

The Moral Imperative To Ordain Women in Ministry

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For Seventh-day Adventists, ordaining women in ministry is a moral imperative that arises from the gospel of Christ, the overall teaching of Scripture, and our own Statement of Fundamental Beliefs: "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" (paragraph 13). Even with the recent General Conference vote in Utrecht, we must proceed to ordain women in ministry on the same basis we ordain men: their spiritual experience, their knowledge of Scripture, their competence for the tasks of ministry, and the fruitfulness of their ministry. We must publicly affirm and fully authorize their ministry in and for the church. It is the right thing to do, and we must do it without delay. We have waited long enough.

Ordaining women in ministry is required first of all by Jesus' instruction that we treat others as we want to be treated--a principle of mutuality and respect which "is the law and the prophets," belonging to the very essence of God's will for human relationships (Matt. 7:12). Ordaining women is required secondly by the New Testament principle of spiritual equality in Christ; a person's value, role, or function is not defined by gender any more than it is by socioeconomic status or race (Gal. 3:28). And ordaining women is required thirdly by the leading of the Spirit, calling both women and men to ministry in the church (Acts 2:17-18).²

On the other hand, refusing to ordain a whole group of persons solely because they are not male, and without regard to their calling, ability, experience, and effectiveness, contradicts the inclusiveness of the gospel and expresses a gender prejudice that is morally wrong. Making maleness a prerequisite for ordination is the same kind of moral issue that slavery was a century and a half ago and that racial discrimination was a generation ago. Would it not be a moral issue if the church were to refuse to ordain ministers who were not Caucasian?

Whatever spin is put on it, whatever rationalizing is done to explain it, whatever narrow reading of Scripture is alleged to support it, restricting ordination to men constitutes a public declaration that women ministers are unworthy of ordination, simply and solely because they are women.³ This is wrong not only in the light of Scripture and of morality, but also in the light of Adventist history, which includes in addition to the extraordinary role of Ellen White in Adventist theology, piety, and mission, the notable contributions that have been made since the 1860s by women evangelists, editors, missionaries, Biblical scholars, teachers, pastors, chaplains, and administrators.⁴ And it is wrong in the light of theology, because it turns ordination into a symbol of maleness.⁵

We are becoming increasingly aware that ordination to ministry as a life-long, world-wide vocation and status is biblically and theologically problematic.⁶ But this

observation should not be used as yet another justification for failing to ordain women. The formal ordination of ministers is the historic and universally-recognized practice of Christian churches, and it has been the consistent practice of Seventh-day Adventists since the 1850s (before there were any organized conferences to authorize it). Until Adventist women in ministry were being considered for ordination, there was no objection to ordination as "unbiblical" or "Catholic." The two issues--the ordination of women in ministry, and the theology and vocabulary of ordination--are related; but they are separate issues, and they should not be confused. We do need to develop our theology of ordination, and we may eventually decide to use different language in a symbolism that better expresses what we mean. But first of all we must ordain the women whose lives and service demonstrate the genuineness of their calling and the leading of the Holy Spirit. We must give them the same affirmation, validation, and authorization we have given men in ministry for 140 years. This is the immediate moral imperative for Seventh-day Adventists.

It might seem that by using alternative language such as "dedication," "consecration," or "commissioning," and making corresponding changes in the constitutional documents of various church entities, we could establish the full equality of women and men in ministry without placing ourselves in direct opposition to the General Conference vote in Utrecht. But this strategy has several weaknesses. In the first place, it depends on the same sort of literalism that is used by many to justify their continuing discrimination against women; in the second place, it could easily be regarded as an obvious attempt to evade the spirit of the General Conference decision while complying with its letter; and, in the third place, it fails to confront the moral issue, which lies not in the specific language of the vote in Utrecht but in its fundamental meaning. It was a vote to perpetuate the ecclesiastical superiority of men--a relic we could and should have discarded 114 years ago, or at least 22 years ago.⁷

The vote in Utrecht against allowing equality for Adventist women in ministry was a grievous error. It constitutes a blot on the history and character of Adventism, and it must be rectified as early, as clearly, and as widely as possible. A proper response to this vote must address its meaning; to try merely to circumvent it verbally and procedurally is to ignore the stark reality that it was morally wrong. What we need to be doing now is not finding ways to affirm women without ordaining them, but finding ways to ordain them without resulting in too much turmoil.

Some practices and structures (such as the distribution of tithe funds, the organization of conferences, and the use of various communication media) are matters of church policy, and they can be settled by a majority vote according to practical and cultural considerations. In such cases we accept decisions even if we disagree with them. But the full equality of women and men in ministry is a matter of moral, spiritual, and theological integrity, in which we must be guided by the teaching of the whole Word of God and the spirit of the gospel of Christ. While we have great respect for a vote of a General Conference session because it is the broadest representation of the community of faith that is our spiritual home,⁸ we must live in accordance with the Word and the gospel.⁹

We are painfully aware that in response to the vote in Utrecht, any action in opposition, or even any statement of dissent, may be misinterpreted as disloyalty to the church as a whole. This causes us great personal and spiritual sorrow; but we must live with integrity, motivated by an even higher loyalty to the principles of truth and love on which the church itself is founded. Opposing an action of the General Conference on moral grounds is a far more authentic expression of loyalty to and love for the church than is passive or grumbling compliance. For it is from the church that we have learned to "call sin by its right name" and to "stand for the right though the heavens fall."¹⁰ In obedience to conscience we cannot, by a failure to speak or act, participate in the continuing discrimination against Adventist women in ministry.

Since the General Conference session failed to recognize the moral imperative of ordaining women in ministry, the responsibility for doing so now rests on others, beginning with the largest and most comprehensive organizational structures. The mission of the church will be best served if this responsibility is accepted by the North American Division. If the division fails to accept the responsibility, it will pass to the union and local conferences. If these organizations fail to accept it, the responsibility for ordaining women will pass to the congregations served by women ministers.

Adventist women in ministry are not on trial; they have recognized the leading of the Holy Spirit and demonstrated the reality of their calling. It is the rest of us Adventists--members, men in ministry, church officials, and various committees--who are on trial. Our actions, or our refusal to act, will show whether we too are willing to follow this leading of the Spirit.¹¹ Ordaining women in ministry is a moral imperative that we must obey without any further delay.

Notes

1 *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Manual* (Silver Spring: General Conference Ministerial Association, 1992), pp. 77-78.

2 The role of women as spiritual leaders and active participants in the communication of the gospel is well attested in the New Testament (Luke 8:1-3; 24:10; Acts 18:26; Rom. 16:1-2, 3-4, 6, 7, 12; 1 Cor. 16:19; Phil. 4:3). This evidence is part of the overall movement of the New Testament toward gender equality and inclusiveness. It is this trajectory that provides the context within the theological and practical significance of the well-known Pauline restrictions on the behavior of women (1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-12) are to be determined. As it was in the case of slavery, it is wrong here to make a particular practice into a prescription for every time and place. Nor have these Pauline restrictions been generally interpreted by Adventists as absolute and universal; such an interpretation would, among other things, logically undermine the ministry of Ellen White.

3 No one claims that women are identical to men. There is a wide array of anatomical, physiological, and psychosocial differences that contribute to a person's identity as female or male. The question is whether any of these differences, or all of them combined, in any way justify a refusal of full recognition and affirmation of the Spirit-led ministry of women. The answer is obviously and emphatically no. On the contrary,

the differences between women and men show that the fullness of humanity created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) exists in the complementarity's of female and male humanness – a complementarity's that is essential to the fullness of ministry in the name of God and that can be adequately expressed only by the ordination of women as well as men in ministry.

4 For names and identification, see "Selected List of 150 Adventist Women in Ministry, 1844-1944," compiled by Kit Watts and published in *The Welcome Table: Setting a Place for Ordained Women*, ed. Patricia A. Habada and Rebecca Frost Brillhart (Langley Park, Md.: TEAM Press, 1995), pp. 359-81.

5 The imagery of "headship" (Eph. 5:23-24) has no relevance at all to the ministry of women in the church. This metaphor occurs in a discussion of household relationships, not the church. The same passage says explicitly that it is Christ who is the head of the church. In Scripture, ordination to ministry is a recognition of God's call to service and servanthood (Mark 10:42-45), not a conferral of status or authority. Just as "headship" has nothing to do with the church, so ministry has nothing to do with "headship."

6 See, for example, V. Norskov Olsen, *Myth and Truth About Church, Priesthood and Ordination* (Riverside: Loma Linda University Press, 1990), pp.121-25.

7 At the General Conferences session of 1881 a resolution "that females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry" was introduced, discussed by eight speakers, and then referred to the General Conference Committee (*Review and Herald*, Dec. 20, 1881, p. 392; see also *Signs of the Times*, Jan. 5, 1882, p. 8, which includes this item "among the resolutions adopted," but seems to be mistaken in this regard). Unfortunately, the resolution was never heard of again. Ninety-two years later, in 1973, a conference of scholars appointed by the General Conference was convened at Camp Mohaven in Ohio and concluded that there were no theological obstacles to the ordination of women. But again there was no action. The fact that, so far as is known, no Adventist woman in ministry has ever been formally ordained is a result of the dominance of narrow Biblical exegesis, ecclesiastical tradition, and cultural influence over the truth of the gospel and the spiritual dynamic of Adventist belief.

8 See Ellen White's 1875 description of the General Conference as "the highest authority that God has upon earth" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p.492), as well as her 1909 statement: "When, in a General Conference, the judgment of the brethren assembled from all parts of the field is taken exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be stubbornly maintained, but surrendered. Never should a laborer regard as a virtue the persistent maintenance of his position of independence, contrary to the decision of the general body" (*ibid.*, vol. 9, p. 260). The current issue, however, is not a matter of "private independence and private judgment"; it involves decisions of the Southeastern California Conference constituency, the Pacific Union Conference executive committee, and the North American Division.

9 See the resolution adopted by the General Conference session of 1877, reprinted in the most recent (1990) edition of the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, p. 17: "Resolved, that the highest authority under God among Seventh-day Adventists is found in the will of the body of that people, as expressed in the decisions of the General Conference when acting within its proper jurisdiction; and that such decisions should be

submitted to by all without exception, unless they can be shown to conflict with the word of God and rights of individual conscience." The vote against allowing equality for women in ministry can indeed "be shown to conflict with the word of God and the rights of individual conscience."

10 Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1903), p.57.

11 Adventists have long been aware that revelation is progressive, leading to an expanding understanding of spiritual truth (John 16:13). See, for example, Ellen G. White's ringing statement: "Whenever the people of God are growing in grace, they will be constantly obtaining a clearer understanding of His Word.... This has been true in the history of the church in all ages, and thus it will continue to the end." (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 706). This progressive understanding of truth was evident in Adventist opposition to the practice of slavery in spite of the fact that there was no clear opposition to slavery in Scripture. It is likewise evident in the growing Adventist recognition that God's Spirit calls, leads, and blesses women in ministry.

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**The Short, Simple, Biblical Case
for the Ordination of Women
in the Seventh-day Adventist Church**

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In a few minutes we can set forth the essence of this discussion. It really does not need all the complex and confusing treatment it has often generated.

First, those who oppose the ordination of women have gone to great lengths and tortured logic to wrest from the Scripture what we will call "A Theology of Headship, Leadership, and Authority That Excludes Women." You have read it in their books and papers, heard it on their tapes and read about it in Dr. Damsteegt's speech in Utrecht. It sounds quite impressive to the masses, I suppose. But in their effort to sustain the argument, they must ignore the plainest teaching and evidence of the Bible.

If, as they say, God has such a "principle," which they call "God's Order," it is quite impossible to explain why God Himself violated it so often! For instance, God called Deborah to be judge and prophetess in Israel (Judges 4). Now Deborah wasn't "elected" to that office by a majority vote in Israel, with a majority of the population of Israel being women. She wasn't appointed by a committee having a majority of feminists on it. No, she was called by God Himself. Surely God could have called a male, if indeed He had a

"principle" of excluding women from headship, leadership, and authority roles in His Old Testament church. But the fact is that God Himself called a woman to the highest civil and military authority, the highest spiritual headship, and the highest judicial leadership. Then she recruited another woman, Jael, whose leadership was credited for the military victory that followed an encounter with an enemy! Obviously, the theological invention which says that God excludes women from these callings is an abandonment of the principle of biblical authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It saddens me that they don't take the Bible just as it reads. Such a concocted theology is in danger of destroying the unity in the church and creating division!

A little later in the Bible story we find the account of the prophetess Huldah. She was called by God to fill not only the highest spiritual headship, but also a top leadership role in the reformation crisis of the hour. If you question that she was called to a role of leadership and authority, read what she told King Josiah (2 Kings 22:15).

The Bible makes it clear that the role and function of the prophet/prophetess is a role of the highest authority and leadership in God's church. It is second to none. Prophets speak with unquestioned authority to all other heads and leaders, including kings, priests, and generals. They do not need, nor do they seek any permission or approval of their message. They are not in submission to nor do they operate under the umbrella of male authority of any kind or station. Plus, Deborah was also judge in Israel, the highest civil and judicial authority. Let me emphasize again that these women were chosen and called by God Himself. They were placed in these roles of leadership and leadership by His will and His choice. He could have chosen either gender, but He chose women. How can anyone claim, if he/she accepts the authority of the Bible, that God's order excludes headship and leadership roles of authority for women? Surely, to teach such an unbiblical theology undermines the historic position the Seventh-day Adventist Church has given to the Word of God!

When God expressed His intention to baptize the world with His message, under the power of the Holy Spirit, preaching His gospel with mighty eloquence, He said He would call women as well as men to that last day appeal (Joel 2:28, 29 and Acts 2:17,18). "Your sons and daughters .. both men and women" (NIV). When Peter said these words on the day of Pentecost, surely he was applying this word of God to the work the disciples were doing at that very moment, and to the work of the gospel in the New Testament church. To suggest otherwise is to do violence to the clear word of God! This inspired commission to preach the gospel to the world explicitly included women! Those who would reason otherwise are obviously not willing to take the Bible just as it reads!

The same must be said with regard to all the gifts of the Spirit, as listed in various letters of the New Testament. Nowhere is it ever hinted that some gifts are exclusively for men, but others could be enjoyed by women, or by both genders. Indeed the passages on the gifts of the Spirit, which include apostles, pastors, evangelists and teachers, mention not a word about gender exclusiveness. Such a notion is utterly unbiblical. Those who are willing to submit to the authority of Scripture will gladly encourage women into all the callings the Holy Spirit offers.

We should take time to point out that the New Testament also specifically mentions women in the role of prophetess, as well as other church leadership roles—Anna, holding the baby Jesus and proclaiming His Messiahship, the four daughters of Philip, and several others mentioned by Paul in his letters (Rom. 16:1-8; Phil. 4:2,3).

Clearly, a theology that teaches that God's order excludes women from roles of headship and leadership in his church dishonors the Bible and parrots instead the sentiments of the Roman church's priesthood theology. We should take our stand on the historic Seventh-day Adventist position of basing our theology on the authority of the Bible.

Holistic Church Leadership

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Sometimes people don't value a gift until they lose it. Others don't value a gift, because they've never had it to begin with. Most of the people I know who are opposed to women in ministry fit this category. They have never had a female pastor. Nor have the critics of women's ordination that I know actually worked on a day-to-day basis with women clergy. I see the issue as similar to the early church's conflict over sending missionaries to the Gentiles. As Peter and Paul suggested, when you see the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Gentiles in the same way as it fell on Jewish Christians, how do you argue with the providence of God? If God chooses to pour His Holy Spirit on Gentiles, who are we to withhold full fellowship?

In my first years of ministry I found myself in a men's club. All important positions and committees were filled by men. I had no real complaints. The elders welcomed me and mentored me into the ways of the brethren. No one sensed that anything was amiss. I think of it as the meat and potatoes period of my ministry. A person wouldn't starve but, over time, a person wonders is this all there is.

I remember going to my second church. In God's providence, a woman was voted as local elder. That first Sabbath when she was on the platform I was a bit uneasy. She was calling for the offering. She carried onto the platform a very huge purse. I winced. As she went to the pulpit to make the appeal, she began to assemble from this purse an incredible exhibit. The men had always just gone to the pulpit, pulled out the card provided by the Conference, and bumbled through the appeal. She on the other hand had taken the time in the middle of the week to plan one of the most memorable appeals I have ever heard.

Over time the elders in my church became balanced with 50 being women. Finally, the board even made the head elder and board chair a woman to balance the gender of the pastor. What we found was that the entire operation took on a more healthy equilibrium. Decision making improved because the balance resulted in a better consensus that was more sensitive, practical and ethical. We found the solution to problems to be more creative and doable. Somehow, what men and women separately couldn't do, or struggled to do, came much easier as they worked together.

In time the church finally hired a woman as an associate pastor. We found one-third of the church blossomed as their needs were met for the first time. In particular, GenX members who were disenfranchised over issues of justice, began to appear. Women whose boundaries had been violated by men found an understanding defender and supporter. People who were broken, marginalized and sidelined were attracted. People no one had listened to were nurtured.

I felt my ministry had gone from a difficult separation to a healthy marriage and family. I believe we returned to the Biblical plan of Genesis. Remember that in the beginning, God created a father and mother. Both were needed for a happy home. But somewhere along the way we've lost sight of God's original plan for a family. We think it's normal to have single parent homes. So also, I think the church is like a home. Just as a broken home is a home with a single parent, so a broken church is a church with only male leadership. All the problems and imbalance you find in a home of a single parent, you will find in a church with single gender leadership. Sure, families survive, but they are not ideal. So also the church with only male leadership may survive but it lacks all God intended.

As I've counseled dysfunctional and broken families, I have been amazed at the ability of people to justify their behavior. I remember one man who physically abused his wife. He felt Ephesians 5:23 gave him biblical support for his actions. Another man beat his children basing his behavior on Proverbs 13:24. In the same way I have watched the church oppress, abuse, and take advantage of women, all in the name of following some self-serving interpretation of scripture.

I've discovered as my own church has become more functional by including everyone in leadership, how unhealthy we had been. What we had been seemed normal until we began to learn how abnormal and pathological we were and what church life could be when it functioned as God intended.

In my most recent transition, I moved to a conference with no conference leaders, pastors, and only a few elders as women. I feel stifled in my work. I feel like I'm missing an arm and leg, an eye or an ear. People whose perspective I've come to depend on to do my work are no longer available to me. So, I'm limping along, dreaming of the day when I can walk again.

You may think you have good reasons not to hire women but if you gave it half a chance you'd quickly learn that you have missed out on what is probably the best gift God gave ministry next to Jesus.

