



Always remember you're unique, just like everyone else.

Lesson 15

Gender Justice

Life Principle

As we pursue God's original plan for the human family, we must seek the complete equality Adam and Eve shared before the Fall.

At the 1995 General Conference Session of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, considerable discussion occurred regarding gender equality and ministry opportunities. From this discussion came the following statement, which addresses concerns for justice between the sexes and takes a position of equality. The statement is entitled "Women's Issues."

Seventh-day Adventists believe that all people, male and female, are created equal, in the image of a loving God. We believe that both men and women are called to fill a significant role in accomplishing the primary mission of the Adventist Church: working together for the benefit of humanity. Yet we are painfully aware that throughout the world, in developing and developed nations, adverse societal conditions often inhibit women from fulfilling their God-given potential.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has identified several major problems, well documented by research, that often keep women from making valuable contributions to society. Stress, the environment and increased demands have placed women at greater risk for health problems. Poverty and heavy workloads not only deprive women of their ability to enjoy life, but also impair their physical and spiritual well-being. Family violence takes a heavy toll on its victims.

Women are entitled to the God-given privileges and opportunities intended for every human being—the right to literacy, to education, to adequate health care, to decision making, and to freedom from mental, physical or sexual abuse. We also maintain that women should play an increased role in the leadership and decision-making bodies of both church and society.

Ultimately, we believe that the Church will fulfill its mission only when women are empowered to achieve their full potential.¹

Created Equal to Live in Equality

1. Reflecting the image of God

Although many people today use the concept of human rights to argue for equality between men and women, the Scripture doesn't use this approach. The fundamental principle in support of justice between the genders is found at the very beginning—at Creation. This moral principle established upon our creation in God's image emerges from God's revelation regarding the essential equality of men and women.

Scripture says that when God created "man" (humanity) in His image, it has reference to both male and female. Soon after the creation of man (male), God created a complementary partner (female). So out of man God made woman, and the two became one flesh. It is the oneness of this complementary relationship that fully mirrors the image of God.

But this perfect equality was marred with the entrance of sin. The relationship between men and women was altered as a result of sin. The difficulties associated with equality issues still hamper human relations today. Christ's work of redemption not only affects our relationship with God, it also helps reconcile our relationships with each other.

An essential element of the distinctiveness of "man" as male and "man" as female is that each has a particular function. When God detailed the results of Adam and Eve's fall, He pointed out some of the different roles

that men and women would now and forever experience. These functions were meant to complement each other rather than be at odds with each other. In the oneness and harmony that is to mark male and female relatedness, there was to be no loss in the distinctions between "man" as male and "man" as female.

Furthermore, this human relatedness is designed to perfectly reflect the full image of God, the multi-personal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The biblical picture of human fulfillment comes into focus when male and female, with all their complexity, uphold equal relationships with each other.

2. Human leadership:

Hierarchy or Servanthood?

The Bible says that the "headship" of the male over the female is designed to reflect God's headship over Christ and Christ's headship over the church (1 Corinthians 11:3). Unfortunately, there are those who abuse this text to create a hierarchical relationship in the home in which the husband is firmly ensconced on the top rung of the ladder. But what would such an interpretation teach us about God if human leadership is a reflection of God's leadership? If God is the head of Christ, does that mean then that God the Father is in a position of hierarchical leadership over God the Son? Is Jesus one step lower on the divine hierarchy than God the Father? And would the Holy Spirit then be the third in com-

mand? Rather than seeing divine and human relations in this sort of political hierarchy of power positions, we need to understand human leadership as it was modeled by Christ. Christ's leadership is one of servanthood in which He completely gave Himself for others.

Unfortunately, our postmodern culture pushes us away from a genuine Christlike model of servanthood leadership and toward a political hierarchy of power.

Creatures of Culture

Do we treat each other in the ways that our culture has taught us, or do we treat each other in the ways that our Savior has modeled for us? The answer is probably that both Christ and culture have influenced our treatment of each other. This question should go right to the core of the issue about what kind of people we are. But what about Christ? Did He minister as accepted in the culture of His day? Did He, for example, treat women in the typical manner of His day?

Christ was decidedly different from the average Jew in the way He treated women. Recall how surprised His disciples were when they saw Him with the woman at the well (John 4). No other religious leader would allow himself to be seen with a woman like that! Recall that women freely "followed" Him and were an essential part of the events surrounding the Cross and Resurrection. Recall that women felt free to approach Him with questions of religious and personal importance. Recall that women were blessed

with essential roles in the development of the early church. Recall that Jesus gave His life in ministry to women and men.

In Jesus' special prayer recorded in John 17, He asks God to create a oneness among His followers like the oneness He enjoyed with God. The oneness among His followers would make no allowance for the discrimination that women faced in His day. Similarly, if our character is to reflect Christ's character, we must oppose inequality and injustice toward women or men at every turn. We must also take every effort to uplift and restore God's original plan for male and female equality in a society where it is sorely lacking.

Walking in the Courage of Christ

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has been richly blessed by a most remarkable woman in a position of leadership. Through God's leading Ellen White was given a place to work among the men of this church.

In her day, 1827-1915, women suffered a great deal of inequality, and her role as a leader in the Church was never an easy one to fill. She personally faced opposition from some in the Church who held on to cultural prejudice toward women.

In the fall of 1891, Ellen White sailed to Australia at the request of the General Conference. While there, the Lord blessed the work of the Church through this special woman. She returned to America and to the pulpit of the church in Battle Creek, Michigan, on the occasion of the 1901 General Conference Session. Gathered there for this meeting were some 4,000 delegates, over-

whelmingly male. There is a picture of her on the platform that day, surrounded by bearded men in dark suits. The president of the General Conference had given his report and stepped down as the leader of the church. She walked to the pulpit with a special message for those men, and she delivered it in the courage of Christ.

Things had not been going well in the management of the Church. Her criticism was sharp and to the point. Some men in positions of leadership had not yielded their hearts totally to God and had hindered God's working through the Church. The thousands gathered sat in stunned silence. Many had expected a special message from her, but no

one knew it would be such strong counsel from this frail, gray-haired lady. When she finished, she returned to her seat on the platform while the silence continued.

The men of the Church might well have held on to a condescending attitude that day and simply patted the sweet old lady on the shoulder and thanked her for her message. But their spirits were overtaken by God, and there was a wonderful acceptance of Mrs. White's counsel. When the chairman of the meeting finally went to the pulpit, everyone held his breath. He said that her words had been "very plain," and that he wanted to accept them in the same humble spirit with which they had been given.²

Reaction

Discussion Questions

1. Is the issue of gender equality merely a concern of those who live in Western societies?
2. What does culture have to do with our vision of a male God?
3. Can God's image be fully reflected in a single gender, or does it take the full relatedness of male and female?
4. Since sin has corrupted human relations, is full equality a realistic goal? Why or Why not?
5. Should family relationships be organized around a hierarchical model?
6. Why is the role of full-time homemaker and staying home with the children often seen as demeaning?
7. What is meant by this statement: Equality is not synonymous with sameness?
8. Should efforts to achieve equality blur the distinction between male and female or blur their unique roles?
9. What types of social inequalities or prejudice exist? Why are people prejudiced? What needs do prejudices fulfill? What is the primary source of prejudice?

As Seventh-day Adventists, we should be encouraged that our story includes a woman of such strength and courage. We must also be challenged to reject the lingering effects of gender prejudice present in our societies. When Jesus was asked about divorce by some church leaders, He referred them back to the beginning, back to when true gender equality still existed. We must do the same as we seek to reflect the image of God.

Anchor Text

"I pray also for those who will believe in me . . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may

believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one" (John 17:20-22).

Bible Search **Gender Equality**

Continue your study on gender equality by completing the worksheet provided by your teacher.

Endnotes

1. The statement was released by the Office of the President, Robert S. Folkenberg, after being adopted by the Administrative Committee of the General Conference, July 7, 1995.
2. *General Conference Bulletin*, April 3, 1901. As quoted in Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: Messenger to the Remnant* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1969), 18.

Personal Response

How might Christ's model of servant leadership help you relate better to persons of the opposite sex?

Practical Application

Develop a Bible study using a minimum of five passages that relate to gender justice. At least one of the passages should be a story that involves Jesus. Indicate your response to what you discover about gender and justice. State the biblical truths discovered as principles of behavior and include a

focus on Christ's response to the issues of gender and justice. Do not simply lift the texts and comments out of this lesson. Search out new texts and fresh thoughts from your own perspective.