

Four Reasons Why Women's Ordination is a Moot Issue

by Sakae Kubo

The Bible does not deal with the question of women's ordination. Therefore, there is no "Thus saith the Lord" either for or against it. The Bible does not deal with many issues, especially those we face today, because the Bible was written in the context of its time. The context differs between the Old and New Testaments, and even within Testaments. For example, before the issue was settled, neither the Old nor New Testament had dealt with the matter of circumcision for Gentiles. That issue would not have come before the Jerusalem Council had there been clear biblical statements related to it. The same was previously true in regard to slavery, and, today, is true about women's ordination.

Women's Ordination and Cultural Issues

Disagreement about women's ordination is a cross-cultural conflict. In his discussion of the women's ordination debate at the 1995 General Conference session in Utrecht, Jon Dybdahl points out that the vote followed cultural lines. Based on his conversations with individual delegates, Dybdahl says that

The issue of women's ordination is as much a cross-cultural conflict as it is a theological issue. The cultural lines the vote followed were clear. Conversations with individual delegates indicated that North America, Western Europe, and to some extent Australia were heavily in favor of allowing North America to ordain women. Those from Latin America, Africa, and to a large extent Asia and Eastern Europe were strongly opposed. African Americans and Hispanic Americans, on the other hand, spoke in favor of the measure. It seems obvious that the vote is, then, not really ethnic but cultural.¹

Jon should have said that the vote was not theological, but cultural. That is the point of his observation. If what Dybdahl observes is true, the likelihood of the world church allowing North America to ordain women is nil, because the majority of Adventists come from cultures where women's roles are not as advanced as in the West. What the world church has said, in effect, is that it will allow societies that are least advanced in regard to the role of women in society to determine what that role should be in countries where women's roles have been upgraded most.

Such issues, it seems to me, clearly ought not to be brought before the world body. Matters that have cultural implications should be addressed on the union or division levels. It would be just as mistaken for the western section of the Church, if dominant, to vote that the world body should ordain women.

This is an important consideration for those who voted against the proposal. Would they want the western part of the Church to dictate such matters to them? If the societies from which the majority of the membership came still used slaves, should those in the minority be expected to institute slavery in their churches? This is what we expect analogically with the women's ordination issue.

The Priesthood of All Believers

Belief in the priesthood of all believers affirms women's ordination. This issue has demonstrated that some Adventists have a surprisingly high concept of ordination, closely in line with Catholics and Anglicans. Opposition to women's ordination in high church circles is understandable because that tradition considers ordination "a sacramental conferral of a grace which effects an indelible, lifelong change and empowers the ordained to celebrate the sacraments."² Because Adventists do not have such a high view of the sacraments—which include ordination—we do not absolutely require an ordained person to administer them. If ordination is not considered in this high sense, what, then, is the reason to be so exercised about women's ordination?

Adventists maintain that every person is a priest, that there is no distinction between a minister and a layperson. I believe these teachings are biblical. This does not mean that we're all laypersons, but that we're all priests. Although it made sense in the early Adventist Church to use ordained ministers who had converted to the Adventist faith to ordain other ministers, the practice is not currently necessary according to our view of the ministry. The idea that only an ordained minister can ordain others is the

Catholic idea of apostolic succession, the belief that unless our ministry can trace its roots back to the apostles and Christ, the ordination is invalid.

I believe that the early Adventist Church could have claimed authority to ordain qualified people as ministers even though none of its members was already ordained. Ordination does not need to be traced back to Christ. Church historian George Knight indicates that the early Adventists' approach to ordination was pragmatic, i.e. based on the need to distinguish between approved and unapproved ministers and the needs of the field.³ Because we are all priests, we can all serve as ministers. But, in a practical sense, not all of us can devote all of our time to a minister's work or have all the required skills. We agree, therefore, that we will "ordain" certain ones with the necessary qualifications to serve full-time.

Nothing mystical or magical takes place to raise that person to a higher level. If that were the case, we shouldn't be too exercised about women being ordained. After all, they, as well as men, are priests. As long as women have the qualifications we want for ministers (spiritual gifts are not gendercentric), we can set them aside. When we want someone to sing, we don't ask whether they are male or female, we only want to know whether they can sing. So with the ministry; we need only ask if they can minister. We are all priests.



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—Julie Z. Lee, Class of 1998

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Consistency and the Use of Scripture

Those who oppose women's ordination apply scriptural passages inconsistently. They base their arguments against women's ordination on passages that speak about the headship of males over females, about women being silent in church, and against women teaching and exercising authority. If these Pauline statements are valid today, then they should be applied not only in regard to women as ministers, but elsewhere, as well.

Following this practice in our colleges and universities, where men and women work together, would mean that we should not have women as teachers of religion, academic deans, vice presidents, or chairs of departments, to say nothing about women presidents. Women would also be excluded from executive positions in our academies or church schools, where there are also men. We should definitely not have women as ministers, even though unordained. Of course, it should be completely inconceivable in the light of these Pauline restrictions to have a woman serve as a senior pastor. We should not even have women as general Sabbath School superintendents. And we should probably exclude women in certain professions, such as law, politics, and some medical fields.

Yet there is no opposition voiced against women filling these positions. Such silence shows inconsistency and weakness in the use of these arguments. To oppose women's ordination on the basis of such Pauline texts is clearly not applicable or enforceable overall in a consistent and logical manner. Why, then, should we try to apply them in one small area?

Service Versus Ordination

Because women already serve as ministers, ordination is a moot issue. The real issue, it seems to me, is not whether or not women should be ordained, but whether women should be allowed to be ministers. In other words, those who oppose women's ordination do so because they do not want women to serve in that capacity. Yet, currently, women already serve as ministers, perform baptisms and marriages, and administer the ordinances. In Loma Linda, for example, a high-profile woman minister serves as senior pastor of the Campus Hill Church.

In effect, the issue of women's ordination is moot because the real issue, women serving as ministers, has been and is a continuing reality. Nonordination does not prohibit women from such service. If that were the case, why fight over the issue of ordination? Ordination is only the approval and confirmation of a person's acceptable service; it is not the approval needed for him or her to become a minister.

Why, then, should we argue over this narrow area of ordination? Is it because we have unfortunately allowed this issue to become the point over which we can take a vote? We have not allowed the world body to vote over whether we should employ women as ministers. This situation is analogous to allowing people to drive without a license and then requiring them to acquire a license after they have driven successfully for a number of years.

The fact is that the battle has already been won. The real issue over which so much debate has gone on is not whether women should be ordained but whether they should serve as ministers. They have served as ministers for some time and will continue to do so. Thus, ordination of women is a moot issue. It has been ever since women were accepted into the ministry. It's completely illogical to say to women, "you can serve as ministers but you cannot be ordained."

These four reasons show that the debate concerning women's ordination is culture-centered, not a world issue, theologically opposed to Adventist theology, inconsistent and unenforceable, and irrelevant and moot.

Notes and References

1. Dybdahl, "Cultural and Biblical Understanding in a World Church," in *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Vyhmeister (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1998), 429.

2. Russell Staples, "A Theological Understanding of Ordination," *ibid.*, 141.

3. Knight, "Early Seventh-day Adventists and Ordination," *ibid.*, 111.

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