in the opposite direction from extremists. When he fought those who defended old prejudices he expressed the bold vision of Galatians 3:28. When he discerned the overstatement of the new liberties, he spoke up for the old, as in Corinthians. Our task is not to harmonize the two tendencies into a perfect system, but to discern where the accent should now lie.³⁶

At this point it is significant to note what Ellen White says about Paul’s text forbidding women to speak in church, since she did not limit herself by those restrictions. According to the scriptural index to her writings, she makes no reference to the crucial passages at all, though she makes free use of nearby verses. She was certainly aware of these texts because they were used against her by those who challenged her right to speak in the churches. Church leaders defended her by using the arguments cited above.³⁷ One can only conclude that she thought the texts restricting women had a

local application not relevant to all times and places.

Paul’s restrictions upon women in church should not be understood as having the force of law. They are best understood as applications of

It is a mistake to give every biblical precedent the weight of eternal law. If we did, we would execute anyone who picked up sticks on Sabbath, or any child who was rebellious, or those who lied before God’s representative.

law. Some laws are fundamental and enduring, and form the basis for lesser laws. Examples are the Ten Commandments, and in our country, the U.S. Constitution. Case laws are laws growing out of specific cases when the basic law must be applied. In Scripture they often begin with the word *when* or *if*—“When an ox gores a man (KJV)” such and such shall be done (see Exodus 21 and 22). Case laws do not have the enduring force of fundamental law, and may with time be changed or dropped. Jesus distinguished between the two kinds of law in the case of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11). He upheld the Ten Commandment law against adultery by telling the woman, “Go, and sin no more.” But he bypassed the case law that said, “If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die” (Deuteronomy 22:22). He did not regard that law as binding in his day.³⁸

It is a mistake to give every biblical precedent the weight of eternal law. If we did, we would execute anyone who picked up sticks on Sabbath (Numbers 15:32-36), or any child who was rebellious (Deuteronomy 21:18-21), or those who lied before God’s representative (Acts 5:1-11). Paul’s statements restricting women tell us how he handled problems in the Greek churches. They are enlightening as examples of how similar problems might be handled in similar situations. But they do not have the force of universal and eternal law. Few modern interpreters would apply the texts rigidly to women—that they must be silent in church, that they must never teach or have au-

thority over men. There were numerous exceptions to these rules even in Paul's day, as we have noticed.

Headship and Subordination: The Question of Hierarchy

The "chain of command" doctrine comes from Paul's statements on male headship and female subordination. To explain what he means, Paul makes an interesting comparison: "The head of the woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Corinthians 11:3). Here Paul compares the husband/wife relationship to the way God and Christ relate. This comparison opens the way for an understanding of how a hierarchy operates among equals, for Christ is equal with God (John 5:18; 14:24; Philippians 2:6), yet subordinate to him (John 14:28), deriving all his powers from God (5:19; 6:57), and doing everything at the Father's command (14:31). This tension between equality and subordination is significant since Paul makes

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Jesus, in his equal/subordinate role, the model for women.

Some assume that Jesus' dependence on God was temporary, applying only to his humanity; but a careful study of the evidence supports the view that it is permanent. Jesus regarded independent action as sinful, stating that his dependence upon the Father was evidence of his deity (John 7:18). We generally assume that to be God means to exercise authority, act independently, make decisions, impose them on others, promote one's own will, and bring glory to oneself. In Jesus' estimation, all these posturings are evidences of the sinful human nature. He cites his

dependence on the Father as the highest evidence of his equality with the Father.

Regarding the role of God the Father, Jesus revealed that the Father neither dominates nor acts autonomously, but acts only in consultation with the Son (John 5:17; 20-22; 8:16). It appears that there is a mutual submission of each to the will of the other. Further, there are times when the Father and Son exchange roles. The Father "has given all judgment to the Son" (5:22). During Christ's earthly ministry the Father "gave all things into his hand" (3:35; 13:3)—he turned over the rule of this world to the Son until every enemy is destroyed; then Christ will deliver the kingdom back to the Father and become subject to him (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

The heavenly model illustrates that man/woman relationships should be characterized by harmony, consultation, and working together, with no independent decision-making. There can even be exchange of roles, with one or the other leading out in different areas. We all live in a web of hierarchies in the home, church, and workaday world, simultaneously leading and following. In marriage it is natural for the husband and wife to exercise leadership in their areas of expertise, but it is unwise for one to try to dominate the other.

Mutual Submission

Jesus rejected the use of power to dominate others.⁴⁰ The lordship of man over man, or man over woman, is a distortion of the image of God. To be the head is not to control, but to be a source of power and strength that enables others to reach their potential, which is no less than "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). Christ is the head of the church in the sense that he is its source of life—"the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God" (Colossians 2:19, RSV; cf. Ephesians 4:15, 16).⁴¹ In God's plan, headship does not repress; it enables.

Though Paul's counsel to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:18-32 sounds patriarchal to us in

the 20th century, it is revolutionary to all social structures based on the struggle for dominance. The passage speaks of headship and submission, yet the underlying dynamic transforms the terms into something opposite the normal meaning. Paul gets lyrical on the husband-wife relationship. The command, “Be filled with the Spirit (v. 18)” issues in a torrent of joys—making melody, giving thanks, being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ, wives to husbands, and husbands with love to their wives (vss. 18-22 ff.).⁴²

In the context of empowering by the Spirit, Paul states the principle of mutual submission following the example of Christ: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). One might ask whether Christ, the Head, ever subjected himself to the church or to humanity, but this is Paul’s precise meaning. Christ, who was equal with God, “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:7). Christ himself declared that to rule was to serve, to be over was to be under (Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27; John 13:13-16). In the light of Christ’s example, Paul asks believers to submit to each other, or, as he stated elsewhere, “Honor one another above yourselves” (Romans 12:10, NIV); “in humility count others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3).

As part of this mutual submission, Paul asks wives to submit to their husbands and husbands to love their wives. In that society the women had already been socialized to make sacrifices for the men in their lives, while the men had been socialized to dominate women and to expect to be served by them. In view of the Spirit’s power to fill those in a “power-down” position and lift them up to maturity in Christ (see Ephesians 3:19; 4:13), Paul now asks them to submit to their husbands from a totally different motivation, a genuine self-subordination rather than a submission to the demands of husbands or society.⁴³ As Christians, they are called on to subordinate themselves in imitation of Christ and as a result of acknowledging *him*, not their husbands, as Lord.⁴⁴ And Paul’s daring comparison between the husband as head and Christ as Head is based not on “lordship” language, but on “sacrificial servant”

language.⁴⁵ As the role of Christ as Head is to enable the body to grow and build itself up (Ephesians 4:15, 16), so the role of the husband as head is to nurture and cherish the wife (5:28, 29) so she can grow into maturity and strength. In Christ there is no power struggle, but a mutual submission that builds the strengths of others and does not take advantage of their weaknesses.

The Fall introduced the rule of man over woman, which rapidly degenerated into male oppression and female degradation. To right this wrong, redemption introduces headship as a lib-

In our age has God used women in pastoral roles? It is astonishing that a church which was raised up largely by the ministry of a woman, and which from its infancy has defended God’s call of women, should have problems with this issue. The question of whether Ellen White was ordained is a theological quibble. How could human hands ordain her when God himself had empowered her?

erating, transforming power that exalts the feminine (whether as church or as woman) to the heights of the heavenlies (Ephesians 1:22, 23; 3:20; 4:15, 16; 5:25-32). The purpose of headship is never to limit or restrict or hold down. (Paul never couples the headship concept with his temporary restrictions on women.)⁴⁶ Headship is never exclusive. It never posts a “Keep out!” sign on the door, for the head cannot be admitted while the body is excluded.

Women, then, inspired by this vision, should seek to develop every talent (Matthew 25:14-23), exercise every God-given gift (1 Corinthians 12:8-11), and reach the measure of the status of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13). Then they can fulfill their God-given roles as helpers in front of man, co-rulers over the earth (Genesis 1:28; 2:18), and *servants* to humanity.

Does God Use Women?

Having examined a portion of the biblical evidence regarding women, we must finally look at what God is doing. In our age has God used women in pastoral roles? It is astonishing that a church which was raised up largely by the ministry of a woman, and which from its infancy has defended God's call of women, should have problems with this issue. The question of whether Ellen White was ordained is a theological quibble. How could human hands ordain her when God himself had signally empowered her with the greatest of gifts? She not only taught, helped in the formulation of doctrine, and exercised authority over men—even presidents of the General Conference—but she did the work of both prophet and apostle. She led out in the founding and development of a new

movement and its many institutions. She was "sent" all over the United States, to Europe, and to the far continent of Australia to plant the message in areas where it had never been heard before. She left behind a body of inspired writings destined to guide this movement until the end of time.

The Adventist church now needs to decide whether to encourage the participation of women in the full-time work of the ministry and to ordain them to do that task. While the church hesitates, most Adventist women are investing their time and energies in secular employment.

In view of the overwhelming task of world mission that confronts this church, should not Adventist women hear the call to dedicate their lives full-time to the work of spreading the gospel? Shouldn't the burden and responsibility of the world task be laid upon their shoulders? Shouldn't there be 100 women ministers where now there is one?

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1952), pp. 215, 227, 231; and *Patriarchs and Prophets*, (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1958), p. 59.

2. For an excellent discussion of how to interpret Scripture, see the chapter, "The Need to Interpret," by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart in *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), pp. 15-27. An Adventist statement on Bible study methods is found in the *Adventist Review*, January 22, 1987, "Methods of Bible Study Committee Report," pp. 18-20. See especially section 4, f-k.

3. Willmore D. Eva identifies two methods of approaching the Bible on the issue of women. The first he describes as an "atomistic" way of applying the biblical data. The proponents of this method tend to focus on specific biblical statements and particular cases to shine light on the subject. Proponents of the second hermeneutic look for the general ethical principles they find inherent in Scripture as a whole, concentrating upon its central events and issues. They also search out the historical and cultural dynamics that might have influenced the approach of the inspired writer. Taking their findings, they attempt to apply them to any contemporary ethical or social concern. "A

Biblical Position Paper: The Role and Standing of Women in the Ministry of the Church," January 1985, p. 4. (Available from the Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.)

4. For a defense of the plural meaning of *Elohim*, see Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Meaning of 'Let Us' in Genesis 1:26," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* XIII:1, Spring 1975, pp. 58-66.

5. Karl Barth was the first major theologian to set forth this view, quoted in C. G. Berkouwer, *Man, the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 72. See also Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Eerdmans, 1975), p. 35; Aida Besancon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1985), pp. 21-22; Gerhard F. Hasel, "Man and Woman in Genesis 1-3," *Symposium on the Role of Women in the Church* (Biblical Research Institute Committee, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1984), pp. 12-13.

6. Phyllis Tribble, "God, Nature of, in the OT," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, p. 368. for this understanding of breasts, see Isa. 66:11, 13.

7. *Ibid.* The words for *mercy* and *merciful* come from the root word *womb*.

8. For a book on feminine images of God, see Virginia R. Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

9. Hasel, *Man and Woman*, pp. 13-14; Spencer, pp. 22-23.

10. See Ex. 18:4; Deut. 33:7; Pss. 33:20, 115:9, 146:5. Scripture references are to the *Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise noted.

11. William Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), s.v. *neged*. The corresponding noun form *nagid* means *leader, ruler, or prince*.

12. Spencer, pp. 23-25.

13. Hasel, *Man and Woman*, pp. 20-21. He adds that the remarkable importance of women in the biblical accounts of creation has no parallel in ancient Near Eastern literature. It indicates the high position of woman in the Old Testament in contrast to woman's low status in the ancient Near East in general.

14. Kenneth L. Vine, "The Legal and Social Status of Women in the Pentateuch," *Symposium*, pp. 44-45; Jerry A. Gladson, "The Role of Women in the Old Testament," *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47, 49, 54; Phyllis Trible, "Woman in the Old Testament," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, supplementary volume, p. 964.

15. Walter F. Specht, "Jesus and Women," *Symposium*, pp. 78-80.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

18. George F. Moore, *Judaism*, 2:128.

19. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 373.

20. Spencer, pp. 59-60.

21. Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of Luke*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984), p. 56.

22. Jeremias, p. 374.

23. For my organization of these materials I am indebted to S. Scott Bartchy in "Power, Submission, and Sexual Identity Among the Early Christians," *Essays in New Testament Christianity*, A. Robert Wetzell, ed. (Standard Publishing, 1978), pp. 57-74.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 61. See I Tim. 4:3.

26. Richard and Catherine Kroeger have documented such practices in the Greek Dionysian religion and mystery cults. See *The Reformed Journal*, "Pandemonium and Silence at Corinth," (June, 1978), pp. 6-11; "Sexual Identity in Corinth," (December, 1978), pp. 11-15.

27. Spencer, p. 101.

28. For more information on these women, see Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, "Women in the Pre-Pauline and Pauline Communities," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 33, Nos. 3, 4 (Spring-Summer, 1978), 157, 158 and Spencer, pp. 99-120; for useful summaries see Jewett, pp. 145, 146; Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women*

(Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1983), pp. 174-178.

29. Bartchy, p. 68.

30. Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), pp. 64, 75.

31. Kroeger, "Pandemonium," p. 9.

32. "Paul's major concern is not the behavior of women, but the protection of the Christian community... from being mistaken for one of the orgiastic, secret, oriental cults that undermined public order and decency." Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, (New York: Crossroad, 1984), p. 232.

33. Spencer notes the positive aspects of the text. Paul said, "Let a woman learn" (imperative mood). Contrary to the practice of the day, women are commanded to study. To "learn in silence" was the characteristic way of rabbinic study, indicating respect for the rabbi. In commanding women to learn, Paul was following the example of Jesus who wanted Mary to sit at his feet and learn. Though learning usually leads to teaching, Paul at that time did not allow women to teach, because they were not ready. "I am not (currently) allowing women to teach," is an acceptable translation of *epitrepo*. Furthermore, the sense in the Greek does not forbid women to teach men, but only to dominate or lord it over them (Gr. *authentain*). The grammar indicates that the word *men* goes with the second verb only (pp. 74-75, 84-85).

34. The prohibition of women's teaching may have been due to the ease with which women were falling under the influence of imposters. Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 76.

35. Spencer, pp. 89-90.

36. Stendahl, p. 37.

37. J. N. Andrews, "May Women Speak in Church?" *The Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald*, Jan. 2, 1879, p. 4.

38. The technical names for the two kinds of law are apodictic (absolute) and casuistic (related to cases). This line of reasoning was suggested to me by James Cox of the Washington Institute for Contemporary Issues, Washington, D.C.

39. This section on mutual submission is largely taken from Scott Bartchy's masterful article, "Issues of Power and a Theology of the Family" presented at the Consultation on a Theology of the Family held at Fuller Theological Seminary, Nov. 1984, pp. 40-46.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

41. It is interesting to note Ellen White's position on headship. Though she acknowledges that the husband is the head of the wife and deserved deferential respect (*Testimonies*, Vol. 1, p. 307), most of her comments on male headship consist in cautions that husbands are not to quote this text to assert their rights or abuse their privileges, and that neither husband nor wife is to attempt to control the other (AH 215, 106, 107). Far from stressing woman's subordinate position to man, she asserts that woman was

created to stand by man's side as his equal and should be treated as his equal (AH 227, 231). She clearly insists upon the pre-Fall rather than the post-Fall status of woman. She does not exalt the Gen. 3:16 statement—"he shall rule over you"—as "chain of command" preachers do, but asserts that it has lent itself to abuse, making the lot of women very bitter (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 58, 59). In her writings she exalts woman's function in the home—there she is queen and has a role unequalled in its importance, the molding of human lives (*Adventist Home*, p. 231). However, she also

gives women an important role outside of the home (e.g., *Evangelism*, pp. 464–481).

42. Note that the Greek has no imperative, "Wives, be subject . . ." as in the English. The only command is to be filled with the Spirit.

43. Bartchy, p. 42.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

46. 1 Cor. 11 does not restrict women, but specifies they must cover their heads when they prophesy or pray (v. 5).