

WOMEN'S MINISTRY WITHOUT ORDINATION

by Rosalie Haffner Lee

Perspectives of a Woman in Ministry

I appreciate the opportunity to share with this commission the perspectives of a woman who has served in the ministry of this church for 35 years.

I am here today to testify to you that the women's ministry of the Adventist church is an exciting, challenging ministry with plenty of room for varied personalities and skills. I can tell you that I have found it rewarding and satisfying, and that if I had my life to live over again I would choose the same route of service for my church, problems and discouragements notwithstanding.

My ministry has been rich and varied. I have engaged in youth ministry, in ministry to families--especially women. I have counseled extensively. I have taught and trained Bible Instructors as well as lay people. I have ministered to my own parish in an academy girl's dormitory. I have engaged in public evangelism and soul winning in the local church. I have served as a pastoral assistant in some of our larger churches. For the past 20 years I have ministered side by side with my pastor husband. And on occasion when necessity demanded I have preached. All this and more without the hands of ordination ever having been laid upon me.

The Bible Instructor Ministry

Unfortunately my profession, commonly known as the Bible Instructor work, has become an endangered species, and very few people are aware that scores of women in Adventist history have made significant contributions in ministry to the church.

The early history of this ministry in the Adventist church is an exciting story of women who devoted their talents and energies to the work of winning souls and building up the work of the kingdom. Women like Loretta Farnsworth Robinson, Hettie Hurd Haskell, Jennie Owen McClelland, Maud Sisley Boyd, and Nellie Sisley Starr, who by the way, helped her husband establish the first Chicago city mission, the counterpart of today's North American Division Evangelism Institute.

And while the work of women's ministry goes back as far as 1883 in Adventist history, its roots go back to the Reformation churches--Methodists, Mennonites, Lutherans, and other faiths whose women's ministries were patterned by the Biblical concept of women ministering in supportive roles--equally important, but different in function--than male roles. At least one of those churches, the Lutheran Missouri Synod, still does not ordain women, but has an active ministry for women, and a specialized training program for them.

With this kind of a precedent, why should we suddenly decide down here near the close of earth's history that women cannot serve in ministry without ordination? Are we less capable than our sisters of the past? Are we less powerful so that we must have ordination in order to have credibility?

My dear sisters, we have a glorious heritage of women in ministry, functioning according to the Scriptural model. In addition to those of the past I think of women in our own time, like Mary Walsh, whose outstanding and unique ministry to this church has spanned several decades and has influenced thousands of lives, including my own.

Opportunity Not Ordination

While many of us have enjoyed our ministry for the church, we would be less than honest to say there is not a problem. Unfortunately, all too often, the church has failed to give women the opportunity to serve. And I sincerely believe that the crisis now facing us has come about because the doors of opportunity in ministry for women have too often been closed. I am convinced that ordination is not the issue we most need to discuss, nor would it necessarily solve the problem of opportunity for the many women who want to serve their church. My dear fellow believers, I challenge this commission and the leaders of this church--opportunity not ordination is the real issue you should be addressing here.

Ellen White recognized this problem and addressed it with vigor. She insisted repeatedly that the women who did a work essential to the ministry, must be paid--from the tithe. She declared emphatically that this was not an issue for men to decide, but that the Lord had already settled it. On one occasion she chided the brethren, perhaps with tongue in cheek, that if they did not change their custom of neglecting these women, who were laboring side by side with their husbands, but

without salary, she would pay them herself from her own tithe. If there is sacrificing to be done, she observed, let it not be by just a few women!

She must have shocked her Victorian peers with the idea of women hiring baby-sitters and putting their housework in good hands, in order to go out and do the work that many pastors were neglecting--visiting and ministering in the homes.

I have studied very carefully every jot and tittle of the counsel given by Ellen White regarding women in ministry. There is not a question in my mind that she advocated a distinct women's ministry to be recognized by the church as a vital role, equally effective as the pastoral ministry of their male counterparts. But nowhere do I find even a hint that she believed women should function in the same role as men, or that they should have the hands of ordination laid upon them.

The Bible Model of Ministry

She believed, taught and exemplified the Biblical injunctions on the roles of men and women in the family and in the church: that men and women are equal in nature, but designed by the Creator Himself for different functions, and that those functions are equally important. Women in the church, as in the home, have unique nurturing abilities, so essential to a growing church. I firmly believe that if we had more women serving in soul winning work, our accessions to the church would be greater and our rate of apostacy less. To leave out a women's ministry in our church is to cripple the energies of our mission to the world. Isn't it time for us to get back to the blueprint?

My own personal experience in ministry bears out that God's plan for functional differences between male and female are for our own protection and blessing, as well as for the benefit of His church. Women, unfettered by administration and other burdens, can give their full energies to nurturing and winning souls. Ordination would place responsibilities and burdens on women that would restrict our freedom to serve in various roles, including marriage. I do not believe that it is possible for a woman to fulfill both marriage and ordination vows at the same time without one or the other suffering. I say that from my own experience born of 35 years of ministry both as a single woman and a married woman, even without the added responsibility of children, by the way. And I have seen it demonstrated in women whose callings were much less demanding than the ministry.

Practical Implications of Ordination on Women's Ministry

In addition to the above reasons for not favoring the ordination of women I have a grave concern that the endangered species of Bible Instructors is becoming extinct. Already the discussions on women's ordination have had the effect of discouraging administrators from hiring women for fear of becoming embroiled in controversy. I have watched the number of women Bible Instructors decrease in the last few years. And there is not a question in my mind but that if we begin ordaining women to the pastoral ministry we will see the Bible Instructor ministry become virtually extinct. From a very practical standpoint, having observed our system over many years, and with all due respect to my brothers in ministry, I believe that

there would be a tendency for administrators, after hiring a select few seminary trained women, to feel comfortable that they had fulfilled their duty to women in a token of good will, and the many more women who might serve as Bible Instructors would be literally crowded out of conference budgets.

And those women who feel called of God to enter ministry as Bible Instructors would be denied the opportunity of making that sacred work their calling.

Does A Call from God Entitle One to Ordination?

And that brings us to the issue of the call. Does the fact that one feels the call of God give one a right to interpret how he or she is to fill that call?

In the 1985 commission on whether or not to ordain women to ministry, the question of a call kept surfacing. If a woman is called to ministry, how can the church deny her the right to serve in pastoral ministry.

My brothers and sisters, if anyone ever had a call from the Lord to ministry, I believe that I did. My parents dedicated me to the Lord before I was born. My first pulpit was an old trailer bed on the farm, when as a young child I preached to my first captive audience, a flock of hens.

During my childhood and teen years the sense of mission to ministry ever followed me. Then after finishing two years of college the sense of call became so urgent that I went to the conference president, and asked to become a conference Bible Instructor. Elder N. R. Dower, with great tact and compassion,

explained to a very disappointed young woman that she needed to finish her education before beginning her service. It seemed rather cruel at the time to think that the church did not recognize something that seemed so clear to me. Yet the ensuing years have confirmed the wisdom of that counsel! I needed to finish my education, and I needed the counsel and guidance of my church to help me find my place in ministry.

I want to say to my sisters who have felt that same intense call to ministry that I experienced, I do understand your feelings and your frustrations. I've been there. But may I say with all the earnestness and compassion I can, that while God calls us to ministry He has established the structure and order of the church, subject to its adherence to Biblical principles, to give us guidance in how we may answer that call. I do not think I could have been more sincere in wanting to enter the ministry half way through college, but being sincere is not always equivalent to being right. I'm grateful for the structure of the church that gives counsel and direction, even though that same structure may sometimes perform less than perfectly.

In our human frailty and shortsightedness, we need order and structure to help us interpret God's call to service. Certainly this principle applies equally to men who are called to the ministry. No man or woman has a right to dictate to the church how he or she will fill that call. Otherwise the whole concept of church order and organization, the unity of believers working together, becomes meaningless.

Bible Examples

When Christ met Paul on the road to Damascus He sent him to church leaders for instruction and marching orders. When Moses as a young man sensed the call of God to deliver his people from Egyptian bondage, he went about fulfilling his call according to his own ideas. Consequently God sent him to the Desert University for a forty year course in patience before he was prepared to lead Israel in God's way rather than by his own plan.

The True Spirit of Service

And that brings me to one last point that has an important bearing on this matter of ordination--of men or women. Ellen White suggests that even though the disciples of Christ had outwardly left all to follow Him, they were still afflicted inwardly with self-seeking. I've done much heart searching lately on this point, and I'm convinced that my own greatest need and I believe the greatest need of our entire ministry is that we learn the difficult lesson that Christ repeated over and over again to His disciples:

"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all." Mark 10:43

"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." Mark 8:35

All too often our service for God is marred by self-seeking and self-exaltation. All too often we ask how will this move or this position affect my professional advancement? rather than how will it affect the work of God? All too often our longing

for human approval motivates us rather than our longing to please our God.

We need to ask ourselves some searching questions. Have we allowed the ordination issue to become merely a status symbol for which men or women clamor for so called personal rights? Are we more concerned with status than service?

Are we willing to give ourselves in service to God for a common cause, the finishing of God's work on earth so that His kingdom may go forward? Are we willing to rid our lives of the leaven of self-seeking that so easily permeates our thinking, marring our work for God, by blinding us to the principles of humility and self-denial as demonstrated by our Saviour?

The Example of Israel

I am currently authoring a set of adult Sabbath School lessons on First and Second Samuel. I've been impressed with the story of Israel's fateful mistake in insisting on having their own way and its implications for us here today. "We want a king," they demanded. "Warn them solemnly what they're in for," said the Lord to Samuel. But no, we don't care what the Lord says, we want a king so that we can be like the nations around us. And a disappointed Heavenly Father, respecting their freedom of choice, let them have their king. And my friends, hardly had the anointing oil dried from off Saul's head when the people cried out to Samuel, "we've sinned again, please pray for us." And we all know only too well the tragic centuries that followed their fateful choice, the apostacy, the captivity, and the eventual ruin of their nation under a system God never intended.

An Appeal

We stand at a crossroads today. We can choose to ignore God's counsel and pay the high price of compromising clear Scriptural principles, a decision which will linger to haunt us in the days to come, or we can decide on this issue once and for all that we will remain true to the principles upon which this church was founded, Scripture and Scripture alone.

May I leave you once more with a personal appeal to change our focus from the issue of ordination which has no clear Scriptural basis, to one of clearing the King's Highway for the hundreds of women who wish to serve their church in these last days. May God help you to make the right choice!