

# A CLOSER LOOK AT WOMEN'S ORDINATION

*by Ty Gibson*

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# A CLOSER LOOK AT WOMEN'S ORDINATION

On Wednesday, January 14, 2015, I decided to study the subject of women's ordination for myself. After all, my church is engaged in a titanic conflict over the subject. As I began my research, I wondered what I would discover if I were to lay aside my biases on the topic and simply examine what the Bible and the writings of Ellen White have to say about it. Whatever I was about to discover, of one thing I was certain: the church should go with whatever the Bible teaches on the matter, so I needed to find out what that is.

My name is Ty Gibson. I am a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, baptized fresh out of the world at the tender age of 18. From that point on, I have given my entire adult life to full-time ministry. I am Co-director of Light Bearers, an evangelistic ministry based in the state of Oregon. Light Bearers enjoys an extremely positive and productive working relationship with church leaders and members throughout the denomination. We have supplied over a half billion evangelistic publications free of charge to Conferences, Unions and Divisions around the world. This material, translated into more than 40 languages, faithfully presents the total doctrinal message of Adventism, centered in Christ. I am also a pastor in the Oregon Conference.

Fast forward. After six months of study, I reached some clear conclusions. What I thought I would discover was support for the view I already held. What I actually discovered is that I was wrong in some of the things I assumed the Bible says on the topic of women's ordination. As I began to read, and read, and read, I underwent a series of shifts in my thinking under the guidance of God's word.

Whatever your position happens to be at present, if you are a serious believer in the inspiration of the Bible and the writings of Ellen White, may I suggest that you really owe it to yourself and to your church to objectively consider the following historical information and biblical perspectives. And if you are a delegate to the 2015 General Conference Session, may I urgently and humbly request, as your brother in Christ, that you read what this little book before you cast your vote on women's ordination.

So I invite you to take a deep breath, offer a sincere prayer for enlightenment, and open your mind to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. That is, after all, the only appropriate posture before God.

## THE SHAPE OF THE ISSUE

Our church is facing a serious crisis that threatens to cause a painful division among us. At the 2015 General Conference Session in San Antonio, Texas, a vote will be taken on women's ordination. It will go one of two ways:

1. A YES vote will allow each of the church's 13 world Divisions to decide what is best regarding women's ordination in their particular area of the world, while not requiring any Division, Union, Conference or local church to ordain women.
2. A NO vote will reject the proposal to allow each Division to decide for their territory what is best regarding women's ordination. A NO vote will also likely be interpreted by some of its advocates as a universal rule forbidding women's ordination throughout the Seventh-day Adventist Church, although that interpretation will be challenged and debated for years to come.

The prominent voices in favor of a NO vote are telling us that the Bible clearly forbids the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, and that allowing women to be ordained would render the Seventh-day Adventist Church unfaithful to Scripture and to God.

The prominent voices in favor of a YES vote are telling us that the Bible does not forbid the ordination of women and, therefore, the church is free to do what it deems best on the matter for the advancement of the gospel.

Both sides of the issue are endeavoring, no doubt with honesty before the Lord, to discover and follow what the Bible teaches on the matter, and both sides no doubt share responsibility for the threat of division the church is now facing.

A NO vote has the potential to split the Seventh-day Adventist Church on a denominational level, possibly leading to the separation of some Unions from the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church.

A YES vote will not likely produce a denominational split, but will likely cause some church members to feel obligated to sever ties with the Seventh-day Adventist Church, especially those who have decided that the issue is a matter of faithfulness versus unfaithfulness to God.

To say the least, this is a very big deal for our beloved Church. It is imperative, as we endeavor to faithfully follow Scripture, that we think through our decision carefully and set our hearts to do whatever is ultimately best for the glory of God, the unity of His church, and the advancement of the gospel. I certainly do not want to add to the confusion, nor do I have any interest in advocating for one side or the other in the debate, but I do have something to say that I don't hear being said, something I think is vital and may make all the difference in the world to sincere church members who simply want to

- be faithful to Scripture
- and at the same time maintain “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Assessing the above vote options, the most direct route to figuring out what is best for the church is to ask the basic, underlying question, *Does the Bible mandate male-only ordination and/or forbid the ordination of women?*

If it does, then we are dealing with a clear matter of doctrinal orthodoxy and moral imperative, in which case the ordination of women would constitute unfaithfulness to Scripture and rebellion against God. If it does not, then the church is free to do what it deems best for the spread of the gospel, and those who are elevating the issue to the level of testing truth are making divisive what Scripture does not.

Let us address ourselves, then, to the question at hand, beginning with some historical background.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The following recommendation was brought before the General Conference Session way back in 1881:

“Resolved, That females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position,

may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry” (*Review and Herald*, Dec. 20, 1881).

Apparently, this is not a new topic for us as a people. Leading up to 1881 the Advent Movement had women engaged in ministry. That practical reality is what promoted the above recommendation. It was not the result of the feminist movement trying to invade the church. Nor was the recommendation prompted by the inroads of popular secular culture. It simply arose as an acknowledgement of what was happening: Adventist women were preaching the gospel.

Ellen White was not able to attend the 1881 General Conference Session, due in large part to the fact that her husband, James, had died in August of that year. Her son Willie, however, did attend the session. He reported the political dynamic he witnessed, describing two groups at odds with one another—one “progressive” and the other “conservative” (W.C. White to Mary White, Dec. 2, 1881, White Estate, General Conference Archives). After being discussed, the recommendation was not voted on, but was sent on to a small committee of three men, and that was the end of it.

Even though Ellen White did not attend the 1881 GC session, shortly after, in her April 4, 1882 *Review and Herald* article, she deliberately republished something she had written a year earlier:

"If there is one work more important than another, it is that of getting before the public our publications, which will lead men to search the Scriptures. Missionary work—introducing our publications into families, conversing, and praying with and for them—is a good work, and one which will educate men and women to do pastoral labor" (*Review and Herald*, April 4, 1882; published the first time in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 390).

You likely didn't see that coming, and neither did I. Ellen White envisioned women in pastoral ministry of some kind. And please pause to catch the significance of the historical context in which her above statement was made. A proposal was just brought before the General Conference Session stating that females "be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry." Then, with that recommendation on the minds of Adventists, Ellen White stated in the church's official magazine that women, as well as men, may "do pastoral labor."

Also notice that the main topic of her article was the need to circulate gospel literature by means of house-to-house labor. But then, apparently off topic and for no apparent reason—*unless you know that the General Conference leadership was at that very time pondering the question of whether or not women may be ordained*—she just throws in this brief comment stating that doing ministry in people's homes "will educate men and women to do pastoral labor."

This statement indicates, at the very least, that Ellen was not *opposed* to the 1881 recommendation to ordain women. If she was, it would have been reckless of her to make this comment in the immediate context of a recommendation to ordain women to "the work of the Christian ministry." Furthermore, it is inconceivable that Ellen White would not have warned the General Conference brethren to refrain from passing the recommendation to ordain women if, in fact, doing so would constitute unfaithfulness to Scripture and rebellion against God. But she did not. In fact, she pointed in the opposite direction at the very time when the matter was under consideration.

Some have attempted to negate the significance of her 1882 statement by claiming that she was merely using the term "pastoral labor" as synonymous with door-to-door literature work. But the objective reader will notice that her actual point was that door-to-door literature work provides an education for transitioning into pastoral ministry.

No, the 1882 statement does not constitute a direct appeal on Ellen White's part to ordain women to the gospel ministry. Some argue that she was simply indicating that she was fine with women doing pastoral labor as long as it did not involve ordination. That's fine. We don't want to extract from the statement, one way or another, more than it says. But what the statement does tell us is that Ellen White envisioned "both men and women" engaged in

“pastoral labor,” and she made this statement, without stipulating any restrictions, in the immediate historical context of the General Conference entertaining a recommendation to ordain women.

This would be a good point at which to pause and ask ourselves if we really want to know what the Bible and Ellen White actually say on this topic, and to ask the Lord to flood our souls with objectivity and honesty.

In 1901 Ellen White made a second statement regarding women occupying the pastoral position:

“All who desire an opportunity for true ministry, and who will give themselves unreservedly to God, will find in the canvassing work, opportunities to speak upon many things pertaining to the future, immortal life. 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” (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 322).

This is basically a repeat of her 1882 statement, only this time she says that “both men and women” may “become pastors to the *flock* of God.” The word “flock” is a symbolic term for God’s church, specifically indicating a local congregation of believers. Clearly, then, Ellen White envisioned both men and women occupying the pastoral role to local congregations. Again, as with her 1882 statement on the topic, prominent voices in

the current debate have simply dismissed this statement as of no relevance to the topic at hand. “She was merely using the word ‘pastor’ as a synonym for the door-to-door canvasser,” they say. But this is clearly not the case, at least not in this particular statement. She plainly says that the canvassing work may serve as a preparation for both men and woman to “become pastors to the flock of God.” The first category of labor is a preparation for entering into the second category.

But if that’s not clear enough, in the next two paragraphs of the passage Ellen White removes all doubt regarding her intent. After stating that the canvassing work may serve as a preparation for both men and women to “become pastors to the flock of God,” she expressed a caution. Certain ministers were telling some who were doing canvassing work that they should enter, instead, into pulpit ministry and become preachers. She cautioned against luring canvassers into the pastoral ministry, explaining that some who were doing the canvassing work should, in fact, remain in the canvassing work because their gifts were suited to it. Then she appealed to each individual, both men and women, to choose either to remain in the canvassing work or to go into pastoral ministry based on an assessment of their gifts and calling, not based on flattering words from those telling them they ought to become preachers. It is evident, therefore, that Ellen White was dealing with canvassing work and pastoral work as two distinct categories, which makes it equally plain

that she was explicitly saying that women, as well as men, are eligible for both categories.

Also in 1901, Ellen White made a passionate appeal for workers, and in the course of her appeal she stated that both “men and women . . . brothers and sisters” are called to be “Priests of the Lord” and “Ministers of our God.” Notice the progression of her thought and notice the biblical source she is drawing upon:

“If men and women would act as the Lord’s helping hand, doing deeds of love and kindness, uplifting the oppressed, rescuing those ready to perish, the glory of the Lord would be their rearward . . .

“Christ said of His work, ‘The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek. . . .

“Wake up, wake up, my brethren and sisters. You must do the work that Christ did when He was upon this earth. Remember that you may act as God’s helping hand in opening the prison doors to those that are bound. Wonderful is the work that God desires to accomplish through His servants, that His name may constantly be glorified. He is waiting to work through His people. Those who are willing to be used will obtain a rich experience, an experience full of the glory of God. . . .

“Of those who act as His helping hand the Lord says, ‘Ye shall be named the Priests of the Lord; men shall call you the Ministers of our God’” (Ellen White, *Review and Herald*, October 15, 1901).

The biblical passage from which she is quoting is Isaiah 61. It is a prophecy of the ministry in which the Messiah would engage. We are generally familiar with the part of the prophecy Jesus applied to Himself. But Ellen White goes on to quote a part of the prophecy with which most of us are not familiar, the part in which Isaiah foretells the formation of the New Testament church in the wake of the Messiah’s ministry:

“Ye shall be named the Priests of the Lord: men shall call you the Ministers of our God” (Isaiah 61:6, KJV).

One of the arguments being offered against allowing for the ordination of women is that the Old Testament priests were all men. Therefore, it is reasoned, only men should be allowed to occupy the pastoral role in the church. The problem with this argument is that it fails to recognize that within the biblical narrative, the Old Testament Levitical priesthood gives way to the New Testament priesthood of all believers. Isaiah 61 is a specific prophecy that foretold this transition. What Ellen White has done with Isaiah 61 is quite illuminating. She quotes the prophecy, invoking the language of “Priest” and “Minister,” and applies it to both brothers and sisters, men and women, within the church.



## HUSBAND OF ONE WIFE

This is of extreme significance, because it demonstrates, unequivocally, that Bible prophecy envisioned the body of Christ as a priesthood of all believers, and that Ellen White simply assumed that the prophecy pointed to both men and women occupying the priestly and ministerial role, in the Christian church.

Again, as with her 1882 statement, these two 1901 statements do not equate to a direct appeal for women's ordination. But what they do tell us is that Ellen White envisioned women, along with men, engaged in the ministerial, pastoral, priestly role. Additionally, it is vital to note that within the entire corpus of her 25 million written words, Ellen White never made a single statement saying that women should not be ordained to pastoral ministry.

So, then, let us proceed to candidly examine what the Bible says regarding the topic. The case against women occupying the ordained pastoral role largely hinges on two main arguments:

1. Paul's husband-of-one-wife statement in 1 Timothy 3 (also in Titus 1:5-9), in the context of his creation statement in 1 Timothy 2.
2. Paul's statements regarding headship in 1 Corinthians 11.

Let's carefully and objectively take a look at both.

When asked to provide the most direct and explicit biblical statement against women's ordination, advocates of the position point to Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 3:2:

"A bishop (*episkope*) then must be blameless, the husband of one wife . . ."

Paul's point here, we are told, is that the bishop (what we now generally call the *pastor*) must be male, because the pastor must be a husband. But there are at least two sound hermeneutical reasons we know with certainty that this is not Paul's point.

First, in this same passage, a few verses later, Paul says, "Let deacons (*diakonos*) be the husbands of one wife" (1 Timothy 3:12), and then he turns around without a blink and says to the believers in Rome, "I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant (*diakonos*) of the church" (Romans 16:1).

One very important and sound principle of responsible Bible study is as follows:

"To understand doctrine, bring all the Scriptures together on the subject you wish to know, then let every word have its proper influence, and if you can form your theory without a contradiction, you cannot be in error" (William Miller).

This principle is echoed in the official *Methods of Bible Study* voted at the 1986 General Conference Annual Council:

“Recognize that the Bible is its own interpreter and that the meaning of words, texts, and passages is best determined by diligently comparing scripture with scripture. . . . The reader must allow each Bible writer to emerge and be heard while at the same time recognizing the basic unity of the divine self-disclosure.”

Pause, then, and carefully consider the comparison of the two passages before us. To Timothy, Paul says that the *episkope* and the *diakonos* must each be the husband of one wife. Then, to the believers in Rome, Paul introduces to us a woman *diakonos*. We can only conclude, then, that Paul has no intention for his statement in 1 Timothy 3 to be interpreted as a declaration about gender.

For clarity, this is what we have before us:

“A bishop (*episkope*) then must be blameless, the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2).

“Let deacons (*diakonos*) be the husbands of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:12).

“I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant (*diakonos*) of the church” (Romans 16:1).

While *diakonos* is sometimes used in a general sense for any informal servant role, we know Paul is using the word here in the formal sense of the ordained position because he describes Phoebe as “a *diakonos* of the church” and as occupying an active role in ministry. He then appeals to the believers in Rome to “assist her in whatever business she has need of you.” Clearly, she is a leader in the church.

It is evident, then, that when Paul says in 1 Timothy that the *episkope* and the *diakonos* must each be “the husband of one wife,” he is simply speaking in a general context in which most of those occupying these roles would have been men, but he was not issuing a universal gender rule.

What, then, does Paul mean to convey in 1 Timothy 3?

Well, look at the passage again: “A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife...”

The grammar of the text presents the “bishop” as the *subject*. “Husband of one wife” is set forth as one criterion in a list that Paul offers to define what a bishop of “blameless” character looks like (see verses 2-7). “Husband of one wife” is a grammatical descriptor of “blameless.” Paul’s *subject* is not the gender of the bishop (pastor) or the deacon, but rather the moral character of those who occupy these two roles. When they are men, as most of them would have been, they are to be “the husband of *one* wife,” the point being that just *one* wife

is permissible. When they are women, as in the case of “Phoebe our sister,” obviously the husband-of-one-wife criterion applies in principle, but with a different application.

It really is that simple, if we allow the Bible to speak for itself and refrain from reading it selectively with a point to prove. Clearly, Paul did not intend to make a gender restriction with his “husband-of-one-wife” statement. We simply cannot be true to Scripture and not concede that when Paul said the elder and the deacon must be “blameless, the husband of one wife,” he meant to convey that those who hold these positions must be of good moral character, not that they must all be males, or else Paul contradicted himself by acknowledging sister Phoebe as a *diakonos*.

But there is a second reason we cannot use 1 Timothy 3 as evidence for male-only ordination. Even if we were to concede that Paul’s point is that all pastors and deacons must be males, Paul also says in the same letter that men are to lift up their hands when they pray (2:8), that women are to “learn in silence” and not “teach” (2:11-12), that elders who lead well, especially in word and doctrine, are to be paid double wages (5:17), and that slaves who are under the yoke of bondage are to submit to their masters (6:1).

We consider none of these things to be timeless moral mandates. We are not having seminars and symposiums and writing essays urging upon the church the necessity of

men raising their hands when they pray, of women learning in silence and not teaching, of especially effective preachers being paid double, or of slaves honoring their masters. If we just stop and think without bias, we know that Paul is speaking here within his particular historical context. That’s why we do not consider these aspects of Paul’s letter to Timothy directly applicable to our time and situation, though the underlying principles are still valid and must be appropriately applied even today. The only way to read the Bible responsibly is to read it with an awareness of its historical context. Otherwise, we are liable to blur the line between timeless truths, on the one hand, and temporal forms, on the other. And the fact is, as Seventh-day Adventists we have always endeavored to read and interpret the Bible in this kind of contextual, historical, responsible manner.

Now pause to notice the obvious problem 1 Timothy 3, if wrongly interpreted, might pose for the Advent Movement as it launched in the 1800s with a woman prophet. Sure enough, there were people in their day who were quick to quote Paul in order to negate Ellen White’s ministry and prove that *she*, precisely because she was a *she*, should not be giving spiritual instruction. On one occasion Ellen White preached to a large public gathering in California. Notice what she wrote about the event, with obvious excitement, to her husband, James:

“Elder Haskell talked in the afternoon and his labors were well received. I had in the evening, it was stated, the largest congregation that had ever assembled at Arbuckle. The house was full. Many came from five to ten and twelve miles. The Lord gave me special power in speaking. The congregation listened as if spellbound. Not one left the house although I talked above one hour. Before I commenced talking, Elder Haskell had a bit of paper that was handed in quoting a certain text prohibiting women speaking in public. He took up the matter in a brief manner and very clearly expressed the meaning of the apostle’s words. I understand it was a Campbellite who wrote the objection and it had been well circulated before it reached the desk; but Elder Haskell made it all plain before the people” (Ellen White to James White, April 1 [Letter 17a], 1880; *Manuscript Releases* vol. 10, p. 70).

It would be helpful to the current debate, would it not, to discover how our early pioneers defended the ministry of Ellen White as a woman. After all, they had to respond to those who were using Scripture to negate the ministry of Ellen White. We have no record of precisely what Elder Haskell said on that particular occasion to make “it all plain before the people.” But we do have a record of James White’s response to the general issue, which gives us insight into the way our early pioneers viewed the matter. Brother White had a way with words and wit that could cut right to the core of an issue:

“We object to that narrow-souled theology which will not allow the old ladies to have dreams because the prophecy says, ‘your old men shall dream dreams;’ and that will not allow young women to have visions because the prophecy says ‘your young men shall see visions.’ These stingy critics seem to forget that ‘man’ and ‘men’ in the Scriptures, generally mean both men and women. The Book says that it is ‘appointed unto men once to die.’ Don’t women die?” (James White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 25, 1862; *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 3, p. 24).

This is brilliant on a number of levels. First, James White is setting forth a foundational perspective regarding how to read and interpret the Bible responsibly (hermeneutics). He takes Scripture for its obvious intent, discerning the principles on display in the text while taking into consideration the use of words in their historical setting. Secondly, he discerns that the inclination to interpret the Bible with a literalistic exactitude that ignores both the broader context of Scripture, as well as the historical context, has its source in a spiritual condition he called “narrow-souled” and “stingy.”

Early Adventists, with their woman prophet, simply did not believe that the Bible’s general tendency to address men—he, him, and husbands—was intended to exclude women. The fact is, pretty much the whole Bible is written to men since nearly all ancient cultures, including Israel, did not regard women as equal

with men, while Scripture indicates that God was leading to a correct estimation of women (Matthew 19:3-10). So as we read Scripture it becomes obvious that in addressing men, both men and women are included. Three examples should suffice to make the obvious point.

1. The Tenth Commandment says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Exodus 20:17). But we do not, therefore, conclude that the commandment does not address women. We believe that the commandment includes, by implication and extension, that women should not covet their neighbors' husbands.
2. Jesus said, "I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). But we do not take His specific address to men to mean that He is not also addressing women. Women should not look and lust any more than men should.
3. The New Testament says, "Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). Yet, we do not take this to exclude women from receiving the gift of prophecy. We accept that women such as Miriam, Deborah, and Ellen White were true prophets and we do not quote Peter's gender specific language to rule out women from prophetic ministry.

If the Bible study method being used to interpret 1 Timothy 3 was applied to the gender-specific language of the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and 2 Peter 1:21, we would be forced to conclude that while men are not permitted to covet their neighbors' wives, women are free to covet their neighbors' husbands; and while men are commanded to refrain from looking and lusting, women are free to look and lust; and while men may be prophets, women may not. At this point, we all know that this interpretive approach to Scripture is deficient. And that is the point James White and our early pioneers were making as they addressed the "stingy critics" who were trying to negate the ministry of Ellen White by quoting the Bible in this "narrow-souled" manner.

We conclude, then, with confidence: Paul's subject in 1 Timothy 3 is not gender, but character. He is not saying, "Make sure only males occupy the ministerial role." Rather, he is saying, "Those who occupy the role must be morally blameless." That is Paul's point. Anything beyond this involves imposing on the text more than it intends and ignoring other passages of Scripture.

Those who insist that Paul, in 1 Timothy 3, is setting down a timeless moral rule of male-only ordination are faced with a fact that should give them humble, respectful pause: there are numerous equally committed and conscientious Adventist scholars, pastors, leaders and laity that do not agree with their

interpretation of the text. This reality, alone, is sufficient reason to refrain, in brotherly love, from making the women's ordination issue a test question over which it is worth dividing the church.

## CREATION ORDER

At this point in our study, we need to back up and take a candid look at 1 Timothy 2:11-14:

"Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression."

Those who are advocating male-only ordination point to this passage as proof that when Paul later says, "the overseer must be blameless, the husband of one wife," he is issuing a universal moral rule against the ordination of women to the gospel ministry by appealing to the creation order. We know with certainty that this is not the case, for four solid hermeneutical reasons:

1. As we've already noted, by a simple comparison of Romans 16:1 with 1 Timothy 3:2, 12, it is absolutely clear that Paul did not intend for his "husband-of-one-wife" statement to constitute a universal rule against women occupying the ministerial

role, but rather as a description of the moral character a person must possess in order to hold spiritual office.

2. We have other instances in Scripture in which women do speak and teach with God-given authority. Luke matter-of-factly informs us that Paul and his entourage stayed in the home of "Phillip the evangelist" with his "four virgin daughters who prophesied" (Acts 21:8-9). Think this through: if Paul believed in a universal divine mandate that all women, everywhere, at all times, are to learn in silence and not teach men by virtue of the fact that Adam was created first, and then Eve, we would not have this record of four daughters of Phillip prophesying. Rather, we might read that Paul said to these women something like, "You are women and we are men, so be silent. We will teach you, but you will not teach us." But no, what we do have is a simply stated report of four women "who prophesied," clearly indicating that God was speaking through them with teaching authority.
3. The Greek word *hēsychia*, translated "silence" in 1 Timothy 2, does not refer narrowly to verbal silence, but rather to being calm and refraining from causing disruption, to "not officiously meddle with the affairs of others" (*Strong's*). Clearly, Paul is addressing a local, specific problem. There were some women who were dominating and disrupting the teaching

process, and Paul essentially rebuked them by saying they should calm down, stop interrupting, and quietly engage in the learning process.

4. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul is again addressing a local church situation. Three times he issues an admonition to be “silent,” but on this occasion the first two times he tells *men* to be “silent,” addressing the women the third time (verses 28, 30, 34). Also on this occasion he explains why he is telling them to be silent. In that local situation there was a lack of order, resulting in confusion and detraction from the edification process in which the church was attempting to engage. In this passage it becomes clear that when Paul issues his “be silent” admonition, it is in the interest of a practical concern for out-of-control, loudmouth people, both men and women, to cease disrupting the church’s discipleship process.

We see, then, that in the larger context of Paul’s thinking, 1 Timothy 2 does not constitute a timeless moral rule for all women to forever be silent and refrain from teaching men. That is manifestly not what God wants, made evident by the fact that He has called and empowered women to be in teaching, preaching, leading positions for the church. Ellen White is the most obvious and immediate example for Seventh-day Adventists. She was an active itinerant preacher throughout her ministry, teaching both men and women, and she was

(and still is) the most prolific teaching authority in Adventist history. “Ah,” someone will interject, “but she was not ordained!”

Actually, she was ordained . . . by God Himself:

“In the city of Portland the Lord ordained me as His messenger, and here my first labors were given to the cause of present truth” (*Review and Herald*, May 18, 1911).

Ellen White’s case is extremely enlightening. Let the fact register with all the force it carries that God chose a woman to be His end-time prophet, to speak and to write authoritatively as His foremost representative to His end-time church. And He did so at a time in history when women generally did not occupy leadership roles. Women couldn’t even vote, nor could they occupy political office, in her time. And yet, God chose a woman to be the channel through which He would teach, lead, and even reprove men.

“But she was not ordained by the church!”

No, she was not, but ordination originates with God, not with humans, so she had the higher, not the lower, level of ordination. If you’re ordained by God, but not by humans, you’re still ordained. If you’re ordained by humans and not by God, you are not ordained.

“But she was ordained as just a prophet, not as a pastor, because pastoral ordination would

have put her in spiritual authority over men, which the Bible forbids!”

Yet we all know that apart from the Bible the writings of Ellen White constitute the highest authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. That’s why we’re all quoting her authoritatively in this debate.

“But when the men in leadership told her to go to Australia, she obeyed and went, because they were men and she was a woman!”

Yes, she did go to Australia when they told her to, but there is nothing to indicate that she went *because* she was a woman and men told her to go. She went because of a humble spirit of submission to her brethren, the same as any male minister of the time would have gone if the brethren had told him to go. On different occasions men told her to do other things and she rebuked them, and on many occasions she told men in leadership positions what they were to do and she expected them to comply.

The plain truth of the matter is that Ellen White was, in fact, ordained by God himself, which clearly indicates that while we may be against ordaining women to authoritative spiritual office, God is not, which, if you think about it, is a very awkward position to be in.

Awkward, indeed!

Those Adventists who interpret 1 Timothy 2-3 as a universal mandate against women’s

ordination overstep the evidence in the face of the fact that they are members of a Church with a woman prophet, and a church that has always accepted women in general in teaching, preaching, evangelistic roles, all of which are, by definition, activities of spiritual authority. They have to outrun the text to sustain their overall position against women’s ordination while at the same time allowing for Ellen White’s ministry to be acceptable and for women in general to teach and preach.

In other words, there is a glaring gap in the logic of their position.

They begin by insisting that male-only ordination is a *moral* mandate due to the fact that Adam was created before Eve, from which they insist that women may not authoritatively teach men. But then they are faced with a woman prophet they accept in an authoritative teaching role—namely, Ellen White. So they have to figure out some explanatory angle to make exceptions for some women to teach men. But here’s the colossal problem: if we’re dealing here with a *moral* mandate, then there can be no exceptions, and to make exceptions is to inadvertently confess that it’s not a *moral* issue after all. And if it’s not a moral issue, then there is no legitimate reason to urge it as a universal rule for the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Why, then, did Paul reference the fact that “Adam was formed first, then Eve”?



We need simply to read the context of the passage to grasp what Paul is getting at. As we pay attention to his opening comments to Timothy we discover that a specific situation prompted his letter:

“As I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:3).

He then states further that there are those in the Ephesus church who are exerting their influence to “cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith. Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith, from which some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm” (verse 4-7). At the close of chapter 1, he encourages Timothy to “wage the good warfare” against the false teachers he’s dealing with in Ephesus, naming two of them as “Hymenaeus and Alexander.”

Clearly, then, Paul is addressing a local situation in which there are individuals who are positioning themselves as teachers, causing theological disputes, and detracting from the godly edification that should characterize the local church dynamic.

Then in chapter 2 Paul proceeds to address the fact that there are some women attending the Ephesus church who are escalating the

problem. They are obviously sympathetic to the false teachers because later in chapter 5 Paul laments the fact that “some” of the women at the Ephesus church “have already turned aside after Satan” (5:15). So Paul is offering counsel to Timothy regarding how to deal with the women who are contributing to the theological disputes by exerting themselves in domineering manner over the men.

It is this situation that calls forth from Paul the admonition that the women are not to “teach” or exercise “authority” over the men!

The word “authority” here is not a word that indicates leadership, but rather it points to a controlling attitude. These women were not exerting godly leadership, and Paul was not, therefore, saying that women cannot ever be godly leaders. He’s not laying down a rule that negates women in general from ever teaching or leading. Rather, he is addressing a disastrous local situation. This is why, writing a letter to another local group of believers, he affirms a woman named Phoebe for exerting a positive leadership influence: “assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also” (Romans 16:1-2). This woman does not need to be told to be silent. To the contrary, Paul positions her as someone the believers should “assist in whatever business she has need of you.”

To make the point about how the local dynamic elicited the specific nature of Paul’s

admonition, imagine if Phoebe and Ellen White had been the influential women present in the Ephesus church. They would have been a positive and strong female force for the heretics to reckon with. Paul would not, therefore, have written the same counsel. But as it was, the local sisters were contributing to the problem and opening the door to the heretics. So Paul said *those women* should stop disrupting the teaching process and submit to the brothers who are attempting to teach the truth and combat the heretics.

In other words, Paul is not attempting to make a deep, philosophical point, but rather a practical one. In this passage we are witnessing Paul, the pastor, in action. Timothy is faced with some out-of-control, loudmouth ladies disrupting the educational process at the Ephesus church. So Paul tells him to tell them to quiet down, just like he told some loudmouth men to do at Corinth. Then to achieve his pastoral goal, he appeals to the fact that though Adam was created first and then Eve, it was Eve, not Adam, who was deceived by Satan. He is speaking homiletically, pastorally, to a specific problem, and the Genesis account of Creation and the Fall makes his point. But there is no evidence in the passage, or in the whole of the biblical narrative, that God has issued a universal rule against women ever, anywhere, at any time teaching men, and Paul certainly is not making any point in this passage for or against women's ordination. Women's ordination is nowhere on his radar.

The intent of Paul's letter to Timothy is simple and clear if we just read it in its own immediate historical and situational context, which includes the fact that Paul was very happy on other occasions to direct attention to women who were good and trustworthy leaders in the advancement of the gospel, as in the case of Phoebe. To use 1 Timothy 2 and 3 to rule out the ordination of women is a hermeneutical stretch at best. The passage simply does not support the weight of the position—a position so heavy it claims that ordaining women to pastoral ministry would constitute to unfaithfulness to Scripture.

## **CAN A WOMAN PASTOR A LOCAL CHURCH?**

At this point, most advocates of male-only ordination, because the exegetical evidence demands it, will concede that 1 Timothy, after all, does not constitute a case against women being in the pastoral role. But then they insist on a condition:

"Okay," they say, "yes, women may be pastors, but they cannot be ordained as such, and they cannot be in leadership/administrative/management positions to the local church."

They hold out for this restriction because they cannot accept a woman in a leadership role to a congregation, because, of course, any

given congregation will consist of both men and women.

Apparently, Ellen White was of the opinion that leading a local church was more a matter of actual character qualification than gender:

“It is not always men who are best adapted to the successful management of a church. If faithful women have more deep piety and true devotion than men, they could indeed by their prayers and their labors do more than men who are unconsecrated in heart and life” (*Manuscript Releases*, vol. 19, p. 56).

Again, we encounter balance. This statement rules out the possibility of operating on the assumption that a woman cannot lead a church. The statement does not negate the need for godly male leadership of local churches, but it reaches further and insists that sometimes women are the better choice for the job. It is character and giftedness that qualify.

Now take this in:

The word “bishop” in 1 Timothy 3:2 is *episkopos*, and literally means “overseer” (ESV). Paul tells us that “the overseer (*episkopos*) manages (*oikonomos*) God’s household” (Titus 1:7, NIV). In other words, part of the biblical job description of the *episkopos* is the *management* of the church, and Ellen White clearly sees women, as well as men, in the church management role.

So we are faced with the biblical allowance that women can preach and teach, and we are faced with Ellen White’s statement that sometimes women are better adapted to the successful management of a church. At this point, some attempt to maneuver around the obvious and say that it is permissible for a woman to teach and preach, or it is permissible for a woman to manage a local church, but it is not permissible for a woman to occupy both roles at the same time, because that would acknowledge in a woman the two primary gifts that equate to a local pastor. Of course none of this reasoning exists anywhere in the Bible or the writings of Ellen White. At this point we’re just making up angles and arguments as we go in order to get around the clear implications of the inspired material before us.

But now, lest there be any doubt, consider one more point that allows us to achieve perfect clarity regarding whether or not women are eligible to occupy the ordained role of “overseer” (*episkopos*). Follow carefully:

- Both sides of the debate agree that all the spiritual gifts are gender inclusive (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4).
- All acknowledge, as well, that one of the gifts is that of “pastor” (*poimēn*), as listed in Ephesians 4:11, and therefore all agree that women, as well as men, may be “pastors.”
- But in order to restrict the women “pastor” (*poimēn*) from the ordained “overseer”

## HEADSHIP

(*episkopos*) role, those opposed to women's ordination have insisted that there must be a distinction between spiritual *gifts* and *offices*, the reasoning being that a woman may receive and exercise the spiritual *gift* of "pastor," but she cannot be ordained in that role as an *office* equivalent to the "overseer" (*episkopos*) role.

Got that so far?

Now notice what 1 Peter 5:2 says to the local church leader:

"Shepherd (*poimainō*, the same word as "pastor" in Ephesians 4:11) the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers (*episkopeō*, the same word as "bishop/overseer" in 1 Timothy 3:2)."

The following is, therefore, evident:

- One of the spiritual gifts for both men and women is that of "pastor."
- And Peter says that the "pastor" is one and the same position as the "overseer."
- Therefore, to concede that a woman can receive the spiritual *gift* of "pastor" is to concede, if we allow all of Scripture to inform us, that a woman can be in the ordained *office* of "overseer" to a local church.

The concept of male headship is the second piece of evidence offered in favor of male-only ordination. The problem here is that the Bible never speaks of the pastoral role as a headship position.

Not once.

In fact, to apply the language of "head" to the pastor is a grave theological error with heavy implication. Let's think this through carefully, allowing all that the Bible says about headship to inform us.

There are a total of seven biblical passages that employ the word "head" with reference to headship. Five of these designate Jesus Christ as the One and only Head of the church. The remaining two tell us that the man, as a husband, is the head of the woman as his wife, thus limiting the role to the marriage relationship. But—and this is crucial to know—not one text employs the word "head" with regards to the pastoral position or in any relation to ordination.

Emphasis, *not one!*

Here are all seven headship passages:

"And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be Head over everything for the church" (Ephesians 1:22, NIV).

“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of Him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15, NIV).

“And He is the Head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy” (Colossians 1:18, NIV).

“He is the Head over every power and authority” (Colossians 2:10, NIV).

“They have lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow” (Colossians 2:19, NIV).

“For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the Head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior” (Ephesians 5:23, NIV).

“I wish you to know that of every man the Head is the Christ, and the head of a woman is the husband, and the Head of Christ is God.” (1 Corinthians 11:3, *Young's Literal Translation*).

In these seven texts we have before us everything the Bible says about headship!

As already stated, we are immediately struck with an obvious and glaring fact: the word “head” is never used to designate the position of the pastor or elder in relation to the church, nor is the word ever used in relation to ordination. In the light of the current debate

regarding women’s ordination, please pause and let this register: the idea that the pastoral position is one of headship and, therefore, all pastors must be males is completely absent from Scripture.

But some claim that the final passage quoted above (1 Corinthians 11:3) deals with men and women in general, suggesting that all men have headship over all women. Of course, those who claim they believe this would quickly reveal that they do not believe it in practice if I were to suddenly begin positioning myself in headship over their wives. Paul is saying, as the English Standard Version renders the text, “the head of a wife is her husband.”

How is it, then, that those who oppose women’s ordination consider “male headship” as biblical evidence in favor of male-only ordination?

We can only guess, with all graciousness and respect, that they have inadvertently overlooked the absence of any biblical linkage between headship and the pastoral position. Basically, they have taken hold of the word “head” and applied it without biblical warrant to the pastoral role and thus inserted it into the topic of ordination. It is an exercise in innocent extrapolation, but it is not sound exegesis. So yes, the concept of male headship is present in Scripture, as we’ve just read, but it is exclusively applied to the husband-wife relationship and is never applied to any person’s position in the Church of God—other than Jesus Christ.

The headship argument against women's ordination employs the same Bible study methodology that is used when Sunday-keepers oppose the Sabbath by pointing to "first day" language in the New Testament. Upon examination we discover that there are a total of eight New Testament passages that speak of "the first day," but not one of them says anything about the first day being the new day of worship. Similarly, there are a total of seven New Testament passages that use the word "head" with regards to the idea of headship, but not one of them employs the word to describe any human leadership role within the Church. What this amounts to is a complete absence of biblical evidence that pastors occupy a headship role to the Church. They simply do not. Christ alone is described as the "Head" of His church, which is composed of a membership that includes both men and women, all of whom constitute the corporate bride of Christ. That's literally all the Bible says about headship.

But think this matter through a little more deeply, because the claim that the pastoral position is one of headship is not only unbiblical, it's dangerous.

Biblically speaking, there is no intermediate category of heads that exist between Christ and His church; there is no human layer of officiants to be regarded as husbandly heads between Jesus and His bride. Describing the relationship between Himself and His church, Jesus explicitly stated, "One is your

Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren" (Matthew 23:8, KJV). There is no sense in which Adventism—as a Protestant, priesthood-of-all-believers church—has any designated head or heads among its members. Understanding the exclusive nature of the headship position in the church, Ellen White explicitly stated:

"Christ is the only Head of the church" (*Manuscript Releases*, vol. 21, p. 274).

And again:

"Let it be seen that Christ, not the minister, is the head of the church" (*Signs of the Times*, January 27, 1890).

And again:

"God has never given a hint in His word that He has appointed any man to be the head of the church" (*The Great Controversy*, p. 51).

And yet again:

"The Lord Jesus is the one spiritual Head, and we are the members of His body" (*Review and Herald*, March 19, 1895).

This present inclination among us to sharply distinguish clergy from laity and elevate the pastoral position with language of headship and privilege over other church members is decidedly papal. Refusing to allow women to occupy the ordained role on the premise of headship dangerously assumes that all women

are under the headship of all men, which the Bible nowhere states. Also, refusing to allow women to occupy the ordained role on the premise of headship assumes that half the members of the church (the female half) do not hold priesthood-of-all-believers status by interposing a human headship, composed of men, between the women members of the church and their Lord. The Bible nowhere explains this kind of arrangement. One must move out of Adventism into Catholicism to have ministers in this role.

The crucial thing to understand regarding headship is this: the Bible does not teach that males in general are in a headship position to all women in general, but only that the individual husband is in a headship position to his individual wife. The husband-wife relationship is then carried over into the church symbolically in the form of Christ, our spiritual husband, being named *the* Head of the church, His spiritual wife, which is composed of both men and women.

This is a major and potentially dangerous oversight on the part of those advancing male headship as an argument against women's ordination. They employ the biblical concept of headship as evidence that women cannot occupy the ordained role because, they say, it would violate the biblical truth of male headship. But the fact is, there is no passage of Scripture that articulates the concept of male headship in relation to ministry, church organization, or ordination. Rather, headship

is only spoken of with regards to marriage and there is no scripture that makes it transferable into church relations.

For the logic to remain consistent, if the ordained minister occupies the role of head to the church, then he occupies that role to all the un-ordained members, both males and females, which would place the pastor in the spiritual role of husband to the bride of Christ. This is the very thing that we, as Protestants, reject in Catholic ecclesiology. The ordained minister in the Seventh-day Adventist Church most emphatically *does not* occupy a headship role to the church.

We conclude, then, that there is no biblically-informed need for concern that ordaining women would usurp the male headship role, because not even the men who occupy the pastoral position possess a headship role to the church. What we should be concerned about, however, is moving the Adventist Church in a direction that would define the pastor in headship terms, because that would constitute elevating the clergy to the position of Christ. Said another way, there is no headship role to preserve or protect, except that of Christ Himself. Ordaining women would, in fact, be an affirmation of the priesthood-of-all-believers ecclesiology we professedly adhere to as Protestants, and it would sharpen our perception of the pastoral role as simply a full-time, vocational extension of the role all church members have as a priesthood-of-all-believers community.

What happens, then, to male headship if we ordain women?

It remains, as precisely what the Bible says it is—the husband is the head of the wife and Christ is the Head of the Church!

For the church to acknowledge women pastors by the laying on of hands would simply affirm a ministerial calling to preach the gospel and win souls to Christ in a vocational capacity. It would alter nothing in a woman's ontological makeup or home relations. If a woman is ordained as a vocational soul-winner, her husband is still her husband and she is still his wife. All the husband-wife dynamics remain the same. He is still called upon by God to love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it, and she is still called upon to voluntarily submit to his selfless leadership within the secure relational environment of his husbandly love (Ephesians 5).

But let us be certain of this: the Bible nowhere reasons that since the husband is the head of the wife in the home, therefore only men can occupy the ordained role in the church. That Bible verse simply does not exist. The idea is a forced construct that lacks even one biblical passage. I am the head of my wife, not the head of every other man's wife in addition to my own. And I have a hunch that all my married brothers in Christ want to keep it that way.

We conclude, then, that the headship argument against women's ordination amounts

to a sheer absence of textual evidence. All we have before us in Scripture regarding headship is seven passages, five of which inform us that Jesus alone is the Head of the church, while the remaining two tell us that the husband is the head of the wife, with not a single verse that articulates headship in relation to either ordination or the pastoral position. Sure, we can construct an arrangement of words and ideas to manufacture an argument that forbids the ordination of women. But there is nothing in the plain reading of the biblical text that equates to a straightforward mandate on the issue.

## **THE HOLY SPIRIT DECIDES**

The moment we enter into the realm of the church, Scripture articulates a priesthood of all believers, offering lists of spiritual gifts that each member may possess for the advancement of the gospel (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4). When Paul gives these lists, he offers no gender restrictions. He does not offer a men's list and a women's list. There is one list for everybody. Each member of the church is invited to discover his or her individual areas of giftedness. And then, after naming the various gifts, Paul says this:

"But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills" (1 Corinthians 12:11).



“He alone decides which gift each person should have” (NLT).

“. . . as he determines” (NIV).

“. . . giving what God wants to give to each person” (GW).

So as we read the biblical list of spiritual gifts, we should not be surprised if, for example, a woman prophet pops up in the church. And if we’re not surprised by a woman prophet, why would we be surprised by women preachers, evangelists and “pastors” (Ephesians 4:11)? After all, Paul stipulated no gender qualifications and he bluntly informs us that the Holy Spirit is not subject to the parameters and restrictions we humans might impose. Here, again, as with the ecclesiastical headship claim, we are in danger of creating manmade rules to restrict the movings of God’s Spirit. But let us ask ourselves the sobering question:

Who are we to dictate who may or may not receive any particular spiritual gift?

If the Holy Spirit wants to raise up a woman to be a political and military leader in Israel, as in the case of Deborah, who are we to say He can’t?

If the Holy Spirit wants to call a teenage girl to be His prophet in a time when women couldn’t even vote or hold public office, as in the case of Ellen White, who are we to say that’s a bad idea?

If the Holy Spirit decides that a woman named Phoebe has what He’s looking for to be a *diakonos* to the church at Rome, why would we try to stand in His way?

If a young lady comes to you, as one recently came to me, with conviction in her eyes and passion in her voice, and says, “I am so in love with Jesus and I sense the Holy Spirit calling me to preach the gospel, plant a church, and lead people to know all about Him,” are we really prepared to tell her that the conviction she feels is not from the Holy Spirit?

Paul says “the Holy Spirit alone decides which gift each person should have.”

Our part is to acknowledge and enable what God is doing, not to impose rules and restrictions that are found nowhere in the Bible. Yes, if there was a biblical rule on the matter, we should obey that rule. But since there isn’t, why would we feel at liberty to create one? We’re not the rule makers. God is! And if He wanted us to have a rule on this issue, He would have given us one.

So then . . .

Assessing the biblical data, we are driven to the conclusion that the Bible does not say that women *ought* to be ordained, and the Bible does not say that women *ought not* to be ordained. And that’s the point all of us need to let register in our minds and hearts, if we are going to be honest with the inspired

information at our disposal. To make any claim that the Bible issues a moral mandate for or against the ordination of women is simply reaching beyond what Scripture actually says.

And yet, on the basis of the headship concept and 1 Timothy 2 and 3, there are those who are insisting that male-only ordination constitutes a biblical truth over which faithfulness versus unfaithfulness is determined. This brings us, as a people, to a very serious and dangerous place, not only for the division such a stand will inevitably cause, but also for how we interpret Scripture in general. If we are going to allow ourselves as a people to be divided over an insistence that the Bible forbids women's ordination, then we will have essentially given the church over to the dictates of one group's strong opinions beyond what is written in the word of God.

## TESTING TRUTH

Consider how serious a situation we are facing:

1. If the General Conference in Session votes a universal rule against the ordination of women to pastoral ministry, it is likely that some Unions will feel compelled to go ahead with the ordination of women in "conscientious protest" against the vote.
2. In response, it is likely that there will be one of two outcomes: either the Unions

will be allowed to proceed with women's ordination or they will be brought under disciplinary action.

3. If allowed to proceed with women's ordination, this would equate to allowing the vote of the General Conference in Session to mean nothing.
4. If the Unions are brought under discipline, this will likely involve three steps: (a) censor, which is an official statement of disapproval and a warning to change course; (b) disbanding of the non-compliant Unions; and then (c) reconstituting the Unions under compliant leadership.
5. Because Unions have their own Constitutions and Bylaws, and their own voting constituencies, if the General Conference moves in the direction of discipline it is likely that the church will enter into internal legal battles that could potentially divide Adventism into at least two denominations.

And all of this potential division we are faced with because of an insistence that Paul's "husband-of-one-wife" statement constitutes a moral mandate against women's ordination, coupled with an insistence that the concept of headship applies to the pastoral position in the church!

May I respectfully state that the interpretations being offered in favor of male-only ordination

do not constitute the kind of biblical evidence, either in mass or in method, from which we can responsibly determine either doctrinal orthodoxy or moral imperative. In other words, male-only ordination does not have sufficient biblical basis to possess the status of a “testing truth” worth dividing the church over.

There are two points upon which we cannot compromise: the law and the gospel.

The law distinguishes between relational right and wrong.

The gospel defines the way of salvation.

The moral mandates of God’s law must be maintained as non-negotiable imperatives, and all explicit Bible doctrines that collectively compose the gospel must be maintained as testing truths that determine formal “fellowship” within the parameters of church membership. But whatever cannot be shown from Scripture to be a moral mandate, and whatever cannot be shown from Scripture to be clear gospel truth, must not be voted and enforced as tests of fellowship.

Ellen White wisely observed that honest Bible students will differ in their interpretations of some topics, and she urged that we should not magnify those differences, but rather focus on preaching “the testing truths” for our time:

“If we allow the mind to take its own course, there will be countless points of difference

which may be debated by men who make Christ their hope, and who love the truth in sincerity, and yet who hold opposite opinions upon subjects that are not of real importance. These unsettled questions should not be brought to the front, and urged publicly, but should, if held by any, be done quietly and without controversy. . . . A noble, devoted, spiritual worker will see in the great testing truths that constitute the solemn message to be given to the world, sufficient reason for keeping all minor differences concealed, rather than to bring them forth to become subjects of contention. Let the mind dwell upon the great work of redemption, the soon coming of Christ, and the commandments of God; and it will be found that there is enough food for thought in these subjects to take up the entire attention” (*Evangelism*, p. 183).

When subjects like the “daily” in Daniel 7 and 8 were being agitated, she pointed to the prayer of Christ for the unity of His church and urged that we focus on “testing truths” rather than on subjects that would reveal marked differences of opinion:

“I would bring to your attention the last prayer of Christ, as recorded in John 17. There are many subjects upon which we can speak—sacred, testing truths, beautiful in their simplicity. On these you may dwell with intense earnestness. But let not ‘the daily,’ or any other subject that will arouse controversy among brethren, be brought in at this time; for this will delay and hinder the work that the Lord would

have the minds of our brethren centered upon just now. Let us not agitate questions that will reveal a marked difference of opinion, but rather let us bring from the Word the sacred truths regarding the binding claims of the law of God. Our ministers should seek to make the most favorable presentation of truth. So far as possible, let all speak the same things. Let the discourses be simple, and treating upon vital subjects that can be easily understood" (*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, p. 167).

How can we distinguish between testing truths and issues that are not to be regarded as such?

First, a testing truth must have a plain "Thus saith the Lord" to distinguish it as such. We cannot make a testing truth out of a topic concerning which God's word is either silent or allows for freedom—"quarreling over disputable matters" (Romans 14:1, NIV).

Secondly, it also seems logical that we must not make a testing truth of a topic concerning which God's end-time prophet was silent, beyond three encouragements that women, and well as men, may occupy the pastoral, ministerial, priestly role.

Thirdly, we must not make a testing truth out of a topic concerning which honest Bible students differ while at the same time sharing belief in the great doctrinal truths of Scripture, such as the Sabbath, the Sanctuary, the Second

Coming, the Three Angels' Messages, and much more besides.

The crucial point is this: the Bible does not expressly command or forbid the ordination of women. Scripture contains no explicit statement, explanation or mandate regarding the matter either for or against. And this is precisely why the church should refrain from dictating a universal rule on the matter. It is not a matter of doctrinal orthodoxy, nor is it a matter of moral imperative, to ordain or not to ordain women. Therefore, it does not constitute a test issue that determines fellowship.

Where Scripture makes no command, neither should we. We simply cannot draw a line in the sand where Scripture draws no line. We should be aiming for maximum freedom and minimum restriction in matters that involve no heresy and no sin.

Women's ordination is simply one of those matters concerning which we must say, "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind" (Romans 14:5), and that includes women. The problem we are currently facing—and it is a serious problem—is that the ordination issue is being advanced as a testing truth that determines one's faithfulness to Scripture.

A simple hypothetical exercise will help put the matter in perspective.

Ask yourself the question, "If the General Conference in Session votes to allow women's ordination, will you remove your membership from the Seventh-day Adventist Church?"

If your answer is, "No, of course not," then on some level you understand that it is not a moral issue and not a testing truth.

By contrast, ask yourself another question: "If the General Conference in session voted to adopt Sunday observance in place of the Sabbath, would you remove your membership and separate from the church?"

Most biblically literate Seventh-day Adventists would answer, "Yes, I would."

Here's the point: most of us correctly understand that there are issues of doctrinal orthodoxy and moral imperative, on the one hand, and then there are issues of individual opinion and conviction, on the other. Women's ordination clearly falls into the second category for sheer lack of biblical support in either direction.

In the current debate, however, we are faced with an insistent claim that male-only ordination is a matter of doctrinal orthodoxy and moral imperative.

In one presentation after another, both spoken and written, we are being told that if we allow for the ordination of women, doing so will constitute unfaithfulness to Scripture.

We are being told that we must vote and enforce a universal rule against women's ordination for the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church, or cease following the Bible.

Please hear this:

**Posturing the issue in this manner is very dangerous to the unity and mission of the church and threatens to severely damage our witness to the world!**

And while the ordination of women cannot be shown from Scripture to be a doctrinal or moral violation, dividing God's church over such an issue is. To exert one's influence in a manner that contributes to polarizing the church over matters that lack clear biblical mandate, most certainly is a sin against the body of Christ.

Sensing that there really is no biblical mandate one way or another regarding women's ordination, some have resorted to arousing fear with extra-biblical arguments in order to frame the issue as a moral one. The most prominent of these is the claim that,

*Ordaining women will lead to ordaining gays.*

First of all, there is no comparison at all between being a woman and being gay.

Secondly, the argument reasons from a false premise. Beginning with the assumption

that the Bible mandates that only men may occupy the ordained pastoral role, it is reasoned that ordaining women requires a liberal method of biblical interpretation (such as higher criticism), thus opening the door for the church to liberally reinterpret other biblical teachings, such as what Scripture says about homosexuality.

If the premise here were true, then, yes, ordaining women would be a dangerous move. But, as we have discovered, the premise is false. The Bible does not forbid the ordination of women. The Bible does, however, clearly forbid the practice of homosexuality. Therefore, a liberal biblical hermeneutic is not required to allow for the ordination of women. All that is required is a sound, balanced, conservative reading of Scripture! In fact, as we have seen, it requires what can only be regarded as a less than conservative hermeneutical method of interpretation to prove that the Bible forbids women's ordination.

To forbid the ordination of women in order to guard against the ordination of gays essentially amounts to avoiding what is innocent in order to avoid what is not. We need to draw the line where it is, not where it's not. We don't forbid eating wheat as a precaution against drinking whisky. We don't forbid making money as a precaution against greed and materialism. We don't forbid matrimonial sex as a precaution against adultery. We forbid what is forbidden and we manufacture no manmade rules beyond that.

Actually, by refraining from creating unnecessary restrictions we strengthen our influence and credibility with the world we are called to win to Christ, as Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. By giving every inch of ground we can without compromising truth, we show ourselves to be broadminded and reasonable, so that when we do need to draw a line on a moral imperative, we will be taken seriously. Conversely, we lose moral authority when we run to extremes and issue mandates beyond what is written in Scripture. We are not strengthened in our position of fidelity to Scripture by taking an extreme position in one direction in order to protect ourselves against a potential extreme in the opposite direction. One extreme does not correct another, but actually has the tendency to feed the opposite extreme.

So where do we go from here?

Considering the fact that we do not have a single Bible passage or Spirit of Prophecy statement that articulates male-only ordination as a matter of doctrinal orthodoxy or as a moral imperative, how, then, in good conscience, can we impose a universal rule against something God's word articulates no rule against?

The church of God does not need extremes, either from the right or the left, to define and dictate our way forward. We need rational, balanced, sound biblical thinking to guide us. On the basis of the evidence before us,

it would be irresponsible and reckless for us to vote a universal rule against women's ordination. In a worldwide church with millions of members, the only rational and charitable thing we can do is to allow for Divisions to decide what is best in their fields of labor.

At this point in the process, it does not matter so much what you and I *prefer* regarding ordination. Rather, the question is, are we willing to divide God's church over the issue?

## **APPEAL**

As Seventh-day Adventists, we have a high prophetic calling to preach the everlasting gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue and people on earth. God has given us a message with the potential, centered in Christ, to paint for the world an unprecedented picture of God's beautiful character. Why should we divert our attention from this vital calling and divide God's church over an issue that does not fall within the parameters of the message God has given us?

Therefore . . .

If you are a delegate to the 2015 General Conference Session, please vote YES in favor of allowing for individual Divisions to decide whether or not to ordain women within their territories.

By voting YES, you will be standing in favor of refraining from dividing the church over a subject that does not constitute testing truth.

By voting YES, you will be voting to refrain from creating restrictions that go beyond what is written in God's word.

By voting YES, you will be voting to affirm the freedom of God's Spirit to do as He pleases with His people.

How tragic and sad it would be for us to allow our beloved church to divide over a subject that loyal, Bible-believing church members differ on in good conscience. On this matter, let us honor one another by applying the ancient Christian maxim:

"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."