

Position 3 - Forward Together in Faithfulness

Our Church finds itself in very strange waters. We have always believed that a faithful study of Scripture, carried out with an openness to the Holy Spirit, would lead to a single conclusion on matters of doctrine and practice. But today we find men and women of good will, committed to the authority of Scripture, praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and yet coming down on different sides of what the Bible teaches about ordination. The one point that we can all agree on in the ordination discussion, is that we have not achieved agreement.

Given this impasse, we are now faced with the question of how to move forward as a Church. The moderate group believes that under these circumstances, the Bible calls every Christian to mutual submission, "Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God" (Eph. 5:21). By its very nature, mutual submission involves a certain sacrifice by all, for the greater good and unity of all. With the guidance of the Spirit, however, we believe that the central concerns within the various positions in the ordination discussion can be affirmed without sacrificing principle, while still maintaining the unity of the body of Christ.

I. Theological Background

Group three is not merely group two dressed up in more conservative guise, or group one hiding beneath a progressive veneer. Rather, we find ourselves in agreement with both groups on some important biblical issues, and cannot choose between them. We also have a solution, a way forward, that is truly different than both groups propose. Essentially, our position offers a general rule of male ordained ministerial leadership, which can be varied from. This is a unique proposal in practice, which I will discuss at greater length later. First, to understand the biblical basis of group three, we want to list those crucial points of theology found in either group one or two that we embrace in creating our unique, moderate position.

1. **Nature of the Trinity** – We believe that Christ is co-existent and co-equal with the Father and the Spirit from eternity. Thus, we do not believe in the eternal subordination of the Son, as some presenters opposed to women's ordination have proposed. (Dt. 6:4; Is. 9:6; Mic. 5:2; Mt. 28:19; Jn 8:58; 17:24; Heb 1:8-12; 2 Cor. 13:14).

2. **Pre-Fall Roles for Man and Woman** – We believe there existed meaningful roles for men and women before the fall that, that while not hierarchical, did involve responsibilities for distinct, but complementary servant leadership roles. We do not believe in the idea of male headship prior to the fall, insofar as that involved "authority over" Eve. (Gen. 2:15-25; 3:9, 16-20; 1 Cor. 11:8; 15:22.)

3. **Post-Fall Family Headship** – After the fall, God instituted a male headship role in the family that, while loving, self-sacrificing, and service oriented, gives the male an oversight responsibility for his family that is of continuing validity. (Gen. 3:16; 18:12, 19; 1 Pet. 3:1, 6; Eph. 5:22-24.)

4. **Male Ecclesiastical Leadership** – We believe that there is a biblical model of male ecclesiological *leadership* that has validity across time and culture. We see this leadership preference in Paul's invocation of the creation order and the fall in discussing the office of elder, in the predominate fact of male institutional spiritual leadership in the OT, in the actions of Christ in choosing twelve male disciples, and in the NT examples of apostles and elders. (1 Tim. 2:12-13; Num. 3:10, 38; Mt. 27:55; Acts 1:21-23; Titus 1:6-7.)

5. Christ is Head of the Church – There is no basis, however, to suggest that men have a general *headship* in the church, exercising husbandly or paternal authority over women or anyone else. Only Christ is head in the church. His statement that we should “call no man father” (Matt. 23:9) was intended to prevent a human, paternal headship in the church. (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 1:22, 23.)

6. Gifts versus Offices – We see an important distinction between *spiritual gifts*, which are given by sovereign action of the Holy Spirit, where gender considerations are not a biblical concern, and church *offices*, chosen by the church membership according to biblical qualifications, and where gender is mentioned, e.g., the office of Elder. (1 Cor. 12:4-11; Eph. 4:11-12; Acts 6:5-7; 1 Tim. 2:12; 3:1-2; Tit. 1:6-8.)

7. Male Spiritual Leadership in the Church – We believe that Paul’s statements about a preferred role for a male in the office of elder (the equivalent of our ordained minister) is a functional, ecclesiastical norm meant to further church order, discipline, and mission. (1 Tim. 2:12-14; 3:1-7; 1 Cor. 11:2-5; Titus 2:2-8.)

8. Maleness: One Qualification Among Many - We view, however, the gender qualification of elder as one characteristic among many, and as not absolute over all the others. We do not think we should make this point of ecclesiastical order paramount over other more important doctrinal concerns, such as the mission and unity of the body of Christ. (Acts 15: 19; Acts 16:3)

9. The Role of Trajectory Arguments – We believe that positions based on trajectory arguments can be biblically valid, such as that for slavery. However, unlike slavery, a view of male ministerial leadership is derived from Paul’s inspired understanding and teaching regarding the creation, human nature, the fall, and the incarnation. (Gen. 1:27; Gal 3:28; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Tim. 2:12-14; 1 Cor. 11:3-5.)

10. Hermeneutical Concerns – We believe that the hermeneutical methods that some who support women’s ordination use to exegete the New Testament gender texts could create problems in dealing with passages regarding sexual standards. If we claim that the injunctions of 1st Tim 2 and 1 Cor. 11 are cultural, despite their references to creation, the fall, and the trinity, how can we insist that the teachings in Rom 1 about God, sexuality, and nature are universal? It opens the door to arguing that any objection to Adam and Steve, as opposed to Adam and Eve, is just based on culture. We do not believe this, and our approach safeguards against it. (Ex. 20:14; Lev. 18:1-30; 20:10-21; Acts 15:28-29; 1 Tim. 2:12-13; Rom. 1:18-27; Gal. 3:28.)

II. A Proposed Way Forward

A. Expansion of Opportunities for Women in Ministry

In TOSC, a consensus has emerged on the vital importance of empowering Adventist women everywhere, regardless of ordination, to greater involvement in a wide range of ministries. Initiatives both affirming women in ministry and supporting them with education and resources would begin to rectify our failure to do so over much of the last century, as we succumbed to cultural patriarchy in disregard of prophetic counsel.¹

¹ E.g., “If there were twenty women where now there is one, who would make this holy mission their cherished work,” Ellen White wrote in 1879, “we should see many more converted to the truth. The refining, softening influence of Christian women is needed in the great work of preaching the truth.” (EV 471-472; see

B. The Office of Elder, the Criteria of Gender, and the Divine Command/Ideal Distinction

But while repenting of our patriarchy, we should not slide into the opposite ditch of western cultural feminism. Rather, we should affirm that the Bible does call men to special leadership responsibilities; that it reveals that male leadership in the office of ordained minister is a biblical and divine pattern. But we should also acknowledge that it is not in the category of divine moral absolute, such as a Ten Commandment, a matter of salvation, or a fundamental doctrine of the Church.

Rather, it is an ecclesiological organizational norm, and is primarily meant to further the mission and functioning of the church. Based on biblical precedent, we believe that this leadership ideal can be adapted to promote the mission and unity of the church. This understanding of the relative importance of the gender criteria is based on the difference between: 1. God's absolute moral commands and eternal truths, and 2. His ideals for organizing His people.

The former include the Ten Commandments, the pillar doctrines of Christianity, and consistently articulated scriptural limits on personal moral behavior. The latter, we believe, deal with ritual, ceremonial, organizational or legal practices and precepts, whose intent is to bring order to the community of believers, safeguard the identity of God's people, and enhance the Church's mission. An important insight of position three is that being faithful to scriptural teaching includes applying it in a spirit and manner that the Bible itself calls for. One can make a biblical teaching actually unbiblical by imposing it in a manner more absolute and rigid than the Bible itself does.

It is crucial to emphasize that adaptation in Scripture is not the norm; that it never applies to God's absolute moral commands and eternal truths; and that He allows it only under certain circumstances. But within these limits, there are a number of instances in the Bible where God allowed for the modification of His initial plans for the Israelites in relation to matters of leadership and/or gender.

None of these episodes are directly analogous to the situation in which we currently find ourselves. Rather, the all express principles that, in combination, show a willingness by God to adapt, through his people, for gospel mission, certain organizational and liturgical practices.

A. A King in Israel

The Scripture makes it apparent that God's ideal plan for the nation of Israel was not that of kingship (1 Sam. 8:10-20). He wanted them to be led by a combination of prophets, judges, priests, and elders. Still, when Israel desired a king, God accommodated this desire, even though the choice was prompted by the surrounding society and culture. "The Lord answered [Samuel], "Listen to them and give them a king" (1 Sam. 8:23).

At that point, not only did the kingship become acceptable to God, the king himself became the Lord's anointed, literally, when Samuel poured oil on Saul (1 Sam. 10:1). Thereafter kings were frequently anointed by prophets or high priests as a sign of divine

also DA 568.)

appointment (1 Sam. 16:13, 1 Kgs. 1:39, 45, 2 Kgs. 9:1-6, 2 Chron. 23:11).

That the kingship was a burden to Israel, and that individual kings fell into sin did not change God's endorsement of the institution. This story of the king shows that God is willing to vary His organizational ideal to accommodate cultural circumstances and the desires of His people. Since God was not willing to reject His people for rejecting one of His organizational ideals, it should cause us to seriously reflect on how we relate to one another when there are differences in understanding such ideals.

Some will note that already in the book of Deuteronomy God himself had made allowance for the variance of kingship (Deut. 17:14-20). God's prediction of the variance—His foresight of Israel's departure from the divine theocratic template—did not make it any less a variance from the ideal, as both the prediction and the fulfillment reveal. The Bible also reveals that not all variances need to be predicted, or revealed by God ahead of time, to be appropriate, as our next example shows.

B. The Daughters of Zelophehad

In ancient Israel, sons were intended by Divine law to inherit property, with a double portion going to the first-born son (Deut. 21:15-17). But the four daughters of Zelophehad had no brothers and, once their father died, his name and property would be dissipated among the people. The daughters petitioned Moses that, in the absence of brothers, they be allowed to inherit property. Moses brought the case to the Lord, Who said that that "the daughters of Zelophehad speak right: thou shalt surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father's possession" (Num. 27:7).

Again, in this instance the Lord explicitly approves the adaptation, but He does it in response to a human need and a human request. There was nothing in the law prior to the daughters' entreaty that suggested adaptation or variation of the law was permissible. Rather, God modified His law, His civil statutes, at the request of not just important community leaders, but of young, unmarried girls in a highly patriarchal culture. The story thus indicates that there is an important role for the community of believers in adaptations of God's plans for ordering His people.

In addition, however, we also have a Biblical story that shows the adaptation and variation of an ideal is possible without a recorded explicit divine command. This story is found in Judges 4 and 5, and concerns Deborah and Barak.

C. Deborah and Barak

Often the story of Deborah the Judge is told in the context of the ordination discussion to prove that women can hold positions of spiritual institutional authority, similar to that of elder. But the story is more complicated than this, and actually helps to illustrate the moral command/ideal dichotomy in the context of leadership and gender.

Deborah "led" or "judged" Israel, and "held court" under a palm tree, where she decided the "disputes" of the Israelites (Jdg. 4:4-5). Even though the Hebrew word used to describe Deborah as a judge is the same as is used for all the other judges, there are indications in the story that a female judge was a rare and unusual event. Deborah is the only woman recorded in the Bible to have been a judge of Israel. This exceptionality is supported by Ellen White's comment that "in the absence of the usual magistrates, the people had sought to her [Deborah] for counsel and justice" (YRP 260).

Further, when it came time to mount a military campaign against Sisera and his

army, rather than take command as most judges did, Deborah called on a warrior, Barak, to lead the troops. He was unwilling to assume the command unless she came along to support him at the battle. This she agreed to, but in a rebuke of his failure to carry out his role as a man, she told him that the glory for the victory would go to a woman (Jdg. 4:9).

Deborah's role as judge and military escort was unusual, made necessary by circumstances, including the failure of men to accept their expected roles. Thus, the Deborah story contains at the same time pointers towards the general biblical ideal of male spiritual institutional leadership, but also biblical evidence of its variability. Circumstances of national peril called for a response, which was then taken in light of the organizational and missional needs of God's people, and the response which varied from the divine ideal then received divine blessing.

D. King David and the Moabite Restriction

The laws of purity and organization that God gave Israel could even be modified to allow a forbidden outsider to play the most powerful leadership roles in the land, as the reigns of David and Solomon, and the genealogy of Jesus demonstrate. Because the Moabites had seduced the Israelites into idolatry, God had commanded that a "Moabite shall not enter into the Assembly of the Lord; even unto the tenth generation shall none belonging to them enter into the assembly of the Lord for ever" (Deut. 23:3). This was relevant to David because his great-grandfather was Boaz, who married Ruth, the Moabite (Ruth 4:16-20), but had done so in defiance of a Mosaic prohibition that had been repeated by Joshua (Deut. 7:3; Jos. 23:12).

Under a strict application of the Levitical code, Boaz's marriage to Ruth was illegitimate. She and her descendants should have been forbidden from playing any formal roles in the nation of Israel until ten generations had passed. This would have excluded David from being king. The book of Ruth can be seen as including an extended defense and legal argument as to why Ruth was really a Jewess, and no longer a Moabite.² Her famous soliloquy, "where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay, your people will be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16), takes on a whole new significance when this larger context is understood.

Once one understands the truly spiritual nature of Jewish identity, all these arguments work. Obviously they worked in their historical context, as a majority of Israel and Judah accepted David as king. But an important point for our purposes is that none of these "exceptions" to the Mosaic prohibition can be found in the law itself! They were all created by the circumstances of the story itself, as Israel's legal and spiritual expositors and leaders wrestled with the meaning of God's laws and the *spirit behind them* in a particular concrete context.

E. David, the Showbread, and Christ.

David's act in eating the showbread is one of the most famous examples of a divine ideal giving way to the larger spirit behind these laws. (1 Sam. 21:1-8). Fleeing from Saul,

² That the purpose of the book of Ruth is to "promote the interests of David and his dynasty" is the position of a "large consensus" of modern interpreters: Robert Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth in The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 37.

David in his haste to escape had left without sufficient provisions or weapons. Arriving in Nob, he asked Ahimelech the priest for bread to eat. Ahimelech said that the only available food was the showbread, which was reserved by the law for the priests (Lev. 24:5-9). Due to David's pressing circumstances, however, Ahimelech was willing to allow David and his men to eat the bread, allowing the letter of the ritual law to give way before human needs of health and sustenance.

Strikingly, too, that is how Christ understood the story. Christ justifies both David's acts as well as those of his disciples in the face of criticism from the Pharisees that his disciples did not keep the Sabbath properly because they plucked ears of corn to eat. David was justified, Christ says, in eating the showbread, in violation of an explicit divine rule, to preserve life and health. Christ himself ratifies human ability to adapt and modify divine rules that provide ecclesiastical order in pursuit of higher principles of the preservation of life, health, or well being of the community and its members.

F. The Jerusalem Council: Differences Over Divine Ideals

Circumcision was a vitally important act for every male Israelite. It was a sign of God's everlasting covenant with Abraham, to be kept "for the generations to come"; in fact those who were not circumcised were said to have "broken the covenant" (Gen. 17:9-14). Circumcision was considered essential to the identity of Israel as God's covenant people.

We do not believe that circumcision and ordination are the same kind of issues in all respects. Circumcision was an ethnic marker, instituted during the time of Abraham, that lost its central meaning when the borders of Israel became defined by that of spiritual Israel. Leadership and gender roles go back to Eden. But we believe that the Jerusalem council highlights three vitally important principles that should be taken into account whenever organizational guidelines of broad impact on the church, such as qualifications for ordination, are being applied or adapted by the church. These principles are:

First: An issue of Church order and organization fracturing the unity of the Church should be decided by a representative council of the church. Second: The decision, though taken collectively, may not require uniformity of action on the part of all, as the Jerusalem council allowed Jews and Gentiles to approach circumcision and ritual differently. Third: The decision should foster both the unity and mission of the Church within the framework of biblical principle. They were not always united in the particulars of ecclesiastical practice. In Christ, however, they were able to live with these differences, and so should we.

G. Ideal and Variation in the Writings of Ellen White

Ellen White showed a distinct awareness of the variable nature of organizational ideals. She was supportive of church order and the need for pastoral ordination, but she was very clear that such organizational rules should not stand in the way of the mission of the Church. In 1896 she wrote about an un-ordained worker and his mistake in not being willing to baptize when no ordained pastor was available:

[I]t has been a great mistake that men go out, knowing they are children of God, like Brother Tay, [who] went to Pitcairn as a missionary to do work, [but] . . . did not feel at liberty to baptize because he had not been ordained. That is not any of God's arrangements; it is man's fixing. . . . If there is a minister in reach, all right, then they should seek for the ordained minister to do the baptizing, but when the Lord works

with a man to bring out a soul here and there, and they know not when the opportunity will come that these precious souls can be baptized, why . . . he should baptize these souls (MS 75, Nov. 12, 1896, pp. 1-2).

In this single quotation we have both the acknowledgment of the ideal (“they should seek for the ordained minister to do the baptizing”) and the variation or adaptations (“he should baptize these souls.”) Ellen White’s clear overriding concern was for the mission of the Church. Organizational guidelines have their place, but should give way when they impede mission.

In another instance, Ellen White described how an apparently clear statement of her own regarding school order and restrictions should be set aside based on “reason from common sense.” She met with a group of parents and educators who were considering starting a kindergarten. Some of these conscientious Adventist believers opposed it, as they had read Ellen White’s counsel regarding not sending children to school until they were eight or ten years old.³

Ellen White acknowledged her earlier statements about students and age, but said that rather than being left loosely supervised, it would be much better for the young children to be in a well-run Adventist school. She explained her response in terms of a wider principle, one that should command our attention: “God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things” (3SM 217).

She applied these very principals to the question of women’s leadership in the medical work in her day: “In ancient times the Lord worked in wonderful way through consecrated women who unite in His work with men whom He had chosen to stand as His representatives. He used women to gain great and decisive victories. More than once in times of emergency, He brought them to the front and worked through them for the salvation of many lives. . . .A study of women’s work in connection with the cause of God in Old Testament times will teach us lessons that will enable us to meet emergencies in the work to-day.” Ellen White, Letter, May 7, 1911 (To Loma Linda, California)

IV. Application and Conclusion

As the above examples show, God in His love and grace accommodates His divine ideal throughout Scripture and salvation history. Again, this reasoning does not apply to universal moral commands or truths. None of the examples set out above involved variations or deviations from God’s moral laws, whether it be the ten commandments or prohibitions against sexual immorality, such as adultery or homosexuality.

But God’s organizational ideals are somewhat different. They should not be lightly or cavalierly disregarded, but the Bible makes clear they can, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, be adapted to further the mission of God’s Church. These type of standards are created to further God’s primary desires of the unity of His Church and for His people to be focused on their divinely appointed role as instruments in God’s mission of seeking and saving the lost (Matt. 18:10-12; 28:18-20; Luke 19:10).

Some may interpret and apply these organizational ideals differently than others, but under biblical principles of mutual Christian liberty we should grant tolerance and

³ (CE 8).

forbearance to each other. (Gal. 2:3-5). Irwin Evans, Editor of *Ministry Magazine* in 1931 wrote an editorial on the importance of Christian Tolerance in the church that I believe speaks profoundly to our situation today:

Controversies that have divided Christians into various sects have seldom been on vital elements of faith, essential to salvation, but on nonessentials, so far as salvation is concerned. Truth cannot be compromised, but nonessentials, which do not enter into our salvation directly, ought not to bring alienation between brethren. Here is a wide sphere for tolerance. Tolerance is not always found where we might naturally look for it. A teacher of the gospel of the kingdom would be supposed to possess tolerance in a marked degree, according to his education and cultural advantages. All leaders in religious revivals, and promoters of the deeper spiritual life among the people, should possess this indispensable Christian grace. Yet how often do these seem to lack the spirit of tolerance. They not only assume that they have the correct interpretation of all Scriptural doctrines, but they feel constrained to condemn all who do not accept their teachings as special light from God. . . . *Tolerance must certainly be one characteristic of the last church. Without it there must come breaking of fellowship.*
Irwin H. Evans, "Tolerance," *Ministry Magazine*, Oct. 1931, 5, 31.

In seeking to implement this godly tolerance, our practical Proposal is as follows:

The Session affirms that men have a special responsibility to carry out the office of ordained minister, but where it would further Church mission and unity, Divisions can allow Unions to authorize the ordination of women ministers, but no Conference, Mission or local Church should be obliged to have women ministers serve within their territory or church.

This proposal does three things:

1. It creates or rather continues a general rule of male ordained ministerial leadership. This will protect Divisions and Unions that desire a traditional approach, and will not create a sense of cultural or social inferiority in relation to those Divisions that do choose to ordain women. This rebuttable presumption is not found in position number 2, and thus makes our position unique.
2. It allow exceptions where Divisions, Unions, and Conferences, in consultation, agree to ordain women. Thus, territories that are convinced and convicted of that need for a variance may obtain one. This separates us from position 1.
3. It protects the rights of territories and churches that desire to preserve a traditional approach to ordination. It protects the religious freedom of those that may differ from the variance. Such freedom would be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain under the other two positions.

We pray for the wisdom of this Council as it seeks to navigate safely through these challenging waters, knowing that we have an all wise, and all loving Pilot who is safeguarding the unity and faithfulness of His precious vessel in these last days.