

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS AND WOMEN'S ORDINATION

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1. Introduction

The multicultural nature of the Seventh-day Adventist Church often affects how its members position themselves regarding important issues in the Church. One example is the long standing issue of women's ordination. The questions relating to women's ordination have traditionally been addressed theologically in the church's effort to be biblically correct. Although this is an important approach, it does not effectively address all the challenges a multicultural church faces. In this article it is our aim to point out that the issues surrounding women's ordination must not only be viewed through theological lenses. The church must also take into consideration cultural issues when tackling this important issue. Although our denomination was birthed in North America, it has grown to become an international church. It is therefore not appropriate to think of Adventism in terms of what is practically acceptable or not acceptable for only the North American Church or for the Church in Africa or Asia or Europe. As missiologists, an important question that keeps demanding an answer is: "How can an international church approach this issue so that whatever is decided encourages members in all parts of the world?"

2. God and Human Culture

The Bible was not written in a cultural vacuum for it was the cultural context of the ancient Near East that served as the incubator for the thought and literature of the biblical people.¹ The fact that God chose to reveal

¹ Henry Jackson Flanders, Robert Wilson Crapps, and David Anthony Smith, *People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 50.

himself to Israel in the ancient Near Eastern cultural context points to the important fact that "God demonstrates his respect and appreciation for human culture by working through it rather than above or outside it."² God's revelations were understood and accepted because they were culturally packaged. The biblical record is a clear portrayal of how God used human culture as a means to relate with human beings. Human beings can only relate meaningfully to that which is consistent with their worldview and culture. Glenn Rogers sums up this vital fact by pointing out that

God interacted with Abraham, Israel, and the Prophets, with Jesus, with the apostles, and with every one of us (including you and me) not in some otherworldly or heavenly context, but in the context of this material world, a world of human culture. . . . God uses human culture as a vehicle for interaction and communication with humans because human culture is the only context in which humans can communicate. This is not because God is limited. It is because humans are limited. Human culture is the only frame of reference humans have. If God wants to communicate with humans it must be within the framework of human culture.³

Because we believe that the church belongs to God, both church leaders and members must pay careful attention to God's recorded dealings with people in their cultural settings. Both in the Old and New Testaments God made room for human culture with its weaknesses (e.g. Mark 10:1-12 where Jesus talks about divorce). In many instances, knowing the effect of drastic change, God chose to slowly work to change people's practices in a culture rather than forcing things so quickly on a people that they could not handle the change. It is therefore quite appropriate to suggest that the revelation of God's principles has often been progressive rather than spelling out God's ultimate ethic or ideal. For example, he tolerated Jacob's marriage to two sisters (Gen 29:15-28), a practice that he later outlawed (Lev 18:18)⁴ and in the New Testament there is no frontal attack on slavery, yet who would argue for a biblical basis for slavery?

Culture is also a powerful force that shapes the assumptions and values of people in a particular cultural context. In all the discussions over the past thirty years on the issue of women's ordination very little has

² John Pilch, *Introducing the Cultural Context of the Old Testament* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1991), 159.

³ Glenn Rogers, *The Bible Culturally Speaking: The Role of Culture in the Production, Presentation and Interpretation of God's Word* (n.p.: Mission and Ministry Resources, 2004), 27, 28.

⁴ Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 441.

been written about how particular cultures impact this sensitive matter. There have been many studies from a biblical perspective, but few that have looked at how culture impacts biblical principles. Some people are even horrified when it is suggested that culture does play a role in defining and shaping the expression of a biblical principle in a particular cultural setting. Therefore, let us illustrate briefly a few areas where this can be seen.

3. Culture and Biblical Principles

First of all let us state right up front that we believe strongly that biblical principles have universal application—they are for all people in all setting for all time. However, we have observed that various biblical principles are interpreted differently in different cultural contexts. For example, let us take the biblical principle of modesty to illustrate this point. Just about everyone would agree that God's people should be modest. However, it seems that modesty is most of the times framed in terms of acceptable dress or behavior especially by women.

When I (Bruce) worked in Japan at the Seventh-day Adventist English Schools, the English School secretary often dressed in a kimono—a very modest type of dress. When Japanese women wear a kimono they are wrapped with clothe in a way to reveal very little shape and they are covered from the neck to the floor. One day one of the saints of the church came in and started to read the riot act to the secretary. When she had left I asked the secretary what all the finger pointing was about. She said that the church member had accused her of dressing like a prostitute. I was flabbergasted and asked her to explain. She told me that geisha girls wore their kimonos in a way that showed about two or three inches of the nape of their necks, and that when the church member saw a little of her neck that morning she had accused her of dressing like a prostitute. I had seen nothing sexy, but in that particular cultural context and to people from an older generation, showing the nape of the neck was considered immodest.

A second case in point is what is considered immodest in India. One hundred years ago missionary women from America and Great Britain went to India wearing dresses that reached halfway between the knee and their ankles, but they were considered terribly immodest. Why? Because they exposed the sexy part of the body in that particular culture—the leg between the knee and the ankle—body parts that were always covered by a sari or leggings that traditional Indian women wore. When the missionary ladies wore dresses that exposed that part of their bodies it was like going topless in the West.

What we are trying to illustrate is that even though there is a biblical principle that God's people should be modest, particular cultures help define modesty in their cultural context. Therefore, modesty can have various expressions.

Another point that is important to remember in connection with this discussion is that cultures are always changing, and what may have been considered immodest in 1930 or 1950 may be acceptable in 2013. Let's take the history of women wearing slacks in America as an example. In 1930 most women wore dresses in America—both at home and at work. Dresses were worn even on the farm. Then during the Second World War when women began working in the factories because so many men had gone off to war, many jobs demanded that the women wear slacks. Bit by bit American culture came to accept the fact that women could wear slacks in certain type of jobs. In the 1970s the mini-skirt came into fashion and it became almost impossible for Christian women to find dresses that had a modest length. Many women began to wear pant suits—a type of attire that was much more modest than what was being worn by many in the culture. Soon women were even wearing pant suits to church in the winter—something that was practical and was also becoming acceptable. Today, many women wear slacks to work or to dress-up occasions and that kind of attire is widely accepted even among Seventh-day Adventists as acceptable and modest dress. So, cultures change with time. However, if someone had forced the issue in the 1950s and had insisted that women could wear slacks back then it would have been culturally unacceptable even though most would have admitted that slacks could be a modest type of dress for women.

With these two concepts in mind—various cultures interpret biblical principles in different ways and a culture's concept of what is acceptable or unacceptable changes over time—the next section will look at some of the cultural hang-ups that are obstacles for some Adventists in some parts of the world that keep them from being open to gender neutral ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

4. Issues of Purity and Ritual Cleanliness

There are still many cultures in our world that have similar views to the ancient Jews in connection with ritual cleanliness for they believed that "when a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean until evening" (Exod 15:19, NIV). In such cultures the very thought that a woman could occupy the pulpit and stand before a congregation of men is incomprehensible. People with those worldview values just cannot

accept the fact that a woman, during her period, could be used by God to speak God's Word. This would be beyond their wildest view of what is appropriate.

I interviewed Appiah Kwarteng from Ghana concerning such views and he helped me understand some of the issues that are involved. Appiah grew up in a polygamist home. Whenever his mother had her period she would never be involved in preparing food for her husband because she would have caused him to be ritually unclean. Being ritually unclean had far-reaching implications since he was the priest of the family and the one that needed to maintain ritual purity so he could have a clean channel to the ancestors. It was believed that to break this taboo would result in calamity coming on the family, clan, or community. So in Ghana, especially among the older generation the idea that a woman could assume a pastoral role would be very difficult for many to accept. However, among those who are younger, the taboo may be known, but it is not feared as much, and among the third or youngest generation many are not even aware that there is a problem. This again illustrates that cultures change and what is unacceptable now may be acceptable later.

This concept of ritual purity is also alive in the Russian Orthodox Church and is practiced widely by its members. The general attitudes connected with ritual purity may also play a role in how people look at the issue of women's ordination in lands where the Orthodox Church has a strong influence.

When I entered a convent of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCOR) in France, I was introduced to the restrictions imposed on a nun when she has her period. Although she was allowed to go to church and pray, she was not to go to communion; she could not kiss the icons or touch the *antidoron*, she could not help bake prosphoras or handle them, nor could she help clean the church; she could not even light the *hmpada* or icon-lamp that hung before the icons in her own cell.⁵

Within the Russian Orthodox Church regulations dealing with ritual impurity vary from parish to parish and depend a lot on the local priest. However, the general practice allows women to attend church during menstruation but forbids them from receiving Holy Communion, kissing icons or crosses, touching prosphora or the *antidoron*, or drinking holy water. In parishes outside Russia most women are asked to abstain from partaking of the communion when they are ritually impure.⁶

⁵ Vassa Larin, "What is 'Ritual Im/purity' and Why?" *SVTQ* 52 (2008): 275.

⁶ *Ibid.*

The above examples help us realize that in some areas dominated by the Russian Orthodox Church, in some parts of the world, and in many tribal societies the relationship between ritual purity and women officiating during religious services elicits strong opinions and still creates barriers that if disregarded could place the church in an unfavorable light in the community.

5. Gender Separation

In many cultures gender separation is still practiced as a social control mechanism that helps maintain purity between men and women. If this social control mechanism is disregarded, there can be unforeseen ramifications that develop in other areas of the culture.

For example, in 2000 a vibrant Seventh-day Adventist congregation was started in Burkina Faso through an interesting chain of events. An Evangelical pastor had been listening regularly to Adventist World Radio (AWR). He became convinced about the new truths he was learning so invited some members of his congregation to also listen to AWR. They did and were also convinced. They withdrew from their church although they knew nothing about the Adventist Church in their country. As they continued to listen to AWR, they learned that the Adventist Church had its headquarters in the capital city, Ouagadougou, so the pastor traveled there to learn what he could about the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I (Boubakar) was asked by the mission president to study the 27 Fundamental Doctrines with him, which we did over a three day period before the pastor went back home. After about a month, the man and some of his members came again during which time the mission president and I went to spend several days with them. After further study, some of them were baptized including their pastor. Because of the pastor's influence in the region, several people began attending church. The mission president helped raise funds in Canada to build a primary school and dug two wells for the new congregation.

Because of the traditional customs in the area where this new church was located, women and men did not sit together during church services and women never preached. One day a missionary visited the church and scolded the members saying it was uncivilized and too primitive to continue with such practices in an Adventist Church. He encouraged them to do things as it was done in "the world church." Women and men started sitting together and women were allowed to address the congregation. Unfortunately, the local people in the area felt that families sitting together and the mixing of genders in public were indecent and immoral practices. As a result, several of the men gradually stopped attending church.

The growth of new members dried up, and since it was a patriarchal society, many of the town's men prevented their wives and children from attending the church. A beautiful church building still stands there but with less than a dozen regular worshippers.

This again illustrates the fact that if strong cultural taboos are broken abruptly, people in that cultural setting may view Christianity as foreign, as against valued cultural beliefs and practices, and as something that would keep many from exploring the claims of Christ.

6. A Culture's Loci of Authority

The appointment of Julia Pierson in March 2013 by President Barack Obama as the first woman to lead the Secret Service is an unprecedented event in the history of that male-dominated agency that was started in 1865. According to *The New York Times* of March 26, 2013 only 10 percent of the 3,500 special agents are women. This fact confirms Erik Olin Wright's claim that workplace authority is still unequally distributed in most of the countries of the world today. He asserts that "in the United States the probability of a man in the labor force occupying an 'upper' or 'top' management position is 1.8 times greater than the probability of a woman occupying such a position, whereas in Sweden, the probability for men is 4.2 times greater than for women."⁷ What is interesting in Wright's research is that his findings are counter-intuitive. Although gender relations are egalitarian in many respects in these Western countries, there is still a gender gap in favor of men in workplace authority.

It is this form of gender gap in workplace authority that constitutes another obstacle that keeps many in our world from easily accepting women in ministry. In many traditional societies authority flows from God to the man to his wife and then on down to the children. This was a pattern in the Old Testament with the patriarchal societies and a system that continues to be true for many groups in the Americas, Africa, and Asia.

It is true that with education women are working in more and more areas that previously were denied to them. Even in some of the most male dominated societies there have been women prime ministers and presidents and there are a growing number of women parliamentarians. However, even in these exceptional cases the majority of the population would feel that the locus of authority still resides with the men in society. In

⁷ Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 319.

many of those cultures women are not looked down on, but are just assumed to fill different roles.

A culture's locus of authority presents another obstacle in some parts of the world for women to be recognized as religious leaders in a community. This is another area that is changing and we anticipate that twenty or thirty years from now even more cultures will allow for a far greater variety of options for women.

7. A Way Forward

This short article has mentioned that God has chosen to work through human culture, that people in various cultures interpret biblical principles in different ways, and that a culture's concept of what is acceptable or unacceptable changes over time. We also briefly discussed the fact that issues of purity and ritual cleanliness in some cultures block women during their menses from participating in some religious practices. Some cultures still practice gender separation and in many cultures the locus of authority is male dominated.

In most Western nations the cultures do not attach any cultural value to concepts of ritual purity and cleanliness in connection with a woman's period, nor do they practice any form of gender separation, or see authority located predominately in the male gender. Thus, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is faced with the very real dilemma that if it promotes the ordination of women for the worldwide Adventist Church it will create stumbling blocks for many, whereas if they do not allow for women called of God to not only serve but also to be ordained, many in other parts of the world will feel that their cultural situation is not appreciated or understood.

We believe that the precedence in how to handle this situation has already been established and provides a workable solution to the issue of gender neutral ordination. At the General Conference Session in 1975 it was decided to allow women to be ordained as local elders in cultures where that practice was acceptable and welcomed. We believe that each union should be allowed to also decide this culturally sensitive issue since they know best the feelings and practices of their areas.

God's missionary passion to save the world calls into question all human prejudice and preconceived ideas about human cultures. There are many cultural practices that impact people in ways that do not allow them to be full participants in all aspects of society. However, God is patient, taking time to allow the gospel principles to permeate each culture. And since the gospel cannot be heard in the abstract apart from a cultural context, any endeavor made by the church on behalf of God must not only

conform to sound biblical and theological principles but also take into account cultural understandings. Since the church's ministry always takes place in a particular context, such ministry must also be relevant to people within their particular cultures.⁸ While firmly maintaining biblical integrity, the church in its mission and ministry must also be resourceful and flexible in adjusting its methods and procedures to its ministry context. Just as God is mindful of the cultural context of those receiving his messages, so must the people who lead the church. Therefore, allowing unions a choice in this matter of women's ordination seems to provide a way forward that protects those who are against the practice for cultural reasons while allowing it in those areas of the world where there are no cultural barriers.

⁸ Hiebert, *Anthropological Insight for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 55.