

Bible Study: What Does the Bible Say About Women's Ordination?

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How does the creation story of Genesis 1, view male and female in relation to each other? What practice do we see in the Old Testament regarding women leaders over men? How did Jesus treat women, and why? What does Paul mean about not permitting women "to teach" in 1 Timothy 2?

This succinct study delves into Scriptures to explain the context and culture involving some of the most misunderstood and misused biblical citations used to withhold women's ordination.

Seventh-day Adventists are to be "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15, NKJV), appropriately incorporating scriptural principles, and applying these teachings to life. We accomplish this sacred task by the interpretive methods that arise from Scripture, while excluding any extra-biblical agendas, social trends, or cultural influences from being imposed upon the text. Just as our health message (which excludes smoking) is based on principles instead of a direct "Thus saith the Lord," we similarly employ principles in order to address this topic, as there are no direct Bible texts dealing with women's ordination.

Here are 10 common questions:

1. How does the creation story of Genesis 1, view male and female in relation to each other? Both man and woman are made in God's image, both are blessed, both share the responsibility of procreation, both are to subdue the Earth, and both are to rule over the animal kingdom (Gen. 1:26-28). As harmonious co-leaders of the Earth, they are completely equal, without any hint of submission/subordination of one to the other, even though they are created with sexual differentiation.

2. What does Genesis 2 teach? (a) The entire account shows that the creation of woman at the end of the narrative, corresponds in importance to the creation of man at the beginning. The movement in the text is from incompleteness to completeness. (b) The Hebrew language describes the woman as man's 'ēzer kēnegdô ("help meet for him," Gen. 2:18, KJV). While the English word "help" often suggests a subordinate,

the Hebrew ‘ēzer’ has no such connotation. Used mostly of God (as in Exod. 18:4; Deut. 33:7, 26; Ps. 33:20; 70:4; 115:9-11), this term never implies a subordinate position, but simply a beneficial relationship. (c) That Adam was “derived” from the ground shows no subordination, neither does Eve’s creation from a rib. Taken from his side, the very symbolism indicates that, not to be stepped on, she was “to stand by his side as an equal” (PP 46.2). (d) Adam does not exercise headship/leadership over the woman by naming her in Genesis 2:23. Hagar assigns a name to God (Gen. 16:13); but this certainly does not suggest her exercising headship over God. In brief, Genesis 2 has no evidence of any creation order with men in the headship/leadership role and women in a submissive or subordinate position. Nothing in this passage restricts her from full and equal participation in any ministry to which God may choose to call her. This description of the relationship between man and woman can be seen throughout the Bible and beyond. No inspired person—not Moses, Jesus, Paul, or Ellen White—teaches a creation headship or leadership of man over woman.

3. What can be learned from Genesis 3, read in its full biblical context? (a) Since they were co-regents of the Earth when Eve sinned, the Devil had no right to usurp dominion. It was only after Adam also sinned that the dominion of this world came under Satan’s control, which is why Scripture notes that “through one man sin entered the world” (Rom. 5:12). (b) While there is not even a hint of male over female headship/leadership in Genesis 1 and 2, a subjection of Eve to Adam is seen in Genesis 3:16 (NKJV): “Your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you.” It is highly significant to recognize that this subjection comes only after the Fall into sin. Moreover this is not a general submission of women to men, but is limited to the husband-wife relationship. The servant-headship/leadership of the husband to his wife, as indicated in Genesis 3, can no more be broadened to man-woman relationships in general, than can the sexual desire of the wife be extended to mean the sexual longing of all women for all men. (c) God specifically identifies what the sin of both of them was: not the violation of an alleged man/woman leadership/submission principle, but rather the eating of the fruit of the tree from which God commanded them not to eat (Gen. 3:11).

4. What practice do we see in the Old Testament regarding women leaders over men? (a) Miriam is noted as a prophet, musician and leader (Exod. 15:20; Micah 6:4). Deborah (in Judges 4-5) is depicted as a military leader with the same authority as male generals, and a judge to whom other Israelites (both men and women) turned for

counsel. Huldah, who served during the time of Jeremiah, comes to the foreground as a chief religious authority at a time of intense revival in Judah (see 2 Kings 22). (b) In a nutshell, although there did exist social inequalities for women in Israel, there were no legal restrictions barring women from positions of influence, leadership or authority over men. (c) God’s plan was that all Israel would be a “kingdom of priests” (Exod. 19:6). Due to Israel’s sin, an alternate plan was instituted in which even most men were excluded—except for one family in one tribe in one literal nation of Israel (Exod. 32; 40:12-16).

5. How did Jesus treat women, and why? Jesus Himself set the tone for complete gospel restoration by directing His hearers back to God’s original plan “from the beginning” (Matt. 19:8). He did not upset the fabric of Jewish culture; thus He did not select women as part of His immediate disciples, nor any Gentiles. But, He pointed the way forward in His revolutionary treatment of women (see Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:1-3; John 4:7-30; 20:1-18).

6. What does Paul mean about not permitting women “to teach” in 1 Timothy 2? The women in Ephesus were not fit to teach because they had been or were being deceived by the false teachers [4:1-5; 6:3-10]—just as Eve had been deceived by the serpent’s alluring words (1 Tim. 2:14; 2 Cor. 11:3-4). The verb ‘authentein’ in 1 Timothy 2:12, translated “to have authority over,” is a type of teaching, which is done in a controlling or domineering manner. Paul’s prohibition is best seen as a temporary injunction specifically related to the false teachings that were troubling the believers in Ephesus. As in all of Scripture, the passage contains principles for the church today.

7. What is the meaning and significance of the phrase “the husband of one wife” found in 1 Timothy 3:2? (a) This phrase shows that the overseer must be totally devoted to the spouse, as the Common English Bible rightly renders it: “They should be faithful to their spouse.” (b) It is this appropriate idiomatic interpretation of the phrase ‘mias gunaikos andra’ (i.e., “faithful to their spouse”), which accounts for the fact that Phoebe was identified as a “deacon [diakonos] of the church at Cenchreae” (Rom. 16:1, NRSV). In brief, just as the use of masculine gender terms in the Ten Commandments does not exempt women from obedience, similarly the use of masculine gender language in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, does not exclude women from serving as elders or pastors.

8. **What about “headship” in the church?** Ephesians 5:21-23 reminds us to be “submitting to one another in the fear of God. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church: and He is Savior of the body.” Hence, husband headship in the home is not equated with male headship in the church. Rather, the only husband/head of the church is Christ, and all the church, including males and females, are His “bride,” equally submissive to Him (Eph. 5:21-23).

9. **How did Paul treat women, and why?** (a) In Galatians 3:28 (NRSV), Paul declared: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” This is not merely dealing with equal access to salvation among various groups. On the contrary, Paul here specifically identifies three relationships in which the Jews had perverted God’s original plan, making one group subordinate to another: Jew-Gentile; master-slave; male-female. (b) The subordination of Gentiles by Jews was difficult to root out (even in Peter; see Gal. 2:11-14). Slavery, similarly, was not immediately abolished in the church (see Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22; Phlm. 12; etc.), yet principles were set forth that would lead back to the edenic ideal. Likewise, it has taken time for women to receive full and equal participation with men in church ministry. (d) Yet, even in New Testament times, there are examples of women in church leadership/headship roles. For example, Paul indicates that the women at Philippi, including Euodia and Syntyche were leaders of the local congregation (Phil. 4:2-3). Priscilla had an authoritative teaching role over Apollos (Acts 18:24-28); also, Romans 16:1-16 lists several women who ministered together with Paul as his coworkers (‘synergoi’). (e) While it is possible that Junia was a female apostle (see Rom. 16:7), a more persuasive case for female spiritual leaders can be made from a study of the gifts of the Spirit, especially that of the gender-inclusive gifts of apostles and pastors (Eph. 4:11-13).

10. **Our Fundamental Belief #14 states:** “The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue and people. In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or

reservation. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures, we share the same faith and hope, and reach out in one witness to all. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God, who has adopted us as His children” (Rom. 12:4, 5; 1 Cor. 12:12-14; Matt. 28:19, 20; Ps. 133:1; 2 Cor. 5:16, 17; Acts 17:26, 27; Gal. 3:27, 29; Col. 3:10-15; Eph. 4:14-16; 4:1-6; John 17:20-23). In other words, the gifts of spiritual leadership in the church, including that of pastor, apostle and teacher (Eph. 4:11), are gender inclusive.

Since Scripture shows that God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34), that the Holy Spirit’s gifts are for both men and women (1 Cor. 12), and that this includes the spiritual leadership of pastors (Eph. 4:11-13), the Seventh-day Adventist Church was right in officially voting (at the 1985 General Conference Session) that women could become pastors. The 2013-14 Theology of Ordination Study Committees did not find any reason not to fully recognize women to the gospel ministry.

Originally published in the Columbia Union Visitor on May 4, 2015 at www.ColumbiaUnionVisitor.com/bible-study-what-does-the-bible-say-about-womens-ordination/