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The Bible Supports the Ordination/ Commissioning of Women as Pastors and Local Church Elders

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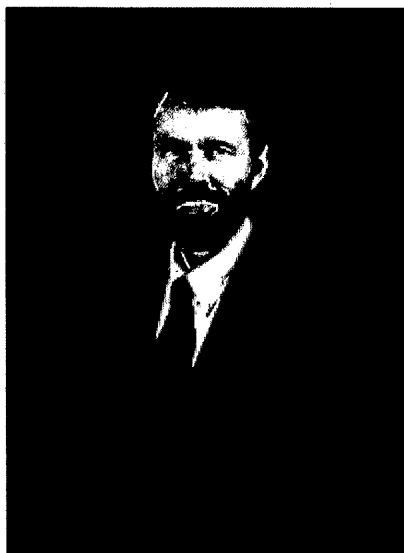
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The Bible Supports the Ordination/Commissioning of Women as Pastors and Local Church Elders

By Richard Davidson



Andrews University - April, 2010

1. Genesis 1 teaches us that male and female participate equally in the image of God. "So God created man [humankind] in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Gen 1:27).

This basic passage gives no hint of a divine creation order. Here man and woman are fully equal, with no subordination of one to the other. We find that this description of the relationship between man and woman holds throughout Scripture and beyond. No inspired writer—not Moses, Jesus, Paul, or Ellen White—teaches the creation headship of man over woman. Nor has this position ever been accepted in historic Adventism.

Those who oppose the ordination of women ultimately base their argument on the creation headship of man over woman. Their case, however, rests on a fundamental misinterpretation of Gen 1-3.

2. Genesis 2 reinforces Genesis 1. In Gen 2 woman is the climax, the crowning work of creation. She is created from a rib from Adam's side, to show that she is "to stand by his side as an equal" (Gen 2:21- 22; PP 46). She is man's *'ezer k'negdô* ("helpmeet for him," Gen 2:18 KJV), which in the original does not denote a subordinate helper or assistant. Elsewhere in Scripture it is most often *God Himself* who is called *'ezer* ("helper") (Exod 18:4; Deut 33:7, 26; Ps 33:20; 70:5; 115:9, 10, 11). The phrase *'ezer k'negdô* in Gen 2 means no less than an equal counterpart, a "partner" (Gen 2:18, 22 NEB).

Contrary to popular argument, Adam does *not* name the woman (and thereby exercise authority over her) before the Fall in Gen 2:23. The "divine passives" in this verse imply in Hebrew thought that the designation "woman" comes from God, not from man (see Jacques Doukhan, *The Genesis Creation Story* [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1978], 46-47). Adam does not name Eve till after the Fall (Gen 3:20).

In short, Gen 2 contains no creation order subordinating woman to man or restricting her from entering into full and equal participation with man in any ministry to which God may call her. For further detailed analysis, see Richard Davidson, "Sexuality in the Beginning: Gen 1-2," chap. 1 of *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 15-54.

3. Subjection or submission of wife to husband comes about only after the Fall. A subjection of Eve to Adam is mentioned in Gen 3. God says to Eve: "Your desire shall be to your husband and he shall rule over you" (Gen 3:16). But it is crucial to recognize that the subjection of Eve to Adam *comes after the Fall*. Furthermore, it is limited to the *husband-wife relationship*, and therefore does not involve a general subordination of women to men.

This is precisely the consistent interpretation of Ellen White (see especially *PP* 58-59, *1T* 307-308, and *3T* 484) and *The SDA Bible Commentary*. The servant headship of the husband prescribed in this passage can no more be broadened to men-women relationships in general than can the sexual desire of the wife be broadened to mean the sexual desire of all women for all men. For further detailed analysis, see Davidson, "Sexuality and the Fall: Genesis 3," in *Flame of Yahweh*, pp. 55-80.

4. Paul's writings maintain the Eden model. Paul gives much instruction regarding the relationship between *husbands and wives*. As can be seen in particular by 1 Tim 2:14 (see also 1 Cor 14:34 and *PP* 58-59), it is ultimately in light of Gen 3:16 that he indicates the "head of a woman is her husband" (1 Cor 11:3) and calls upon wives to "be subject in everything to their husbands" (Eph 5:24). Such passages as 1 Cor 11:3-12, 1 Cor 14:34-35, and 1 Tim 2:11-12 all concern the issue of the submission of *wives* to their *husbands* and not of women to men in general.

Furthermore, in 1 Tim 2:13 Paul is *not* arguing for a creation headship of man over woman as has often been assumed. Rather, he is correcting a false syncretistic theology in Ephesus which claimed that *woman* was created first and *man* fell first, and therefore women are superior to men. Because of this false theology, wives were apparently domineering over their husbands in public church meetings. (For a careful analysis of the evidence for these conclusions, see Gordon P. Hugenberger, "Women in Church Office: Hermeneutics or Exegesis? A Survey of Approaches to 1 Tim 2:8-15," *JETS* 35 [1992]: 341-360; and Sharon Gritz, *Paul, Woman Teachers, and the Mother Goddess at Ephesus: A Study of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 in Light of The Religious and Cultural Milieu of The First Century* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991].)

Paul's counsel for *husbands and wives* cannot be extended to the relationship of men and women in general. The apostle himself shows how the marriage relationship applies to the church. *Husband headship* in the home is not equated with *male headship* in the church. Rather, the Husband/Head of the church is *Christ*, and *all* the church--including males--are His "bride," equally submissive to Him (Eph 5:21-23).

5. In the Old Testament we see numerous women in leadership roles over men, thus confirming Genesis 1. Witness Deborah (Judges 4 and 5), one of the judges over the people of Israel-- women and men. Witness the leadership role of Miriam (Exod 15:20-21), Huldah (2 Kgs 22:13-14; 2 Chr 34:22-28), Esther, and others (e.g., Exod 38:8; 1 Sam 2:22; 2 Kings 8:1-6; Ps 68:11; Jer 31:22).

Although in OT Israel there did exist social inequalities for women, reflecting a perversion of the divine ideal set forth in Gen 1, yet nonetheless there are no legal restrictions barring women from positions of influence, leadership, and authority over men.

With regard to the priesthood, Adam and Eve were appointed priests in the Garden of Eden before the Fall, and reconfirmed as such after the Fall (see discussion and evidence in Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 47-48, 57-58). God's original plan was that all Israel be a "kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:6). Because of Israel's sin, an alternate plan was given in which even most men were also excluded--except for one family in one tribe in Israel. Yet in the New Testament the Gospel restores God's original plan. Not a few male priests, but once more the "priesthood of *all* believers" (1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6).

6. Jesus called His people back to the original plan regarding the role of women. In the NT Jesus Himself set the tone for the Gospel restoration by pointing His hearers to God's original plan "from the beginning" (Matt 19:8). He did not move precipitously, upsetting the very fabric of Jewish culture; He did not ordain women as His immediate disciples, just as He did not ordain Gentiles. But He pointed the way

toward the Edenic ideal in His revolutionary treatment and exaltation of women (see John 4:7-30; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:1-3; Matt 15:21-28; John 20:1-18, etc.).

7. The Gospel ideal is the return to the Eden model. Paul emphatically declared: "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" (Gal 3:28). This is not merely a statement on equal access to salvation among various groups (cf. Gal 2:11-15; Eph 2:14-15). Rather, it specifically singles out those three relationships in which the Jews had perverted God's original plan of Gen 1 by making one group subordinate to another: (1) Jew-Gentile, (2) slave-master, and (3) male-female. By using the rare NT terms "male-female" (*arsen-thēly*) instead of "husband-wife" (*anēr-gunē*) Paul establishes a link with Gen 1:27 and thus shows how the Gospel calls us back to the divine ideal, which has no place for general subordination of females to males. Thus, Paul's choice of terminology upholds the equality of men and women in the church, without changing the position of the husband as head of the family.

Within the cultural restraints of his day, Paul and the early church (like Jesus) did not act precipitously. The subordination of Gentiles was difficult to root out (even in Peter! [Gal 2:11-14]). Slavery was not immediately abolished in the church (see Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22; Phlm 12; 1 Tim 6:1). Likewise, women did not immediately receive full and equal participation with men in the ministry of the church. However, Phoebe is mentioned as a "deacon" (Rom 16:1) Junia was a female apostle (Rom 16:7), and the leaders of the church at Philippi were women (Phil 4:2-3). Priscilla assumed an authoritative teaching role over men (Acts 18), and the "Elect Lady" (2 John) may well have been a prominent church leader with a congregation under her care. (See discussion of these persons, with bibliography, in Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 649-650.)

Paul's list of qualifications for elders framed in the masculine gender ("husband of one wife"--literally, "a one-wife husband"--[1 Tim 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9]) does not exclude women from serving as elders any more than the masculine gender throughout the Ten Commandments (Exod 20; see esp. vs. 17) exempts women from obedience. Rather, these passages are again upholding the Edenic ideal--the principle of monogamy (Gen 2:24).

God does not speak directly to the question of the ordination of women in the NT, just as He does not deal directly with the abolition of slavery, with vegetarianism, abstinence from alcohol, and many other issues based on principles set forth "from the beginning." But He has given clear Biblical principles to guide our decision-making.

In these last days, when the fullness of the everlasting Gospel is to be preached, God has called His church to return to His original blueprint for every area of our lives: our diet, our day of worship--and the three human relationships mentioned in Gal 3. Our church has already taken courageous stands against slavery and racial prejudice. God also calls us to return to the Edenic ideal for male-female relationships that allows women equal access to the gifts of the Spirit for ministry (Joel 2:28-30; Eph 4:11-13).

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