

GC TOSC Committee
Women's Ordination – A North American Division Report
January 21, 2014

I was a recent graduate of college and my dad thought it was very important that I colporteur. He said every pastor should have the experience of being a colporteur. He had quite a few stories of his experiences of going from farmhouse to farmhouse on a horse selling truth-filled books.

So I spent a summer selling books. I remember one house in particular. I arrived while they were having a Bible study. In the course of the conversation the man said he would be happy to study the Bible with me. I said I would enjoy that with one condition, that he was willing to admit the possibility, no matter how remote, that he was wrong in his understanding of the Bible.

He immediately asked, "Would you admit that?"

I said, "Yes, I am willing to admit that my understanding of the Bible could be wrong."

He jumped on my admission and said essentially that such an admission proved that he was right. Because he was absolutely sure he was right, and in light of the fact that I was not as sure as he was, that proved he had the truth and I didn't. He knew he was right because he was "more sure" than I was.

Needless to say we didn't have any Bible studies. It was clear that his mind was closed to an expanded understanding of the Bible.

The founders of our Church met with that kind of resistance as they discovered new light. They were expelled from their former denominations as they grew in their understanding of Scripture. They believed in progressive revelation.

"But the path of the just *is* like the shining sun,
That shines ever brighter unto the perfect day."ⁱ

The Adventists today have truth, but the day we believe we are finished growing in the truth is the day we are mired in the past instead of following God's unfolding revelation.

If we have never questioned ourselves, if we have never questioned our position on an issue, if we have never had the thought that we might be wrong, then we have not thought deeply.

Ellen White, speaking of this kind of closed-minded person, said:

They are unwilling to learn of anyone. . . . They speak and act as though they would take the work out of God's hands and pass judgment themselves upon those whom they consider in the wrong. . . . Where the Spirit of God is, there is meekness, patience, gentleness, and longsuffering; there is a tenderness of soul, a mildness which savors of Christ.ⁱⁱ

As we share our convictions on the issue of ordination, it is my prayer that we have “a tenderness of soul, a mildness which savors of Christ.” I hope our minds are never closed, and that we always are ready to grow in our understanding of the Bible and of God’s will in our lives.

Our North American Division Theology of Ordination Study Committee study has given me opportunity to investigate my own convictions. Our group has explored in depth a variety of perspectives on ordination. We have read books by those who oppose and those who favor the ordination of women, by Seventh-day Adventists and by non-Adventists.

As Ellen White has said,

“Those who desire to know the truth have nothing to fear from the investigation of the word of God. But upon the threshold of investigation of the word of God, inquirers after truth should lay aside all prejudice, and hold in abeyance all preconceived opinion, and open the ear to hear the voice of God from His messenger.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Societal Pressures

I know there may be a sense that in seeking the ordination of women, the North American Division is succumbing to the societal pressures brought on by what has been termed by some as “women’s liberation.” The real fear may be of a type of radical feminism, which is built on higher criticism. There is anxiety that supporting the ordination of women shows a weakness of conviction about the

Bible and a yielding to current culture, which will eventually result in watering down the Three Angels' Messages.

Our committee recognizes that some are concerned that we are travelling the wide road of culture and that it will lead to a diminishing of Biblical authority. That is a real anxiety given the path that has been taken by many liberal denominations. There is a stated fear that we are headed down the slippery slope to approving homosexual behavior. However, our position is based on a return to the equality of man and woman in Genesis 1, and the anticipation of full equality in the earth made new. There was no homosexuality in Genesis 1, and the new earth will be a return to humanity as God intended us to live. As Revelation 21:5 proclaims: "The one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'" The creation story of man and woman, along with the description of recreated beings in heaven, allow for no affirmation of homosexual activity.

Another concern that we need to be aware of is that our Church could be so focused on orthodoxy—establishing the parameters of belief—that we would no longer be a movement with a mission but would expend our time and resources on detailed discussions of religious practice instead of spending our time sharing the truth. When our Church becomes dependent on everyone's having the "right" opinion, we are moving down the slippery slope of no longer being a remnant movement, but becoming a deadened denomination. If we are to maintain momentum in spreading The Three Angels' Messages, we can't occupy our time and our lives defining, in ever-narrowing circles, doctrinal details that don't bring the gospel to people. I like the poem by: Charles Edwin Markham

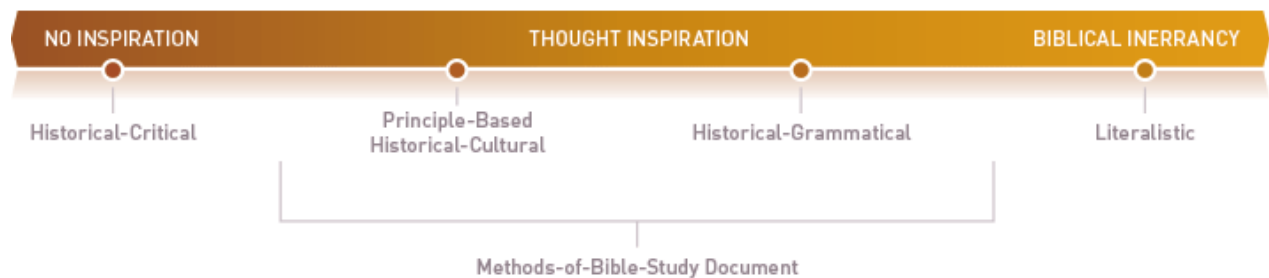
He drew a circle that shut me out
— Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win;
We drew a circle that took him in!

In light of the fact that the theological approaches of those opposed to and those in favor of women's ordination are sufficiently understood by this group—and are addressed in the document that we distributed, as well as in other papers presented to this commission—I will only briefly reference the theological issues associated with hermeneutics and headship, and then speak of unity and our recommendation.

Hermeneutics

At the core of the question about women’s ordination is the issue of hermeneutics. How do we interpret Scripture? Early in our study process, the committee unanimously acknowledged as a guide the principles outlined in the “Methods of Bible Study” document, which was voted and published by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1986 to provide parameters for the study of Scripture.

This model helps illustrate the range of approaches compatible with the “Methods of Bible Study” document. The “no inspiration” side of the continuum represents the idea that the Bible is not divinely inspired and should be regarded as any other literary work. The “biblical inerrancy” side represents the idea that God dictated the precise words of Scripture. The traditional Adventist approach to interpreting Scripture reveals a centrist path of “thought inspiration.”



Since the various hermeneutical approaches can lead to differing interpretations, it follows that approaches designated by more distant points on the continuum—even those within the central portion representing traditional Seventh-day Adventist guidelines—may draw conflicting conclusions about issues for which there is not a clear, unequivocal biblical mandate.

Considering how easy it can be to misunderstand words from a friend in an email that we receive today, it would be prudent for us to be very humble as we approach phrases and words written 2,000 years ago in a language other than our own, to a culture we are not familiar with, by a person we don’t know, dealing with problems we may not really understand.

When it comes to understanding the Bible, we have found many different ways to interpret some difficult texts. We are fortunate to have the leadership of

Ellen White, especially as outlined in the introduction of the *Great Controversy* where she compares thought inspiration to a literal reading of the text.

For many Scriptures, we use a hermeneutic that allows us to interpret the text in a way that might be different from the literal or plain reading of the text. These examples are scriptures that require such interpretation.

1. Mark 16:18 describes handling snakes and drinking poison. Some people today believe that a plain reading of the text requires the handling of snakes and the drinking of poison as a part of following scriptural injunctions.
2. In Matthew 8:22, Jesus says the dead are to bury their own dead.
3. 1 Peter 3:19 speaks of Jesus preaching to the spirits in prison.
4. 1 Peter 4:6 says the good news is preached to those who are now dead although they were destined to die like all people.
5. In 1 Corinthians 7:20, Paul indicates that if you are slave, it's good to remain a slave.
6. Though 1 Corinthians 14:5 encourages speaking in tongues, we don't do that today.
7. Though 1 Corinthians 15:29 describes baptism for the dead, we don't practice that.
8. 1 Timothy 2:11-12 suggests we should have no women who teach men at all.
9. 1 Timothy 5:23 says not to drink water but to drink some wine for your stomach.
10. Revelation 14:11 and a multitude of other texts in both testaments indicate that hell is an eternally burning fire.

We all interpret Scripture, and we need to do it in line with the "Methods of Bible Study" document. A principle-based reading is appropriate when a plain-text reading fails to do justice to a holistic understanding of Scripture. Reading in isolation texts that require women to be silent represents a hermeneutical approach used neither by Ellen White nor Church pioneers, and it is not one that aligns with the "Methods of Bible Study" document. If the literal, plain-reading hermeneutic alone is used in determining the appropriate response to the question of women's ordination, the issue of headship then leads some to suggest that women shouldn't be appointed as spiritual leaders.

Headship

The decades-old debate about the role of women in Seventh-day Adventist Church leadership is complex and sensitive. Those who disagree with ordaining women to the offices of elder and pastor are usually in harmonious agreement concerning most facets of the discussion—that women, too, are created in God’s image; that they are created of worth equal to men; that they bring equally valuable gifts to the church; and that they also bring exclusively female contributions to the mission of the body of Christ.

But the word *headship* itself is problematic. The specific term is not used in the New Testament and the headship principle makes assumptions beyond our ability to know the whole story behind Paul’s observations to a specific situation, which should prevent us from developing a comprehensive principle that appears to contradict Jesus’ teaching about servant leadership.

When Paul discusses church “organization” (and thus “authority” in the church) he never uses the “family headship” model, but rather the human body—where Christ is the head and we members (male and female) are represented by the different parts of the human body without regard to gender.^{iv}

As an illustration of what we face, we should note that we have significant challenges understanding Paul’s description of speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians 14. With this in mind, we need to be modest in our convictions that we fully grasp the issues surrounding Paul’s words that have been quoted to support headship. Even Paul’s contemporary, Peter, suggests that “His letters contain some things that are hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16).

Our committee looks to the Garden of Eden as a reference point for understanding headship. It is here we find God’s ideal, and it is here that we have a picture of Eden restored in heaven. It is part of the Seventh-day Adventist story of the Great Controversy to teach how God is working with the human race after the fall from Eden to their re-creation in Eden restored. It is a process of growth and restoration from creation to re-creation. When we describe our diet standards, we refer to the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1. When we talk about the Sabbath, we use the Garden of Eden as a reference point. But when it comes to equality of women, some have suggested that we go to Genesis 3 instead, identifying the fall of man and woman into sin as the benchmark. This is a deviation from our entire theology, where each of our major distinctives is based on a theology of restoration, which is grounded in the Edenic paradigm of Genesis 1 and 2.

In the story of the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan, God was tolerant as he led people to greater light. He tolerated slavery though it was not His preference. He tolerated Israel's request for a king though it was not His preference. He tolerated polygamy, though it was not His preference. God's dealing with the human race shows continual growth and understanding of His ultimate will to eventually bring humankind to Eden restored.

The trajectory of restoration, so clear in Scripture, leads us to the last days and the inclusion of the prophecies of Joel that were repeated by Luke in Acts.

And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God,
That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
Your young men shall see visions,
Your old men shall dream dreams.^v

God's Spirit is to be poured out on everyone for the finishing of the work in the last days. Scripture presents no evidence that suggests that God's gifts are gender exclusive nor that the outpouring of the Spirit develops a hierarchy of gifts. The trajectory that leads to the ordination of women is not outside of the text. It is embedded in the text in the same way that the rejection of slavery is there. If we don't believe in the trajectory of Scripture, we don't believe in the gospel.

It has been suggested that we can't use the ministry of Ellen White as a template for pastoral leadership today because she was a prophet, and prophets come under a category totally different from pastor. Those who suggest that being a prophet and not a pastor means that the authority over men she exercised was somehow not a violation of the headship principle are splitting hairs in ways not justified by any biblical hermeneutic I am aware of. Of all the texts in the Bible that speak of the gifts of the Spirit, none of them suggest that any of the gifts are gender specific; so when the Holy Spirit fills someone with a gift, they should exercise it, and the Church should affirm it whether in a man or a woman.

Practical Implications

What are the practical implications of holding strictly to a plain-reading hermeneutic and denying women a spiritual leadership role in the Church?

1. Women could teach theology in Sabbath School but not in a college or university.

2. Women could be evangelists. They could use spiritual authority in winning men to the Church but would not be allowed to lead them once they join the Church.
3. Women could be principals at Adventist academies but could not be college presidents where theology is taught.
4. Women could be conference vice presidents but not conference presidents. This suggests that the vice president or secretary or treasurer of a conference does not have spiritual authority over the pastors in the conference.
5. Women could not serve as elders, so we would have to reverse the General Conference action approving the ordination of female elders.
6. Women could not be commissioned lead pastors.
7. Women could teach university students English but not theology. They could teach biology but not religion. At Southern Adventist University—and I believe at all of the Church’s higher-education institutions around the world—we believe that every faculty member teaches theology and provides spiritual authority over students. This arrangement would mean that women could exercise authority over men in every area except those deemed to involve spiritual authority. A dichotomy results when you seek to determine what is spiritual and what is not spiritual. Does this mean that the work of a chief financial officer or the conference treasurer doesn’t call for spiritual leadership and authority?

Just imagine the size of the new General Conference policy book as a Talmudic handbook of laws delineating where women can and cannot serve is published. But can you see the hairsplitting difficulty of such an approach? Those opposed to ordination of women, in an honest desire to be consistent, and in an honest desire to hold true to their biblical hermeneutic, must develop policies that are unenforceable and unexplainable. This bifurcation of responsibilities based on gender simply doesn’t reflect the prophecy of Joel, which we can already see being fulfilled today.

Today, it is important for those of us who support the ordination of women to understand that there are some areas of the world where the cultural context and social milieu is not only opposed to the ordination of women but also prohibits women from voting or having public influence. We need to remember that fewer than 100 years ago in the United States women were not allowed to vote.

Today, women in some countries are treated as lifelong dependents under the guardianship of a male relative. Deprived of the right to mix with men publicly, they are confined to strictly segregated lives on penalty of severe punishment.

Only four countries in the world allowed women to vote during the 1800s. It is only in the last century that women were allowed to vote in most countries of the world, and three countries have just allowed it in the twenty-first century. Only two countries still don't allow women to vote: Saudi Arabia and the Vatican.

Why do I bring up women's suffrage? Because the suggestion has been made that allowing women's ordination would be merely following societal trends when our Church should be counter cultural not just copying society. But we should also remember that the Church followed "societal trends" when it accepted African Americans into schools and when it united conferences in South Africa. One could say that the Christian church followed, albeit slowly, "societal trends" when it moved to eliminate slavery. All trends in society are not of the devil.

There is the risk that we are so determined to avoid reflecting society that we become out of touch with society. We don't want to become a Mennonite-like aberration of history that is fascinating for tourists but no one would want to live that way.

Those of us who support women's ordination must be sensitive to the fact that there are parts of the world where women are not allowed to drive, let alone provide spiritual leadership. We must realize that some in Church leadership could jeopardize their positions for even suggesting a spiritual leadership place for females.

Unity

Emo Philips tells the following parable:

I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So I ran over and said, "Stop! Don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" he said.

I said, "Well, there's so much to live for!"

He said, "Like what?"

I said, "Well, are you religious or atheist?"

He said, "Religious."

I said, "Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?"

He said, "Christian."

I said, "Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

He said, "Protestant."

I said, "Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"

He said, "Baptist!"

I said, "Wow! Me too! Are your Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"

He said, "Baptist Church of God!"

I said, "Me too! Are your Original Baptist Church of God or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God!"

I said, "Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915!"

I said, "Die, heretic!" and pushed him off the bridge.

The ordination of women should not be the cause of high anxiety in our Church. It should not result in voices sounding the call, "Heretic!" nor is it an issue for the watchmen on the walls of Zion. Let's be honest. We have read reams of documents, we have listened to hours of convictions, and we have prayed earnestly. We will not come to a unanimous consensus on whether or not it is appropriate to ordain women to leadership positions in the Church.

Does that mean that we push off the bridge (or out of the Church) those who don't agree with us? The NAD study committee doesn't believe that differences of opinion on this issue need to result in corporate disunity—the breaking up of the Church into separate organizations of those who favor and those who don't favor ordination of women.

Throughout the history of the Christian church, wars have been fought and people have been burned at the stake over different interpretations of Scripture—over issues of hermeneutics. In light of that, our committee came to this very significant consensus:

An individual, as a Seventh-day Adventist in thorough commitment to the full authority of Scripture, may build a defensible case in favor of or opposed to the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, although each of us views one position or the other as stronger and more compelling.

Because a scripturally based, reasonable case may be made in favor of or opposed to the ordination of women to pastoral ministry, a worldwide mandate is neither practical nor necessary. We have lived together with this difference of opinion for many years; there is no reason why we can't continue to live with this difference of opinion going forward.

Note Ellen White's statement about unity of the Church:

We cannot then take a position that the unity of the church consists in viewing every text of Scripture in the very same light. The church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions but we cannot force the mind and will, and thus root out disagreement. These resolutions may conceal the discord, but they cannot quench it and establish perfect agreement. Nothing can perfect unity in the church but the spirit of Christlike forbearance.^{vi}

In many ways this General Conference committee is a microcosm of our Church. We are a very diverse group of people representing a diversity of Church members and holding very different convictions on this issue. Yet we can live and function in unity of conviction about the mission and message of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

We need unity of purpose, not a unity of policy conformity. We need unity of conviction about the Three Angels' Messages, not the unity of a voted *Church Manual*. We can be in harmony like an orchestra, without being in the conformity of sameness.

Our unity is based on our doctrines which comprise the common ground upon which our denomination is organized. For the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the 28 Fundamental Beliefs are the common doctrines. They are officially adopted and are considered scripturally clear. Other issues, not unequivocally outlined in Scripture, are subject to varying interpretations.

In recent years, the General Conference has established policies recognizing women in leadership roles: the ordination of deaconesses and elders and the commissioning of pastors. Although these policies are not practiced in all regions of the world, (or for that matter in all churches in the North American Division) the Church has remained a single, worldwide organization. It is the conclusion of the North American Division study committee that differences in opinion and practice on this issue do not constitute disunity in Christ nor in the Adventist Church. We have clear evidence of this around the world.

The world Church denied women's ordination on July 11, 1990, because "in view of the possible risk of disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the church,"^{vii} it was considered to be "probably best and the least disruptive for the world church at this time."^{viii} So primarily in a desire to maintain Church unity,

rather than for theological reasons, it was denied. That decision has maintained some policy unity but the conviction is so strong on the part of some unions in the world that they have gone ahead and ordained women. Pursuing world Church unity in 1990 was a well-intentioned goal, but today it is clear that the only way to maintain that unity is to *not* make the ordination of women a condition of unity. It need not be the 29th fundamental belief.

We are arguing that—given the principles of equality that the Bible teaches, and given Paul’s statement in Galatians 3:28 that “there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” which signals the transition away from Jewish exclusivity toward inclusiveness in Jesus—we are arguing that there is an openness for the twenty-first-century Church to determine how best to practice affirming the gifts of the Spirit.

If we were to do a unity study of the early Christian church, we would find some significant diversity. As I previously mentioned, Peter writes that Paul says some things that are “hard to understand,”^{ix} and the Jewish Christians certainly had some views that differed from the Gentile Christians. They might have split in two. But they were caught up in a vision, a dream given to them by Christ—a dream to give the good news to the world. And they were one in Christ in that effort.

The early Seventh-day Adventist Church had many disagreements that might have caused them to divide and go in different directions. For instance, many of them were opposed to Trinitarianism, and they had many other doctrinal debates, but:

- The message of Adventism was not comprised of the codified beliefs of the *Church Manual*.
- The message of Adventism was a living reality and passion of their lives.

Unity? Yes, they had unity, but not the kind of unity that comes from formal assent to a policy book. May our unity be found in the commitment to our mission to give to the world the Three Angel’s Messages! To accomplish that task we need to take advantage of the gifts of both men and women.

Acts 15 gives us a very helpful example of how to deal with a controversial issue that threatens unity. Their issue of circumcision had much more potential to split the Church than the issue of ordination. Would there be a Gentile church and a Jewish church? Their Bible, the Old Testament, is crystal clear about the importance of circumcision as a mark of identity of the people of God. But then the

church listened to the mission stories of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the Gentiles up in Antioch, and James summed up their decision in Acts 15:19: "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should *not make it difficult* for the Gentiles who are turning to God."^x Let that be our judgment today. We see the Holy Spirit working in the lives of women. Let's not make it difficult for the gifts of the Holy Spirit to be used in the lives of women. They need our blessing and encouragement.

The worldwide unity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church will be assured when our focus is maintained on Jesus. When He is our focus and we maintain our commitment to our shared mission outlined in the 28 Fundamental Beliefs, we will live in unity. We practically guarantee disunity in the Church:

- When that which is conditioned by history and culture is made the policy for all,
- When that which is local in importance is made universal in application, and
- When no general consensus can be reached by the community and yet a policy is imposed on everyone.

Acts 2 describes the unity we all seek when it says, "All the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had."^{xi} They had unity, but not the kind of unity that comes from formal assent to creedal or policy statements. Theirs was the unity of a dream. The future of our Church will be found in the moving of the Spirit of God as the people follow a dream. Unity will be found at the foot of the cross and not on the pages of a policy book.

Brothers and sisters, let us follow the lead of the apostle James at the Jerusalem conference when he said, "Let's not make it difficult!"

In particular in the North American Division, where 95% of the professors of theology in the higher-education institutions believe it is appropriate to encourage women in ministry by ordaining them and where a large majority of the youth believe it is appropriate, and where two union constituencies have voted it we face an ecclesiastical necessity in allowing our division to ordain women.

Recommendation

Whereas the Bible does not directly address the ordination of men and women, and

Whereas the evidence is neither complete nor irrefutable, and it can be expected that differing conclusions may be drawn by equally sincere and competent students of God's Word, and

Whereas we believe the "Methods of Bible Study" document allows Bible-believing members to have differences of opinion on the issue of the ordination of women,

We recognize the reality of differing beliefs around the world and would not seek to impose North American Division convictions on other divisions,

Therefore:

The North American Division humbly recommends that the General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee support the authorization of each division to consider, through prayer and under the direction of the Holy Spirit, its most appropriate approach to the ordination of women to gospel ministry.

ⁱ Proverbs 4:18 (NKJV) Also see GC 476

ⁱⁱ TDG 291.3

ⁱⁱⁱ RH, March 25, 1902 par. 1

^{iv} See 1 Cor. 12:12f

^v Acts 2:17 (NKJV) Joel 2:28

^{vi} Ellen G. White, Manuscript Releases (Silver Spring, Md.: E.G. White Estate, 1993, vol. 11, p. 266

^{vii} Fifty-Fifth General Conference Session, July 11, 1990, Session Bulletin #7 p. 15.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} 2 Peter 3:16

^x Acts 15:19 NIV (Italics added)

^{xi} (Acts 2:44)