

Theology of Ordination Study Committee
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“My Personal Testimony: Some Pastoral Reflections”

Do you know what I find so awkward about our collective conversation? It is that I have personal friends—dear personal friends—who have embraced diametrically opposite points of view from each other—loving the same God, obeying the same Bible, serving the same church. And not only are my friends opposed to each other—some of them are opposed to me. Oh, I understand that they are not opposed to me personally, nor I to them—these friends of mine—but sometimes it almost feels like that, doesn't it?

I wish there were a politician's way out of this debate we are having. Years ago I read about Senator Everett Dirksen (Illinois), who used to handle controversial issues this way. When confronted by a constituent, “Where do you stand, Senator, on this issue?” he would take the voter's hand and reply: “Some of my dear friends are vehemently opposed to this matter—and some of my close friends are very much in favor of it—and I don't know about you, but I believe a man ought to stand with his friends—so that's where I stand.” And he would walk off before the constituent could sort out just what it was he had said.

Well, some of my dear friends today are vehemently opposed to this matter, and some of my close friends are very much in favor of it—and I would love to stand with my friends. And according to Psalm 133:1 it is possible to do just that: “How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!” (NIV) That is why Jesus prayed on the eve of Calvary, “I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity” (John 17:22, 23 NIV). Jesus prayed for our unity—and I believe His prayer will be answered. And we will be friends for eternity.

The fact of the matter is—I have stood in the pulpit of the Pioneer Memorial Church on the campus of Andrews University and preached my heart out in defense of male headship from Holy Scripture. The sermon was so passionate that a prominent Adventist family (I later learned from my friend Richard Leshner, president of AU at the time) withdrew their daughter from that school in protest. I believed in male headship—what my male headship friends believe today—fervently.

But in the subsequent two years of continued Bible study, I came to the conclusion that in fact the Word of God, rather than forbidding the ordination of women to gospel ministry, in fact actually opens the door to it. And so it was my humble, pastoral duty to return to the same pulpit and reverse myself.

To change one's mind is not a sign of weakness, but is rather the fruit of a personal commitment to continue to search deeply in Holy Scripture for divine truth.

As I have sat here with you for these three separate weeks over the last twelve months—and have listened and read and listened and read and prayed and prayed—I have found biblical evidence that informs my own conclusion as to what is God’s will for our world church. I have been asked to share with you now that evidence.

CREATION

At the heart of all the revealed truth that you and I embrace together is the shining and resplendent truth about our triune, communal God. In fact, as in all matters spiritual and ecclesiastical, it is the truth about God that is the most compelling evidence of all—this God who first revealed Himself in these words: “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man [*ha adam*, humanity] in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Genesis 1:26).¹

Ellen White’s magnum opus, *The Conflict of the Ages* series, opens and ends with the identical three words, “God is love.” All universal truth, all divine revelation, all inspired human understanding is refracted through the prism of the solitary truth that God—when all is said and done—always has been, always is, and always will be love. “God is love.”

So the opening salvo of Holy Scripture portraying the creation of the human race comes as no surprise, given the triune, communal God who is our Creator. From time immemorial Love has always sought to expand its embrace and extend its circle to include. For “inclusion” has always been the *modus operandi* of Love. Perhaps you remember the epigram Edward Markham wrote a century ago:

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!²

Calvary’s outstretched arms were nailed in a wide-open embrace so that we would never forget that even for sinners divine love always seeks to include. Love took us in. Thus, inclusion, rather than exclusion, has been the defining truth about God from “in the beginning.”

Thus Genesis 1 – 3 rings with the jubilant note of Love’s inclusion “from the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate.”³ And in His gift of the seventh-day Sabbath, our community-building, relationship-seeking Creator bound Himself to the human race with ties that would never be broken.

And so I must tell you that I have not been able to see what my male headship friends have suggested, namely that this God of inclusive love, in fact, is a God of hierarchy and subordination even within the Trinity. I understand—we all do—that given the fall of the

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical references are from the NKJV.

² <http://www.theotherpages.org/poems/mark01.html>

³ See Ellen White, *Great Controversy*, 678.

human race the Member of the Godhead who became the Incarnate One, Immanuel, would by necessity live out His days on this planet, humbly subordinated to the Father. As a Son “He learned obedience through the things He suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). But God’s emergency response to the human crisis can hardly become the template for defining the ontological reality of this God who has already ruled this universe for eternity past.

Thus Richard Davidson in his careful examination of Genesis 1 – 3 rightly concludes:

It is crucial to recognize that in describing the divine interrelationships (“let Us”) which form an analogy with human relationships (“male and female”), the narrator gives no indication of a hierarchy within the Godhead, no reference to the asymmetrical submission of one Person (the Son) to the Other (the Father). In describing the interrelationship among members of the Godhead, the emphasis in this text is upon the deliberation and fellowship of Equals. If there is any submission implied, it is a *mutual submission* of Equals as the members of the Godhead discuss and deliberate together concerning the creation of humankind. The divine “Let Us” implies that One is not commanding, and Another obeying; all are equally engaged in the deliberation.⁴

In other words there is not a single hint of divine headship or subordination within the Trinity in the Creation account. Thus there is no divine a priori or precedent for the notion that male headship is cryptically embedded in between the lines of Genesis 1 and 2. It simply is not there. Davidson concludes:

Such equality without any top-down hierarchy, by analogy, is thus emphasized with regard to the *mutual* submission in human (male-female, husband and wife) relationships, who are made relationally in the image of God. . . . According to Gen 1, male and female are regarded holistically, as equal without hierarchy. The full equality of man and woman—in resemblance/constitution, in relationship, and in representation/function—is unhesitatingly proclaimed in the first chapter of the Bible, and is evaluated by God Himself as “very good” (Gen 1:31)!⁵

I have listened with great interest to my male headship friends try to establish a male hierarchy within the Creation account. While they are quick to assert a basic or ontological equality between man and woman, husband and wife, they side-step that equality by suggesting that it is in the divinely assigned “roles” of our first parents that male headship finds its primordial basis. Really? Consider the logic of that assumption:

If “role” is no longer a temporary, secondary feature of being a woman or man, but involves a permanent subordination of women to men because of their very personhood, then “role” is not the appropriate word to describe this situation. It may be a nice-sounding term, but it is misleading, since, as [Kevin] Giles points out, for gender subordinationists “The issue is not *gender roles* but essential *gender relations*. God has

⁴ Richard Davidson, “Should Women Be ordained as Pastors? Old Testament Considerations,” TOSC paper, p. 3.

⁵ Davidson, pp 3, 5.

set men over women because they are women. The word *role* only has the effect of obfuscating this fact.”⁶

Roles by definition are temporary. To suggest that women were assigned by the Creator to a subordinate position in the human race by virtue of their womanhood is hardly the establishment of a “role,” but rather the creation of a “caste.” I agree with Richard Davidson: “This is nothing less than a caste system in which there is permanent subordination of the female gender to the male gender.”⁷ The word “role” may soften and perhaps make more palatable the theory of male headship, but it cannot hide its logical conclusion—the permanent subordination of all women to all men. The suggestion that our Creator intended that gender subordination from the beginning cannot be substantiated. I do not find it there.

Ellen White observes: “No distinction on account of nationality, race, or caste, is recognized by God. He is the Maker of all mankind. All men are of one family by creation, and all are one by redemption.”⁸ Moreover, “caste is hateful to God. He ignores everything of this character.”⁹

Then what shall we do with God’s pronouncement to the woman after the Fall? “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16). The very language makes it clear that this is a post-fall provision by God for marriage. God speaks of “your husband,” not “your neighbor.” Thus it was not a permanent provision for all male and female relationships; it was not even a permanent provision for marriage. After all, the Creator’s egalitarian blueprint for marriage in Genesis 2—“She came from my side”—is hardly negated by the Creator’s provision for marriage after the Fall in Genesis 3. Clearly Genesis 3:16 is a temporary post-fall accommodation for all our marriages. It is not a divine proviso to pull rank. And any husband who champions this post-fall accommodation as divine permission to exert the power of rule in his marriage has already abused the provision!

Moreover it is an exegetical mistake to extrapolate from God’s post-fall marriage provision a decree that declares this marriage remedy a divine requirement for the world, for society, and for the church. My male headship friends seek to get around that fact by suggesting that the church is like a family, and therefore the rules of the family (or marriage) are the rules of the church. But that is simply wrong. Males are not the heads of the church. The church has only one Head, and His name is Jesus. We are all subordinated *to Him* in the church, not the women to the men. Period.

In fact Richard Davidson, Jiri Moskala, and Jacques Doukhan all have thoroughly established the exegetical evidence in Genesis 1 – 3 that *both* Adam and Eve served as priests of Yahweh in the sanctuary of Eden. Davidson lists over thirty textual parallels that establish

⁶ Davidson, p 14.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ellen White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, 386.

⁹ Ellen White, *Conflict and Courage*, 297.

“a sacerdotal function for the first couple.”¹⁰ Thus if any conclusion regarding women in ministry is to be derived from the Creation account it would be the conclusion that God ordained both man and woman to serve Him in priestly servant leadership. One would not expect any less from this God of inclusive love.

JESUS

Was it any different when the Creator became flesh and dwelt among us? Given the mission of divine love to draw a circle to take us in, is it any surprise that Jesus’ ministry among us was one of “inclusion” rather than “exclusion”? The gospel record depicts the Savior proactively going about dismantling the walls that had grown up among His people—walls between the rich and the poor, between the Jews and the Samaritans, between the saved and the lost, between the religious and the irreligious, between the Jews and the Gentiles, between the young and the aged, between men and women. “Whoever comes to me I will never drive away” was His invitation (John 6:37 NIV).

Gilbert Bilezikian identifies nine direct inclusions of women in Jesus’ life and ministry: (1) the intentional insertion of four women along with Mary into the Messiah’s genealogical record (Matthew 1); (2) a woman receives the first news of the incarnation (Luke 1:32-35); (3) a woman, with her wedded husband, provided the occasion for the first divine sign of Jesus’ eschatological glory (John 2:1-11); (4) a woman was the first Samaritan convert (John 4:7-42); (5) a woman was the first Gentile convert (Matthew 15:21-28); (6) a woman received the first resurrection teaching (John 11:23-27); (7) a woman manifested the first perception of the cross (Mark 14:3-9); (8) a woman was the first to witness the Resurrection (Matthew 28:9; John 20:16); and, (9) the first witnesses to the Resurrection were women (Matthew 28:10; John 20:18).¹¹

Bilezikian observes:

This list of exceptional roles played by women in the crucial events of the life of Christ suggests that he made deliberate choices concerning the place of women in the economy of redemption. The message conveyed by those decisions is not to be found in mere chronological primacy (which according to Jesus is of no advantage; see Matt. 20:16), but rather in the fact that Jesus himself gave women a foundational and prominently constitutional role in the history of redemption. Any subsequent reduction of the conspicuous involvement of women in the community of redemption could be perpetrated only in violation of the will of its divine founder.¹²

In his book-length examination of Paul’s attitude and practice toward women in the early Christian church, Philip Payne notes the example of the Lord of Paul:

¹⁰ Davidson, p 19.

¹¹ Bilezikian 71-76.

¹² Bilezikian 76.

Paul affirms “I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). Christ’s example in all his deeds and words was to treat women as persons equal with men. He respected their intelligence and spiritual capacity as is evident in the great spiritual truths he originally taught to women [Samaritan woman, Martha, et al]. . . . Although a woman’s testimony was not recognized in the courts, Jesus demonstrated his respect for their testimony by appearing first to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection (John 20:14-18) and instructing her to tell the others. After Jesus taught the Samaritan woman, she acted as the first missionary to her people and many of her people believed (John 4:39-42).¹³

Payne further observes:

Jesus gives no hint that the nature of God’s will for women is different than for men. He made no distinction in the righteousness demanded of both. . . . He calls a crippled woman a “daughter of Abraham” (Luke 13:16), a linguistic usage seventy years prior to the first recorded rabbinic equivalent (Str-B 2:200). He says, “You are all brothers” (Matt 23:8), and he treats obligations to father and mother equally (Mark 7:10-12).¹⁴

But what about Jesus’ choice of only males as His disciples and apostles? Isn’t Christ’s all-male apostolate a template and example for us today? In reality, Jesus’ inner circle of disciples was not only all-male—it was all-free-Jewish-male. I.e., the first formal leaders of His church on earth included no slave, no freed slave, no Gentile, no person of color, nobody period *except* for free Jewish males. So shall the third millennial church follow suit?

Moreover, to suggest that an all-male inner circle of disciples was Jesus’ subtle embrace of the all-male priesthood of the Old Testament is illogical. For to be faithful to the Old Testament model, Christ would have had to select only Levite males for His inner circle of priests/disciples. So to press Jesus’ selection of His all-Jewish-free-male disciples as a model for third millennial ordination practice makes no sense to me.

And to all those who counter—Look, He had women ministering to Him throughout His ministry; why didn’t He include one of them in His inner circle?—consider this response:

It is one thing for a number of women to be mentioned as following Jesus from time to time in his preaching in the towns (Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:1-3), but traveling full time for three years with late night meetings such as at the Garden of Gethsemane and spending periods of time in the wilderness are quite another thing. Strong cultural objections and moral suspicions would undoubtedly be raised not only about Jesus, but also about the men whom he chose to be with him. Married women could hardly leave their families for such a long period, and single women would have been even more suspicious. To have chosen women disciples would have raised legitimate suspicion undermining the gospel.¹⁵

¹³ Payne 57.

¹⁴ Payne 58.

¹⁵ Payne 59.

The truth is that a careful examination of the life of the Creator lived out in “the Word made flesh” reveals the dignity, courtesy and mercy Jesus extended to both men and women, the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate, the Jew and the Gentile. In His living, His ministering, His saving it is compellingly clear that the very tenor of Jesus’ life and ministry was inclusion, not exclusion. In Christ there was neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female—for in all, He saw “heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29).

Thus it was the mission of the church He raised up to determine how the walls separating them might yet be brought down.

EKKLESIA

Paul

Paul, who championed the life and the way of Christ, perpetuates the example of Jesus in his own ministry with women throughout both the church and the Empire. More than any other apostle, Paul both examines and teaches the role of women within the mission and ministry of the community of faith.

Romans 16 is a veritable treasure trove regarding Paul’s attitude toward women in ministry, an attitude unabashedly revealed in the titles he gives his female partners in ministry: “servant” or “deacon” (*diakonos*), v 1; “helper” or “benefactor” or “leader” (*prostatis*), v 2; “fellow worker” (*sunergos*), v 3/Phil 4:3; and “apostle” (*apostolos*), v 7. Moreover Paul describes these women “as fulfilling functions associated with church leadership: they ‘worked hard in the Lord’ (Rom 16:6, 12) and ‘contended at my side in the cause of the gospel’ (Phil 4:3). Over two-thirds of the colleagues whom Paul praises for their Christian ministry in Rom 16:1-16—seven of the ten—are women.”¹⁶

Then what is the meaning of Paul’s declaration, “And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence” (1 Timothy 2:12)?

The central theme and overriding concern that runs throughout Paul’s pastoral letter to Timothy is the havoc raised by false teachers and their heretical teachings in the church of Ephesus. Paul had warned the Ephesian elders at his farewell, “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves” (Acts 20:29-30). First Timothy is evidence that his prediction had come true. The first six verses lay out Paul’s urgent concern for Timothy’s confrontation of these false teachers, with the rest of his letter interspersed with explicit counsel on how to deal with them.¹⁷ In fact,

¹⁶ Payne 68.

¹⁷ 1 Tim 1:18-20; 4:1-8; 5:11-15; 6:9-10.

so concerned is the Apostle with the false teaching that “nearly every verse in this letter relates to it.”¹⁸

That women in the church were caught up with the false teachers and their teachings explains why “no other book of the Bible has a higher proportion of verses focused specifically on problems regarding women: 21 out of 113 verses (1 Tim 2:9-15; 4:7; 5:3-7, 9-16).”¹⁹ Because 1 Timothy is a pastoral letter from the apostle to his young associate, the counsel necessarily reflects the pastoral and congregational context of the Ephesian church. To suggest that Paul intended his context-specific admonition prohibiting women from teaching in the church in Ephesus to be applicable to the universal church overlooks Paul’s clear recognition in 1 Corinthians 11:5 that women may both pray and prophecy in worship.

Furthermore Paul extols the teaching ministry Timothy’s grandmother Lois and mother Eunice had in his young life (2 Tim 1:5; 3:14-16). As already noted in Romans 16, Paul’s listing of seven women who served with him in ministry and leadership in the churches belies the suggestion that here in 1 Timothy 2:12 Paul is universally prohibiting such authoritative ministry and leadership. What is more, at around the same time Paul wrote this letter to Timothy he wrote to Titus, another pastoral associate, with the instruction that “older women” serve the church as “teachers of good things” (Titus 2:3).²⁰ Elsewhere Paul commanded the church in Colossae, including its women, to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you [plural] teach [no gender distinction is made] and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you [plural] sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16 NIV). And in the wider New Testament witness, the observation that “by this time you ought to be teachers” in Hebrews 5:12 was clearly addressed to both the men and women in the church and offers no gender restriction. Thus to suggest a universal mandate prohibiting women from authoritative teaching in 1 Timothy 2:12 contradicts both the practice and teaching of Paul.

But what about his proviso in 1 Timothy 3 that an elder/overseer and deacon are to be “the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2, 12)?²¹ Is not such a designation incontrovertible evidence that the spiritual leadership offices of elder and deacon are reserved for only men?

¹⁸ Payne 296. Here Payne identifies in 1 Timothy 1:3-11 these five aspects of false teaching: myths and endless genealogies, controversies, causing people to leave the faith, meaningless talk, and in appropriate application of the law.

¹⁹ Payne 300.

²⁰ Some suggest that Paul’s description of older women as “teachers of good things” does not refer to public teaching, but rather to some form of in-home ministry. However an “examination of all the words Paul uses with the root ‘teach’ shows that in every other instance teaching had verbalized content, and in this case the content is enumerated for older women just as it is for Titus. Thus, those who would interpret Titus 2:3 as teaching solely by example do so in opposition to Paul’s universal use of this word in any form (noun, verb, participle, compound, root derivative) in this and every other context. They strip ‘teacher’ in [Titus] 2:3 of its basic meaning (one who verbally imparts knowledge of skills) in only this one instance simply because women are the teachers” (Payne 329).

²¹ Some are surprised to learn that in these Greek passages (1 Timothy 3:1-12; Titus 1:5-9) there is not a single masculine pronoun. Rather it is the English translations that insert the masculine pronoun up to fourteen times (NIV, NASB) in Paul’s list of requirements for the offices of overseer/bishop/elder and deacon. See Payne, 445.

The Greek phrase is *mia/j gunaiko.j a;ndra*, literally “one woman man.” Besides the obvious exclusion of polygamists (multiple women/wives) and adulterers (multiple sexual partners), what other exclusions does this single phrase cover? Some have isolated a single word from this phrase and used *a;ndra* (“man” or “husband”) to function as a separate stand-alone qualification. But if it were acceptable to piecemeal this list of spiritual requirements, then one could just as logically dissect “one who rules his own house well” (v 4) and reduce it to the phrase “his own house” in order to conclude that spiritual leaders must be house owners. Nobody would countenance such a reduction. Yet when a single word is isolated from the phrase “one woman man” in order to insert an additional gender requirement, such reductionism is immediately logical to its proponents.

However, what is not logical are the implications of such a literal one-word reduction, when applied to the entire list. Along with marital relations (“husband of one wife” v 2), Paul also lists requirements concerning children—“having his children in submission with all reverence” (v 4), “ruling their children and their own houses well” (v 12), and “having faithful children” (Titus 1:6). On the basis of a literal reading of these four phrases, the following categories of men would be disqualified: “single men; married men with no children; married men with only one child; married men with children too young or too indifferent or obdurate to profess faith; married men with believing but disobedient children; married men with children who are believing and obedient but not respectful in all things.”²² What is more, it must be stated that this literalistic exclusion of single men would begin with Christ Himself:

. . . Jesus Christ—since he was single—would have been unqualified to exercise leadership among the people he taught before and after the resurrection. Paul and Barnabas, who both served as missionaries and occasional leaders of local churches (Acts 13:1), would have been violating Paul’s marriage requirement since they were both working as single persons (1 Cor. 9:5). Finally, should this requirement for the Ephesian church be absolutized, men who accept Jesus’s radical challenge to celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:12), thus exemplifying obedience to his call to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him (16:24)—the very men who should be upheld as exemplars of commitment before the Christian community—would be systematically and universally rejected from the most influential positions in church leadership. The personal sacrifice they would have made to serve the community with total dedication would be held against them as an impediment to such service.²³

But what about women in ministry? Does Paul’s list of requirements for spiritual leadership and ministry (which in the Greek contains not a single masculine pronoun) exclude women from this calling of God? The nine Greek words or expressions that Paul applies to overseers/elders in 1 Timothy 3 are all applied to women elsewhere in this pastoral epistle: “good works” (3:1/5:10); “blameless” (3:2/5:7); “husband of one wife” (3:2/5:9—“wife of one

²² Bilezikian 139.

²³ Bilezikian 144.

man”); “temperate” (3:2/3:11); “self-controlled” (3:2/2:9, 15); “respectable” (3:2/2:9); “reverent” (3:4/3:11); “condemnation” (3:6/5:12); “good testimony” (3:7/5:10).²⁴

Thus the very traits once thought to be exclusively applied by Paul to men, as it turns out, were also applied by Paul to women *in this same epistle*. When the “one woman man” phrase is correctly interpreted as excluding polygamous or adulterous individuals from ministering in spiritual leadership, there is no embedded or exegetical reason in 1 Timothy 3 to prohibit Spirit-gifted women from serving in the same overseer/elder offices that in the post-NT church eventually became reserved for men alone. As Darius Jankiewicz has concluded: “. . . the gender of a bishop or deacon was not on Paul’s mind. If gender was truly important to him, we would have a clear statement in 1 Timothy or elsewhere, such as ‘a bishop must be a man.’”²⁵

The compelling evidence is that Paul never advocated an all-male clergy. His teaching and practice imitated the inclusive ministry of his Lord in purposefully widening the circle of spiritual leadership to include called and qualified disciples of either gender.

Peter

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. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy.²⁶

On the Day of Pentecost when Peter began that first gospel sermon by quoting from the ancient prophet Joel, under the inspiration of the Spirit either Peter or Luke inserted a new opening phrase to Joel’s prophecy, “in the last days.” Peter was not speaking of epochs, but rather of imminence. He would eventually write: “The end of all things is at hand” (1 Peter 4:7). But before the Day of the Lord—and this was Peter’s point on Pentecost—there would be an eschatological, an apocalyptic outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon “all people.” And in that outpouring God would dismantle three walls that have kept the human family divided and separated from its beginnings: the wall of gender (men and women); the wall of age (young and old); and, the wall of class (free and servant). And in that apocalyptic unleashing the spiritual gifts of prophesying, visioning and dreaming would be bestowed upon “all flesh.”

It is of interest that the spiritual gift Joel and Peter identify in that endtime outpouring is the gift of prophecy, a gift that is ranked second in Paul’s hierarchy of spiritual leadership gifts: “And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues” (1

²⁴ See chart in Payne 450.

²⁵ Darius Jankiewicz, “Authority of the Christian Leader,” TOSC paper, p 19.

²⁶ Acts 2:17-18.

Corinthians 12:28). This is the same gift that Revelation predicts will be operative within the remnant community in the same last days, “the spirit of prophecy.”²⁷

It is noteworthy that this gift which God will bestow upon our sons and our daughters, His menservants and maidservants, is a gift that ranks second in the Bible’s hierarchy of spiritual authority gifts,²⁸ higher even than the gift of teaching, the very gift my male headship friends have concluded should be reserved only for men.

The point? If both genders are chosen by the Holy Spirit to receive the second highest gift of spiritual authority in the church, the same would surely be true for the lesser gifts, including third highest gift of spiritual authority, the gift of teaching. Thus the Bible predicts God’s endtime calling and gifting of *both* genders, all ages and all classes for the sake of His strategic endgame.

Ellen White

That is why for me one of the great anachronisms of this conversation we are having regarding the role of women in ministry is that the debate is taking place within a denomination founded by a woman! I am incredulous over how those who are as vigorous as I am in upholding the Spirit of Prophecy (which we just referenced), as manifested in the life, ministry, writings and leadership of Ellen White, are such vocal opponents to the suggestion that even as God led the New Testament church from a Jews-only paradigm to a Jews and Gentiles sharing the same gift and same spiritual authority paradigm, He has the right to do the same in this endtime church by uniting both men and women by the same Holy Spirit gift and with the same ecclesiastical spiritual authority. What do they do with Ellen White?

Here’s how my friends respond to my question: Well, yes, she is a prophet—and prophets indeed do have very significant spiritual authority (to argue otherwise would be to argue against her gift)—but it’s not “headship authority”—and this is why Deborah, who was both a prophetess and a great leader, was not a great leader because she actually did not lead, but rather deferred to the male leadership of her nation (and I have one friend who says that while she was a great prophetess with spiritual authority and leadership it was a derived authority since her husband is somewhere mentioned in the background of the passage in order to show that she was still under his headship).

Do we really need to go to these lengths in order to prove that Ellen White really did not have spiritual headship authority in our community of faith?

The fact is that Ellen White was a great spiritual leader with all the divinely-delegated headship authority necessary to raise up this remnant community “for such a time as this.” Did she agree with the theory my male headship friends are advocating today? Denis Fortin wrote, “I find it interesting that in her 70 years of ministry Ellen White never referred to or commented on 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 or 1 Timothy 2:12 to limit the ministry women can do in the church

²⁷ Rev 12:17; 19:10.

²⁸ 1 Cor 12:28.

or society. . . . If somehow Ellen White believed that the concept of male headship is to be prescribed for ministry positions in the church, she had plenty of opportunities to clarify her thought. She never did.”²⁹ One hundred thousand manuscript pages she penned, and not a single reference to these proof texts for male hierarchy in the church?

No wonder Ellen White unhesitatingly called young women to prepare themselves for gospel ministry. “The experience thus gained [in canvassing] will be of the greatest value to those who are fitting themselves for the ministry. It is the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit of God that prepares workers, both men and women, to become pastors to the flock of God.”³⁰ The messenger of the Lord knew of no male headship theory that would preclude women entering the gospel ministry and exercising spiritual authority alongside their male counterparts.

Could the following words of hers be applied as well the male headship theory? After describing the Holy Spirit’s baptism upon the pagan Roman centurion Cornelius and his family, she wrote: “Thus, without controversy, prejudice was broken down, the exclusiveness established by the custom of ages was abandoned, and the way was opened for the gospel to be proclaimed to the Gentiles.”³¹ In these words Ellen White reflects the heart of her Lord, who Himself chose inclusion rather than exclusion, who in this Cornelius moment revealed to the church the time had come to abandon “the exclusiveness established by the custom of ages.”

The Jerusalem Council and the Third Millennial Church

That was precisely the decision that faced the Jerusalem Council—to abandon “the exclusiveness established by the custom of ages.”

What is so stunning in the often referenced church council in Acts 15 is the way in which the Holy Spirit guided the leaders of the fledgling church to their eventual decision. The debate began when the circumcision party (defined by their male-only premise) insisted: ““Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved”” (Acts 15:1). This insistence immediately brought this wing of the infant church into direct conflict with the apostles Paul and Barnabas, who were witnesses to the explosive growth of the Christian faith among pagan Gentiles. Neither of these front-line missionaries would countenance this notion of overt exclusion. They bore in their own bodies the stripes of Christ’s gospel mission of inclusion rather than exclusion. Luke describes the resultant conflict: “This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp debate with them” (Acts 15:2 NIV). Apparently heated debate is not antithetical to the divinely guided process of decision making.

²⁹ Denis Fortin, “Ellen White, Women in Ministry and the Ordination of Women,” TOSC paper, p 7, 9. See also Jiri Moskala, “Back to Creation: Toward a Consistent Adventist Creation—Fall—ReCreation Hermeneutic,” TOSC paper, p 12: “Is it telling that Ellen White never once refers to the crucial passages like 1 Tim 2:8-14 and 1 Cor 11:3, which provide the foundational argument for those who oppose women’s ordination?”

³⁰ Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:322.

³¹ Ellen White, *Acts of the Apostles*, p 142.

The narrative of the convening of this church council to resolve this heated conflict is well known. On the one hand there were the Judaizers who championed a “Thus saith the Lord” to defend their insistence on the Old Testament divine provision of circumcision. On the other hand there were the apostles—Peter, Paul, Barnabas—who were invited to the podium to tell the stories of what in fact the Holy Spirit was doing among Gentile pagans. Rehearsing the conversion and baptism of the pagan Roman centurion Cornelius, Peter declared: “God who knows the heart showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us” (Acts 15:8 NIV). Then the two missionary apostles stood up. “The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them” (Acts 15:12 NIV).

What is striking is that when the church council takes its vote, as it were, the decision that prevails is one that is established without a clarion “Thus saith the Lord.” The Judaizers clearly were able to assemble the most proof texts to support their view that circumcision is a divine command thoroughly established in the Old Testament and clearly linked by the Lord God with His “everlasting covenant” (Genesis 17:13). But their defense in fact did not carry the day. Rather the church council opted to place conclusive weight on the anecdotal evidence provided by the three apostles.

True, the apostle James, as leader of the council, stood up and quoted Amos 9:11-12 as divine support for the anecdotal evidence Peter, Paul and Barnabas had just presented. But nowhere in Amos 9 is there any hint of a divine abrogation of the previous divine command of circumcision. It is not there.

What is in Amos 9 is the divine promise that one day Gentiles would seek the Lord and bear His name. But not even the Judaizers are contesting that point. All agreed. The Gentiles are coming to Christ. “We, however, insist that to be saved they must be circumcised.” But the council votes in favor of inclusion, not exclusion—and so they vote no to the male-only provision of circumcision. And they do it without a plain “Thus saith the Lord.”

Why? Because the arc of God’s centuries-long guidance of His faith community has finally led to these explosive narratives of Holy Spirit gifting among uncircumcised, pagan Gentiles. And I believe that same divine arc of guidance stretches from the NT church to the third millennial church today, revealing to us God’s unfolding will through the compelling narratives of Holy Spirit gifting among women pastors.

I have had the privilege of serving alongside three very effective women pastors on our senior leadership team at Pioneer Memorial Church. I also have women pastor friends today who are serving as lead or senior pastors in their own parishes. And I can personally testify to the Holy Spirit’s ministry through their gifted exercise of spiritual authority in the midst of God’s people. And by the way, just ask the people of God that they are leading—they, too, will also testify to the imprimatur of divine spiritual authority that radiates from these women pastors’ teaching, shepherding ministries.

I firmly believe the anecdotal evidence of the Holy Spirit's gifting of women pastors today is as persuasive and convincing as the anecdotal evidence Peter and Paul and Barnabas cited in the Jerusalem Council—evidence that can lead the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the third millennium to make the same decision as the Jerusalem Council made: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . ." (Acts 15:28). And why wouldn't following the arc of God's inclusive guidance seem just as good to the Holy Spirit and to us today?

In fact Peter himself, when called onto the carpet by the Jerusalem hierarchy, could muster only a single defense of his breaking down the ancient wall between Jews and Gentiles. He offers no proof texts, he has no pretext. All he can exclaim to the leadership are these words: "If God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17 NIV).

The Jerusalem Council and that single line from Holy Scripture, I believe, are all the evidence this third millennial church needs to follow the same God who has poured out the same Holy Spirit and has called to the same gospel ministry these women who have answered His call.

"If God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"