

Equality in Ministry
Utrecht: A "Providential" Detour?

By Alden Thompson, Professor of Biblical Studies, Walla Walla College

First published in *Ministry*, October 1997, pp. 18-21.

(This version with corrected notes)

In the April 1995 issue of *Ministry*, Andrew Bates suggested that the Jerusalem Conference of Acts 15 could be the key to the women's ordination dilemma: If Jerusalem could make circumcision optional for Gentiles, Adventists could make women's ordination optional by division.

Utrecht voted no, however, and now five crucial questions rise before us. Two focus on Bible study: (1) How does the biblical world address our world? and (2) Do we decide biblical "truth" by vote? Two other questions address our worries and fears: (3) Will the church splinter? 4) Where is the leading of "providence" in all this? And then the last question is simply practical: (5) Where do we go from here?

I will address each question briefly, arguing that the Utrecht vote is a "providential" detour, a temporary road leading us to address the real issue, ordination. I will conclude with practical suggestions as to where we might go from here.

1. Jerusalem and Utrecht

In its handling of the circumcision issue, the Jerusalem Conference illustrates an important truth: unity through diversity of practice. The parallel between Jerusalem and Utrecht is only partial, however, because their boundaries were clear; ours are not.

The Jew-Gentile distinction defined the solution to the circumcision issue. The solution forced no one to change their accepted practice, just their perspective. Jews could circumcise if they wished, and Gentiles had a choice. The Spirit simply had to impress the believers that allowing this diversity would keep the church unified. Easy...

By contrast, in our time, the ordination issue seems to be an uncharted jungle. Gender, education, and socio-economic status offer no clear boundaries, and good people on both sides of the issue quote Scripture. Culture plays a role, of course. But sincere Adventists are found on both sides.

Another issue addressed in Acts 15, that of food offered to idols, more closely parallels our ordination dilemma. Though Acts does not emphasize the dissension over food in the early church, 1 Corinthians certainly does (see 1 Cor. 8 and 10). Boundaries were not defined and the issue touched both practice and perspective. Jerusalem did not solve the food problem then any more than Utrecht has solved the ordination issue now. In this respect their dilemma and ours are remarkably similar.

2. Voting on the "Truth"?

What happens when we face a dilemma such as ordination for women? Do Adventists determine "truth" by ballot? No. But we do vote on the boundaries within which we agree to live. The church needs a solid foundation and clear boundaries if we are to fulfill our mission. And we have just such a foundation, for the genius of Adventism has been its grip on "the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:12), the heart of the covenant used when we first organized as a church.¹

Adventism involves much more, to be sure; but we have resisted a fixed formula, preferring the Bible as our "only creed." That principle is clearly laid down in the first line of the current expression of our fundamental beliefs, right where it belongs — "Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures."

But all-or-nothing thinking has always threatened us with its eagerness to nail down every detail. In 1888, for example, one brother exclaimed that changing our view of Galatians would jettison everything, leaving "nothing to our faith." Ellen White called his statement "not true," "extravagant," "exaggerated," and even declared that the matter he was so concerned about was not a "vital question."²

In 1892 she spoke more generally, declaring that the unity of the church could not depend on "viewing every text of Scripture in the very same light." Voting on such matters might "conceal" discord, but couldn't "quench" it. The secret is supreme love for God and each other, for then "labored efforts to be in unity" are not needed and "oneness in Christ" is the "natural result."³

In short, Utrecht calls us not to close our Bibles, but to open them and continue to seek God's will for His people.

3. The Splintering of Adventism?

Some have feared that the current discussion over ordination could splinter the church. But if we will temper our rhetoric in light of the biblical vision, the Spirit can point us to a better way. The God who delivered slaves from Egypt and captives from Babylon speaks to us today by His Son, calling Jew and Greek, bond and free, male and female to oneness in Him (Gal. 3:28).

But how can that happen after Utrecht? I believe there is a way of maintaining our unity which does not involve ordaining women. The Utrecht vote could turn out to be a "providential" detour leading us to find that way. Let me explain.

4. "Providential" Detour?

Attempting to interpret God's hand in history may sometimes set believers at odds with one another. The two polar positions are clear and consistent: A hands-on

Providence plans everything in detail; a hands-off Providence lets the world take its course.

The hands-off position is rooted more in modern rationalism than in Scripture, though Scripture does teach that human beings are free to turn from God's will. Are errors and evil, then, part of God's will? The various translations of Romans 8:28 reflect uncertainty on that point. The hands-on bent of KJV and NRSV ("all things work together for good") softens in the NASB where it says God "causes all things to work together," and in the NIV which translates it "in all things God works for the good," implying that God steps in after the fact to bring good out of evil.

The NASB and NIV more readily suggest a "providential" detour: God allows human beings to make a mess, to go down a rough, temporary road. He then works in and through that temporary mess for good. Key Bible stories illustrate the point:

Joseph: Joseph interpreted his brothers' act of betrayal as a "providential" detour: "You tried to harm me, but God made it turn out for the best" (Gen. 50:20, CEV).

Israel's defeat: In the gruesome story of the dismembered concubine (Judges 19-21), Israel suffered two bitter defeats when they confronted Benjamin before seeking the Lord (cf. 20:8-25). Only when they sought the Lord first, before massing for battle (verses 26-28), did God give them victory. The second defeat is so amazing that several modern translations (e.g., NRSV, REB, NAB, New Jerusalem) switch verses 22 and 23 (with no manuscript support!) to provide a more "logical" flow. But the original text is clear: a "providential" detour led wayward humans to turn to the good.

Paul, Barnabas, and Mark: When Paul and Barnabas quarreled over Mark's fitness for service, Paul chose Silas as a companion while Barnabas took Mark. A "providential" response to Paul's (sinful?) stubbornness spawned two missionary teams instead of one (Acts 15:36-41) and reclaimed Mark as a worker, finally convincing even Paul (cf. 2 Tim. 4:11).

Adventism, too, knows about "providential" detours:

Great disappointment: In the disappointment. God transformed an early faulty interpretation into a settled conviction of the nearness of the Advent and the reality of Christ's heavenly ministry.

Shut Door: The erroneous belief that the door of mercy was shut to any who had not entered it during those early days of our movement, was a "providential" reprieve for the "little flock," allowing them time to settle into the truths God was actually calling them to preach.

In short, a "providential" detour at Utrecht is in good company. But what mistake triggered the detour and how do we put it right? I believe we erred by focusing on the ordination of women rather than on the question of ordination itself. I will address that broader issue as a first step towards proposing a plan for the future.

5. Where Do We Go from Here?

Although Acts 15 strikingly illustrates the unity which can be achieved in and through diversity, we cannot expect it to answer all our questions on something which was not even on the agenda of the Jerusalem Council, namely, the issue of ordination. But that is the issue for us and we must ask what the Bible teaches about ordination itself.

That is not the easiest question to answer, for as we search and study, we also have to grapple with our own history, feelings, and practice and assess how other churches may have influenced us on the matter of ordination.

The "highest" view of ordination is found in Roman Catholicism, where it is a sacrament (not just a symbol) and is seen as communicating "grace" to those who receive it. Someone in authority passes on that authority, a process the Roman Catholic tradition traces back to the moment when Christ gave Peter the keys of the kingdom. Even when Protestants deny the sacramental status of ordination (as in Adventism), the Catholic tradition lingers on if those in authority appear in some way to pass on their authority to others through ordination.

The New Testament teaching on leadership includes the idea of the priesthood of all believers, not just a special class of ordained men who pass their authority on to others. Let's look at some key passages, beginning with Acts 13:1-3, one of the few texts describing how the

Acts 13:1-3. At the Spirit's command, the believers in Antioch consecrated Barnabas and Saul for a special work. But the description of the believers' role is tantalizingly brief: "And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away" (verse 3).

Instead of human leaders serving as channels of God's call and authority, the Spirit gave the "call." Then the church, apparently as a whole, recognized the call by the laying on of hands, thus commissioning their leaders. The church also illustrated the Protestant principle of "the priesthood of all the believers," a phrase rooted in 1 Peter 2, where an unrestricted "royal priesthood" refers to "a holy nation. His own special people" (verse 9, NKJV), that is, all members of the body of Christ.

As a result of the Incarnation, New Testament leaders are much less "authoritarian" than those in the Old. Paul, for example, could confront Peter "to his face" (Gal. 2:11, NIV), an act that might have cost him his life in Joshua's day (cf. Joshua 1:18). The lively give and take at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) would have been rather more subdued with Joshua in charge.

Why the difference? Because Jesus transformed notions of authority. The next two passages show how.

Matthew 20:20-28. When the mother of James and John requested leadership positions for her sons, Jesus said that only Gentiles exercised "authority" over others. "To be great in my kingdom," He told His disciples, "be a servant" (verse 26). Jesus' kingdom was marked by an upside-down equality, not by the exercise of authority of one believer over another.

Matthew 23:8-12. The love of position was not just a Gentile disease. In His woes on the Pharisees, Jesus noted the craving for honors and titles (verses 5-7). But the disciples themselves were all on level ground with just one "teacher" above them (verse 8, NRSV). The law of His kingdom is simple: "The greatest among you will be your servant" (verse 11, NIV, NRSV).

Yet the New Testament still preserves the idea of a hierarchy of church leaders. In 1 Corinthians 12:28, for example, the first three "gifts" are ranked by number: apostles, prophets, and teachers. But all the gifts are necessary for a healthy body. And to make sure that no one misunderstands how the hierarchy of position should function, Paul concludes the chapter with a call to "eagerly desire the greater gifts" (verse 31, NIV), gifts spelled out in chapter 13, not as gifts of rank, but as gifts of the mind and heart: faith, hope, and love.

The crucial point is that the superiority of faith, hope, and love has nothing to do with rank or position, even if believers are tempted to equate high position with great holiness. If those called or elected to high office are presumed to be more faithful, more righteous, more loving, and thus holier and nearer to God, it is only a small step to a person or organization which claims to speak infallibly for God!

Though Adventists have never gone that far in reverencing their leaders, the tendency to do so troubled Ellen White.⁴ She declared that "high position does not give to the character Christian virtues."⁵ One hears echoes of the famous saying of her contemporary, Lord Acton (1834-1902): "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

If power is dangerous when put into human hands, it is even more so when claimed in the name of God. Men in high position are the very ones "who are in danger of considering a position of responsibility as evidence of God's special power."⁶ Position does not make "men of infallible judgment."⁷ If a leader feels "he is invested with authority to make his will the ruling power, the best and only safe course is to remove him, lest great harm be done, and he lose his own soul and imperil the souls of others."⁸

Yes, followers are at risk as well as leaders. In 1907 Ellen White said it was "a greater danger" for believers to "depend on the mind of certain leading workers" than it was for the leader himself to suppose he was "capable of planning and devising for all branches of the work."⁹

More broadly-based input in the decision-making process, however, should not automatically imply that the participants are better or wiser. C. S. Lewis argued that human wickedness is a more powerful argument for democracy than human goodness; crooked people dare not give absolute power to one crook! Even John Calvin declared that because "of the devices and defects of men," several rulers are preferable, each checking the excesses of the other.¹⁰ Presbyterian church polity addresses that danger by distinguishing "ruling" elders (laity!) from the "teaching" elders (clergy!), a safeguard against the tendency of the teaching office to rule inappropriately.

In the work of the church, then, the healthy interaction recorded in Acts 15 is essential and is rooted in the view of leadership implied in Acts 13, where the whole church recognizes the call of the Spirit and the believers lay their hands on the leaders.

Neglecting this interactive model of church leadership poses real dangers for the church. Ellen White warned that the tendency simply to accept the proposals of leaders has meant the approval of many matters which "involved far more than was anticipated and far more than those who voted would have been willing to assent to had they taken time to consider the question from all sides."¹¹

Any view of ordination which assumes greater holiness for the ordained hinders believers from fulfilling their spiritual duty to their leaders. Ellen White gives a startling glimpse of the ideal when she describes how a younger worker should relate to his superior: "He must not lose his identity in the one who is instructing him, so that he dare not exercise his own judgment, but does what he is told, irrespective of his own understanding of what is right and wrong." If his supervisor departs from the right, the younger worker should not go to "some outside party," but to his superior in office, "freely expressing his mind. Thus the learner may be a blessing to the teacher."¹²

This is a New Testament view of "authority," one which allows, indeed mandates, Paul's confrontation with Peter. Interestingly enough, Ellen White does not use the word "authority" in this quotation, nor does the word appear anywhere in its three-page context in *Gospel Workers*, "Young Ministers to Labor with Older Ministers." Teaching, helping, respecting, honoring, training, strengthening are all there — but not authority.¹³ In the New Testament model, authority simply isn't an issue.

6. A Proposal

In conclusion, I would like to suggest some steps for finding common ground. None of the suggestions below are new, but they do seek to link biblical principles with practical realities. The underlying theme is that Jesus is the head of the church for all believers and that by the laying on of hands, the church recognizes the Spirit's call, a call to any member of the body of Christ, Jew or Greek, bond or free, male or female. Everything we do should reflect that equality of call.

A common credential. Credentials identify those whom the church trusts. For Adventists, issuing credentials was the first step toward organization, coming a mil decade before the General Conference was organized in 1863. Let conferences issue

credentials as they do at present, but let these be a common credential knowing no gender, economic, or other improper boundary. Those wishing to retain their former credential may do so. But current workers may choose the new and workers newly employed will also receive the new.

A common laying on of hands. Let pastors, elders, and laity share in the laying on of hands in recognition of God's call to service. Credentials should come from the conference and the laying on of hands should happen locally, following the model of Acts 13. Such a plan would not perpetuate that view of ordination which allows only ordained clergy to place hands on those who are set apart for ministry.

A new vocabulary. The word "ordination" has been tarnished by debate and practice. The word may be innocent when used for local elders and deacons. But for pastors, it now implies nonbiblical barriers and practices. So let us speak of "credential" or "license" for the document issued by the conferences, and "commissioning" or "dedication" for the laying on of hands.

Maybe, in time, when the meaning of the laying on of hands is perfectly clear, we can return to the language of ordination. Until then, careful language would remind us and the world what it means to follow Jesus.

Recovering and practicing the New Testament teaching on ministry and leadership has been an urgent need in Adventism for some time. Through the "providential" detour of the Utrecht vote. God has opened a day of opportunity for us. By His grace we can do what needs to be done. We may begin by initiating a comprehensive study of the whole concept of ordination in Scripture.

Notes

1. "We, the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together, as a church, taking the name. Seventh-day Adventists, covenanting to keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus Christ." *Review and Herald*, 18:148, Oct. 8, 1861, in "Covenant, Church," *SDA Encyclopedia* (1996), p. 416.

2 Ellen G. White manuscript 24, 1888, in *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), vol 1, p. 220.

3. Ellen G. White manuscript 24,1892, *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 1092,1093.

4. Three sections in *Testimonies to Ministers* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1923, 1955, 1962) are particularly forceful in warning of the dangers of the abuse of power. No. 11 "To Brethren in Responsible Positions," pp. 279-304; No. 13 "Conference Officials," pp. 319-346; No. 14 "Appeals for Truth and Loyalty," pp. 347-391.

5. *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif: Pacific Press, 1948), vol. 9, p. 277 (Oct. 3,1907).

6. *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 380 (July 5,1986).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 347 (Mar. 8,1895).
8. *Ibid.* P. 362 (September, 1895).
9. *Testimonies*, vol 9, p. 277.
10. C. S. Lewis, "Membership," in *Weight of Glory* (New York: Collier Books, Macmillan, 1980), pp. 113,114; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV chap xx sec. 8 trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), vol. 2, p. 657.
11. *Testimonies*, vol. 9, p. 278.
12. *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald, 1915,1948), pp. 102, 103.
13. *Ibid.* pp. 101-103.