

Brief Bible Thoughts on Women's Ordination
By Eugene Prewitt
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The Issues and the Issue

Silence can be eloquence. And on the issue of women's ordination to the gospel ministry in the Adventist church, too much has already been said. Books have been written on both sides of the issue. The anti-ordination camp have urged that the Bible settles this issue decidedly. The pro-ordination camp retorts that the Bible writers conformed to cultural norms in their day when they limited the role of women in local church administration.

And I, of course, have highly oversimplified the issue by making such a summary.

Complicating matters somewhat are the facts that the Bible abounds with evidence of women prophets, but never of a female priest.

Nevertheless, I agree with many who argue that the real issue at stake here is the question of scriptural authority versus higher critical naysaying.

The New Testament Data

When the Bible outlines the qualifications for being an elder, they are worded in distinctly gender-specific terms. The elder is to be the "husband of one wife" and to "rule" his house well. The apostle argues that if he is not able to rule his house, how can he be expected to rule the church well?

1 Timothy 3:1 This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. 2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; 3 Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; 4 One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; 5 (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)

If we ask the question, "who is authorized in the Bible to rule the home?" we have a simple answer even in Genesis 3:16. Paul makes reference to this fact also in the verses just before the ones above.

1 Timothy 2:11 Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. 12 But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. 13 For Adam was first formed, then Eve.

These three verses are located just between an exhortation to women to adorn themselves with meekness and the announcement that if a "man desire the office" of an elder, that he does well. In other words, the "teaching" in verse 12 is united to the idea of "authority" in that verse because the verse is about teaching authority in the church. It is about the issue of women's ordination to

the position of “elder.”

The reason that a woman is refused such a position is plain in the passages above. She ought to be subject to her own husband. And how, then, can she be in authority over him? She ought to submit to his headship. How then can she rule well her own home?

These same arguments are used by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians.

1Co 11:3 But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.

1Co 14:34 Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. 1Co 14:35 And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

The “speaking” here cannot be a reference to speaking in general. Earlier in the same book Paul laid down regulations for females to pray and prophecy in assembly. Rather, the speaking and silence and obedience here must be the same as those mentioned in the 1 Timothy verses. These speeches are the authoritative teaching of elders.

The idea of gender distinction in family government is plainly present in several other New Testament passages. (See Colossians 3:18, Ephesians 5:22–24, 1 Peter 3:1, 5–6.)

But what about the issue of prophets? We mentioned earlier that female prophets were present in Corinth. Even the female prophets, by the way they kept their hair, were to show their submission to their husband, their spiritual head.

1 Corinthians 11:5 But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.

This is not, of course, the only New Testament reference to women praying or prophesying. Acts 21:9 records that Philip had four daughters that were prophets. The assembly by the river was a meeting place for women and a place where prayer was routinely made. Acts 16:39.

Were women refused the position of elders because of cultural norms? If this was the case, Paul had opportunity to argue this way. But how did he found his argument? He founded it on the order of creation, the origin of sin, the teaching of nature regarding gender, the model of ancient holy persons. And never once did he found it on the customs of the Jews or of the Romans or of the varied peoples among whom he founded churches.

To ignore his reasoning while countering his conclusion is to discount his authority. And as I said in the introduction, this is the primary issue.

Were women involved in ministry in the New Testament? Indeed. Even Jesus had women that ministered to Him and that, to at least some extent, traveled with Him.

Mark 15:40 There were also women looking on afar off: among whom was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome; 41 (Who also, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered unto him;) and many other women which came up with him unto Jerusalem.

Lu 8:3 And Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their substance.

Acts records the work of a husband-wife team that worked hand-in-hand with Paul, the author of the anti-ordain passage. Acts 18:2-3.

Why would God allow women to minister to Jesus, to plant churches, to prophesy and pray in public, and yet refuse to them the position of elder?

Prophets have no personal authority associated with their gift. They speak for God. Socially, if they are a daughter (as were Philip's four prophets), then they still are a daughter. They are still subject to their father. And when God speaks through them, they are as subject to those words as are the others that hear.

So Ellen White can be a prophet and James White can be an elder and theirs can be a happy home. (And it was, most of their married life.)

By way of contrast, the position of elder has personal authority with it. Let me explain.

When men organize themselves into any type of group and choose one of their own number to be a director, they are choosing to submit part of their individual independence to each other and to the leader. They do this for efficiency. Even angels are ordered in such a way.

Are such men saying that one is fundamentally superior to themselves in strength or intelligence? No. All they are really doing is saying that things will work better if there is order.

That is what the church does. If women were not an integral part of church life, then there would be no need to refuse to them the position of elder. God has ordained that the order in the family be reflected and supported by the order in the church.

So women may teach Sabbath school classes. They may conduct VBS. They may lead a stewardship drive. They may help their husbands plant a church. They

may even do pastoral work in the fullest sense of caring for the flock. But may they be placed in headship over the flock? No. That would upset the order of the family.

But what if she is single? No, that won't fix it. To put her in the elder's position would be to forbid her to marry. And that would not be right.

Old Testament Data

In the Old Testament women figure prominently. Huldah the prophet was probably a professor in the "college." Deborah was the courage behind Barak's success. Miriam won the hearts of her nation and led them in anthems. Women show up most often in their positions as significant mothers.

But never, in all the history of the Old Testament, do we find a female priest.

"Wait!" says one. "Wasn't it a whole nation of priests?" Oh, yes, that is true. But that was part of Korah's argument when he wanted to be a priest. And it didn't hold much theological weight in Numbers 16.

The fact is that when we select a man to be an elder, he is our peer. We are not obliged to believe what he says. He is not our king. But we are to respect his headship for order's sake.

In like manner, when God chose an Old Testament person to be a priest, he was a peer of his wife and relatives and fellow Israelites. But they were a kingdom of priests. But they all surrendered a bit of their individual independence for the best good of the body. And so they respected their God-chosen priests.

This is how Luther explained it when he preached about the priesthood of believers. He wrote that the priesthood belongs to everyone, but that not everyone can exercise it. So the body chooses who will exercise the authority that they all possess. (If they didn't possess it, he reasoned, they wouldn't be able to give it to their pastor.)

Ellen White and Adventist History

While the prophet lived the issue of woman's suffrage was a hot political one. Women had taken the lead in many social issues, from nursing to the care of deranged persons, to the advocacy of temperance.

And in the Adventist church itself a group of women led out in one of the most successful and pervasive of all revivals, the introduction of the Tract and Missionary Society. That organization was often presided by a woman and was one of the most significant positions in the denomination.

But women were not ordained to the gospel ministry. We were the people of the Book. And the Book spoke clearly on this issue. We had a woman prophet and the Book smiled on that. It did not smile on the idea of having women elders. (Ordaining women was suggested once in meeting. It didn't get as far as a vote.)

Conclusion

For years I have hesitated to write on this issue, and for only one reason. I wasn't sure where to draw the line Biblically regarding women teaching and leading in church functions outside that of ordained elder. That issue is resolved for me now by the proximity of 1 Timothy 2 to 1 Timothy 3.

The Bible isn't confusing. If it takes long arguments to make it that way, the arguments are at fault rather than the Bible.

If a man desires the office of an elder, he desires a good thing.

If a woman desires the same, she doesn't understand. She cannot rule her house well. If she rules it, that is not well. And so, like all the other members of the church, she gives of her priesthood authority to the men chosen by her and by the church to exercise it. And then she respects that authority that, originally, was hers.

Amen.