



Let Divisions Decide When to Ordain Women

A G.C. officer strongly urges taking the next step.

by Gary Patterson

THE 1995 GENERAL CONFERENCE SESSION IN Utrecht will have the opportunity to vote yes or no to the following motion:

The General Conference vests in each division the right to authorize the ordination of individuals within its territory in harmony with established policies. In addition, where circumstances do not render it inadvisable, a division may authorize the ordination of qualified individuals without regard to gender. In divisions where the division committee takes specific actions approving the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, women may be ordained to serve in those divisions.

Importantly, the 1994 Annual Council voted to ask the 1995 General Conference Session to vote on the issue of the authority of world divisions, not approval of ordination of women

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pastors. In other words, the General Conference Session will be deciding to vote on an issue of policy, leaving to divisions to debate the theological questions.

Policy: Authority of World Divisions

It is realistic to give authority in such matters to the divisions. The concern is often expressed that such an ordination would not serve the world church, as there are places in which a woman would be unacceptable in the cultural setting. But we must be fair in addressing this matter. There are just as surely places in the world where people of one ethnic group would be unacceptable to another ethnic group. One would hardly send a pastor of Jewish origin to the Arab world. Yet this is not to demean in any way the ordination of such a pastor, nor does it suggest that Jews should not be ordained merely because there are places in the world where they would not be welcome to serve. Rather, it recognizes the

social realities of the complex world in which we operate.

The church has arrived at this point concerning ordination of women pastors long after it first addressed ordination of women. As far back as the Annual Council of 1974 the matter of ordaining women to local church leadership was addressed. It was voted at that time "to request the President's Executive Advisory to also arrange for further study of the election of women to local church offices which require ordination." Ten years later the 1984 Annual Council voted "To advise each division that it is free to make provision as it may deem necessary for the election and ordination of women as local church elders."

Having already made such a determination on this matter of ordaining women to church office, subsequent action as to just which ordinations are available to women and which are not seems at best to be theologically dubious. As A. C. McClure, president of the North American Division stated at the 1994 Annual Council, "it appears to be theological hairsplitting to say that we will recognize ordination of women on one hand and refuse to recognize it on the other hand, while calling them both scriptural positions."

Since the initiation of the practice of electing women as local elders, hundreds of churches have ordained women to these posts. At the present time more than 1,000 women are serving in such capacities. Again McClure stated, "There is no turning back. Can you imagine the havoc that would be wrought if we were to attempt to tell the churches that they could no longer elect and ordain those who for 20 years have been serving effectively and with acceptance by those congregations?"

Some say that the North American Division has sought to go its own way in these matters, threatening the rest of the world church if they do not go along. But quite to the contrary, North America would not now be making this request of the world body if it had determined

to ignore the policies and actions of the world church. In fact, the actions of the North American Division have carefully and circumpectly followed church policy in these matters, at times much to the frustration of those who saw the process as taking much too long.

Not until 1985 did an agenda of a General Conference Session include ordination of women as a topic. Subsequently, the 1987 Annual Council appointed a commission on the role of women to give major study to the issue. The 1989 Annual Council, in turn, placed the matter on the 1990 General Conference Session agenda.

It is significant to note both what was and what was not voted in this recommendation to the most recent, 1990 General Conference Session. While the action does say, "we do not approve ordination of women to the gospel ministry," it does so in the context of preserving church unity, not on theological grounds. The action clearly states that it "does not have a consensus as to whether or not the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen G White explicitly advocate or deny the ordination of women to pastoral ministry." As A. C. McClure asked the 1994 Annual Council, "Does it not speak for itself that after more than 20 years of serious study the church has not taken a theological position?"

It is because North America has followed church policies on this matter that it has ordained hundreds of women to local church office, but not to the pastorate. It is because North America has followed General Conference policies that, as McClure stated to the recent 1994 Annual Council, "The position in which we find ourselves is, therefore, clearly untenable. North America has not been running independently ahead of the world or acting on its own. Because this division has applied these General Conference actions in a way that was felt to be fair and right, we now find ourselves in a position that is seen by

many in this division as discriminatory, unethical, and even immoral.”

McClure, speaking in favor of divisions acting differently on the issue of ordination of women pastors, went on to say,

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a very diverse family. We are a multitude of cultures, each with its own perspective on issues that affect the life of the church. Our objective must be fidelity to God's word, providing unity in diversity, while recognizing and preserving the ability of each member or region of "the body" to best function in its unique sphere.

It may not be an easy choice. But we must go with the risks, for to stop short is to close ourselves off from even the possibility of discovering truth in its broadness. Should such permission be granted to the divisions, there would remain for them the delicate process of determining the course to follow. The matter of scriptural authenticity would be addressed, and the hermeneutical process joined.

Principle: Scriptural Teaching

Of course, the vote at the General Conference Session on the policy of world divisions deciding for themselves whether to ordain women will be affected by assumptions concerning what the scriptures say, or don't say, about women in ministry. Deep in the heart of Adventism is a noble and proper desire to be Scripturally authentic. It is a yearning that at the same time both informs and distresses the present discussion of women in ministry and women's ordination, not only in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but also in most other denominations as well. Scriptural authenticity is at the core of a valid faith, since any other approach to both religious belief and practice is, by definition, cultic. Yet at times a misguided quest for scriptural authenticity leads to extremes in doctrinal interpretation. The result is often an ignoring of

both the context and the original meaning of the Bible in an attempt to buttress a given position through the quoting of Scripture.

Often when caught in a struggle over the meaning of Scripture we resort to the assertion that the Bible is for everyone, and everyone is mandated to understand and interpret it individually. This motif sees reflection in the rather confrontive bumper sticker that declares, "God Said It—I Believe It—That Settles It." There is inherent in this statement the noble ideal that everyone is both capable of and responsible for an understanding of God's Word, and thus accountable for the choices that result from that understanding. But it is naive to assume that every individual is equally, or for that matter, even adequately equipped to be the arbiter of all scriptural interpretation, regardless of intellectual ability, educational background, or doctrinal predilection. Even though this seems to be a noble ideal, it is not a practical reality.

That salvation is available and understandable to everyone is a position that we vigorously support. But to say that all Scripture is equally understandable by all people is egregious. Were it not for the scholarly devotion of Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic linguists, most of us would be either crippled or totally dysfunctional in our relation to Scripture. And were it not for the aid of scholarly analysts of scripture and theologians, we would individually draw broad ranging and perhaps strange conclusions on the meaning of the Bible, a fact clearly demonstrated by the plethora of fanciful interpretations that abound in the world of religion, and from which we ourselves are not exempt.

Within the vastness of the spread of cultures in the world—both presently existing, and existing over the time span of scriptural history—it would be naive, even presumptuous to assume that any one individual could comprehend it all in isolation from religious and scholarly communities. It is these commu-

nities that save us from the folly of our own narrow views and the limited information that is available to us individually.

In any search for the meaning of Scripture, the obvious truth must be understood—that it means exactly what it says. 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 for example is not obscure. It is not a problem text. Despite its frequent usage in the debate over the ordination of women to ministry, it does not refer in any way to the ordination of women. Ordination is not the context in which it was written. It says, “As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says” (NIV).

A text could hardly be much more straightforward than that. It is not a problem text to translate. Rather, it is a problem to interpret. It does not, in its straightforward declarativeness, seem to fit into current-day perceptions of the way things should be—or for that matter—even into the practice of Paul and the church of his day.

We cannot manipulate or change the text to say other than what it says. The issue we struggle with here is not what the text says, but whose departure from it is acceptable and whose is not. However, no one individual's departure from it has any more authority than another. The text says “silence”—and anything beyond that is a departure. Despite the ongoing struggle over the meaning of this text, rarely do we find anyone willing to accept it for what it plainly and simply says.

Then, injected into the discussion process are the speculations as to who will leave or refuse to join the church over the issue of the participation of women in ministry. And no doubt anecdotal evidence can be marshaled to indicate that there are significant numbers from both sides of the issue who will make this a pivotal matter in their decision to be or not to be part of the church. But this threat of refusal to be part of the church—despite its

painfulness—is not the criteria on which such issues are to be resolved. We must not decide what is right on the basis of who can count the largest number of disgruntled members or potential members. Rather, each world division must decide what is right on the basis of the principles of sound biblical interpretation and scriptural authenticity.

The outworking of the hermeneutical process is sometimes a conundrum for us. While we struggle intently over the matter of exact adherence to one particular Scripture, we are quite comfortable explaining—or perhaps at times even ignoring—other clear scriptural instructions. When it comes to Sabbath observance, the scriptural mandate is clear and the penalty for violation specific. Yet we neither advocate nor follow the straightforward and unequivocal position of Exodus 31:12-17. It is startlingly clear:

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy. Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people. For six days’ work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord.’”



Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested” (NIV).

This Scripture was taken quite literally. When a man built a fire on the Sabbath—a matter which would seem quite innocuous to us—the people took him out of the camp and stoned him, following strictly the instruction of Scripture. And in a similar situation, it was the intervention of none other than Jesus himself who saved the woman taken in adultery from the same fate. He did not allow for the stoning that was advocated by her accusers who, by the way, had scriptural precedent for their position.

Likewise, Scripture proscribes the collection of interest on loaned money. And from time to time there are those among us who protest the investment of church funds on this basis. But we generally ignore them. There are also scriptural instructions regarding the manufacture of clothing from multiple materials. Yet little of what we wear today complies with this instruction.

The struggle with our sacred texts is not so much with what they say. That is quite clear most of the time. Rather, the problem is that we must derive present truth out of the vast scope of their historic and social settings. This search for meaning in context does not always mesh smoothly with proof-text methodologies. Yet the search for meaning must not be abandoned just because there are problems and dangers in the process.

Theology is not something that exists somewhere by itself, waiting in tidy form to be discovered by the church. It is rather a work that must be done ecclesialogically. Unless we take the text literally as it reads—which obviously we do not do regarding women being

silent in church, as well as in many other instances—then the work of interpretation becomes the work of the church. In this search for meaning, we find our security in the community of faith, thus saving us from the pitfalls of narrow individualism. And when we stand apart from that community, insisting on our own individual positions, then we are in apostasy—for that is the meaning of the word—“to stand apart.”

This is not to say that the church never errs, or that it never moves from its prior positions, as though at any point in time it has arrived at all truth. Indeed it does err. And indeed it does move. Such is the nature of present truth in the community of faith. Matters that in the past seemed crucial to the maintenance of the faith may today be seen today as irrelevant. And a society that refuses to acknowledge this fact can see its future reflected in the Amish community. Indeed, these people have preserved some matters of value in their separatist life-style. But to live in this kind of splendid isolation is not an acceptable response to the gospel commission.

The hermeneutical problems we face are largely problems we have created for ourselves. We maintain that Scripture never contradicts itself. And given a definition of Scripture that sees its task as presenting the broad scope of the truth of God, this is a tenable position. But when we perceive this notion of no contradictions as the core of an inerrant view of Scripture, then the reality of the actual text overwhelms us. In this mode we are forced to struggle with such minor issues as the order of the temptations in the wilderness, for example. Matthew lists them as bread, temple, and worship. Luke’s order is bread, worship, and temple. If we are truly consistent with an inerrant viewpoint, then the authority of Scripture is threatened by this rather unimportant discrepancy.

As long as we seek to do hermeneutics in a proof-text mode, we will not resolve the problem. We must make a choice. Either we do exactly what the Scripture says in all instances, and quit trying to make it say what it does not say—or say what is comfortable to us—or we must truly enter the hermeneutical process and deal with the nature of inspiration in our search for truth.

In the context of honesty to Scripture, it is strange that a text such as 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 should be used to oppose ordination (to which it does not refer) while speaking in church (to which it does refer) is broadly deemed acceptable today—even encouraged. In a strictly technical sense, women could well have done the work of those who were set apart by the “laying on of hands” without violating at all this stricture of silence in the church.

In actuality, the first “laying on of hands” in the life of the young church was for the purpose of “waiting on tables” and not for preaching or church leadership. The point of it all was to leave the apostles free for “the ministry of the word of God” (Acts 6:2, NIV). Furthermore, Philip is recognized as an evangelist not on the basis of this “laying on of hands” but as a result of his witness and preaching, which bore fruit for the kingdom of God. In fact, his act of performing baptisms while a deacon was seen as the proof of his call to preaching. Scriptural evidence shows no connection whatever between the matter of who was ordained, and the restrictions of 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 regarding women speaking in church.

To decry the ordination of women as an

action that forsakes the teaching of Scripture, demeaning such a position as a dangerous new understanding of Scripture, while allowing women to participate in church activities verbally, is an amazing mental stretch. If we are going to allow for any deviations in this plain and straightforward statement regarding silence in church, it must be a decision that is taken in the open community of the church with fairness and intellectual honesty in all the discussion.

It is a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, the work of the church body saves us from the folly of our own individual biases. Yet on the

other hand, we must not assume that truth is somehow found at the level of the lowest common denominator of world opinion. Rather than waiting till truth is acceptable everywhere simultaneously, we must be leading and calling the church on to higher ground wherever possible. Had we not done so in the past, we might yet be supporting slavery—

which, by the way, Paul refers to and accepts in some of the same discourses in which he discusses the role of women.

To the Galatians he says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” To the Ephesians he says, “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. . . . Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.” We cannot claim honesty in our interpretations of Scripture while picking and choosing what is comfortable to us and what is not in these

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comments of Paul. The issues of women and slavery are part of the same texts. We cannot advocate freedom from slavery in our day on the basis that the social setting directed the words of Paul on the slavery issue, and then refuse to use the same understanding of Scripture in addressing the issue of women in ministry.

Anything less than full and honest investigation of the Bible deals only with isolated scriptural particles, which are not allowed to interrelate in our minds or our theology, because of the apparent contradictory nature. The choice is ours. We can continue the process of amassing texts that seem to support one position and destroy others. Or we can seek the fullness of meaning and truth in Scripture, even in the face of apparently conflicting stories, statements, and texts that, for whatever reason, appear to us to be in contradiction.

This is the work of the church community, and it is our only safe haven. We must work

together in this process of ecclesiologically developed theology as an ongoing process. Thus we are saved from both the isolationist disaster, where our own individual positions are advanced in a manner which seeks to dominate all others, and from the alternate, smothering control of an authoritarian system, a system in which Scripture is interpreted only by church leaders.

We must come to recognize that our perception of truth—both as individuals and as community of faith—is not complete. It is dynamic, not static. This is what present truth is all about. We are part of a community of faith that is on a journey with truth. And the fullness of this truth of God will be our eternal study and wonderment. As the poet James Russell Lowell puts it:

New occasions teach new duties,
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward,
Who would keep abreast of truth.