

TOSC Struggles Reading the Bible | BY BONNIE DWYER

Is there hierarchy within the Trinity?

Were Adam and Eve priests in the sanctuary of the Garden of Eden?

Does 1 Cor. 11:4–6 refer to headship or head coverings while praying?

What does the Bible teach about slavery?

If one agrees with women's ordination does that mean s/he is an "evangelical feminist"?

As the Theology of Ordination Study Committee continued in January to wrestle with key biblical passages about women and authority, it became clear that the texts could be interpreted in more than one way. That prompted the further question: if this is so, does it mean that the Bible and the writings of Ellen White are unable to solve the question of women's ordination?

For some, the fear of that insufficiency led to labeling those reading Scripture differently from themselves as being influenced by "evangelical feminism," a pejorative term to many. Clinton Wahlen presented a chart to describe the effects of evangelical feminism on biblical interpretation and lamented the state of hermeneutical practice within the church, saying, "When I joined this church thirty-five years ago I never would have imagined that I would be standing here with all of you, looking at two possible pathways into the future based on which set of hermeneutics we choose for the study of Scripture: the historical-grammatical method that refuses to limit the Bible's authority, or a new hermeneutic, based on evangelical feminism, that finds reasons to limit the Bible's authority on the issue of women's ordination."

Note: All of the division reports and research papers presented at the TOSC sessions can be read at: <http://www.adventistarchives.org/january-2014-papers-presented#.Uwah3yj6RCg>



Artur Stele (r) led the TOSC, with co-chair Geoffrey Mbwana

After his presentation at the meeting in Columbia, Maryland, some committee members were questioning whether there was any point in continuing the conversation because they felt they were being incorrectly labeled. Ekkehardt Mueller of the Biblical Research Institute, Denis Fortin, former dean of the Seminary at Andrews University, and Jiri Moskala, the current Seminary dean, all expressed their displeasure over the way those against ordination had made personal attacks, disparaging the methods of Bible study embraced by many in the room. Wahlen got the point. When his paper was posted online at the website of the Adventist Archives, Research and Statistics, all references to Moskala were removed from the paper, although Wahlen continued to imply that the "evangelistic feminism" label was appropriate for other participants in the conversation.

Name-calling wasn't the only kerfuffle at the January meeting, however. Another revolved around the paper "Interpreting Scripture on the Ordination of Women" by P. Gerard Damsteegt, Edwin Reynolds, Gerhard Pfandl, Laurel Damsteegt, and Eugene Prewitt. The paper had been added to the program at the last minute and was not vetted by the Steering Committee. Eugene Prewitt was the author who read the paper, and there were many ques-

tions, not the least of which concerned the paper's treatment of slavery.

"And what does the Bible teach about slavery?" the paper said. "God's law established that men might indenture themselves either by crime or by debt or even through a desire of some advantage (such as the hand of a daughter.) This 'slavery' has none of the moral evils that come with a more modern idea of slavery."¹ This breathtaking endorsement that slavery is OK (if it is practiced as the Hebrews practiced it) was felt necessary in order to deny a basis for including women in ministry.

The reason for this discussion of slavery was because of hermeneutics, the paper's authors said. Prewitt read:

Among some interpreters there is an approach to the Bible that has been called "trajectory." This approach assumes that there is a development of Bible truth on specific teachings that are not clearly present in the Bible, but through the light of the Gospel it has become accepted in today's society. An example of this reasoning is slavery, a practice which Christians today fully reject. Yet in the Bible it is practiced and legislated. Here the trajectory shows a positive development based on our understanding of the Gospel. The trajectory has been used to advocate the ordination of women. The danger lies in "creating a trajectory"—especially when there is nothing within the text that would point to such a trajectory, or even worse, when such a trajectory actually would be contradictory to the explicit intention of the text itself.²

As questions mounted for Prewitt, he told the committee that he had not actually written the paper. Gerhard Damsteegt, the first author listed and a member of the Steering Committee, apparently asked Prewitt to read the paper. Gerhard Damsteegt had presented four other papers (more than any other participant) in earlier sessions. Later another of the co-authors, Gerhard Pfandl, said that he had never seen the paper before it was read, despite the fact that it bore his name. Prewitt in his presentation of the material pleaded for a plain reading of Scripture. Using the trajectory method of read-

ing the Bible was problematic in his mind, as was the common practice of intertextuality which he also disparaged.

No matter which side one was on, hermeneutics (that is, the method of biblical interpretation) was found problematic to those on the other side. Ángel Rodríguez, the retired director of the Biblical Research Institute, had been asked to write a paper that evaluated the arguments of those in opposition to women's ordination. He wrote the following under a section subtitled "Hermeneutical Diatribe":

Our friends charge those who disagree with them of using a non-biblical, non-Adventist hermeneutics. This type of diatribe is not constructive and closes the possibility of any meaningful conversation. It leads away from a discussion of the arguments themselves into an evaluation of the character and intentions of those involved in the discussion. This approach seems to attempt to resolve the problem by instilling fear against those who disagree with them; they are the enemy. My careful reading of their papers made it clear to me that the major hermeneutical problem we face is located in the definition and application of one principle of biblical interpretation, namely, the proper use of the context of a biblical passage.

In summary the hermeneutics used by those opposed to gender-inclusive ordination does not appear to be completely faithful to MBSD (Methods of Bible Study document voted by the General Conference in 1986). They claim to be following the principles of the totality of Scripture, Scripture interprets itself, and Scripture alone, but their use of a few biblical passages as their hermeneutical key to interpret or reinterpret other passages (a canon within a canon?) raises questions about the validity of their hermeneutics. Their main hermeneutical problem is to a large extent their desire to prove their point and to undermine the arguments of those who support the ordination of women to the ministry.³

But there were other problems, too. Rodríguez found the presentation of headship by those who oppose women's ordination a serious deviation from Adventist theology and doctrine because it redefined the doctrine of God. "If one of the three members of the Godhead has been the

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eternal leader of the other two, even at a functional level, we have introduced a fissure within the unity of the Godhead that brings us too close to polytheism," he wrote. "If one member of the Godhead has to tell the others what to do and when to do it, then, we have to conclude that the exercise of the divine attributes of the other two is being limited or that not all of them have the same divine attributes—they complement each other. If we were to insist that eternal headship is consistent with monotheism, we would have to argue for something very close to modalism—the one God is functioning in three different ways."⁴

The Doctrine of the Atonement would also be affected by their interpretation of headship, Rodríguez said. "The eternal headship of the Father could imply that the sacrifice of the Son was the result of an order given by the Father to Him to save us; the assignment of a function. This would destroy the biblical doctrine of the atonement and would damage in a radical way the biblical understanding of the nature of divine love."⁵

Gerhard Pfandl got the assignment to write the reciprocal paper critiquing the arguments in favor of women's ordination. He included the names of the other opponents of women's ordination in the byline with him: Daniel Bediako, Steven Bohr, Laurel and Gerhard Damsteegt, Jerry Moon, Paul Ratsara, Ed Reynolds, Ingo Sorke, and Clinton Wahlen. This group selected ten items from the papers in support of ordination of women with which they *disagreed*:

1. Full equality of male and female in the Garden of Eden;
2. The suggestion that Adam and Eve served as priests in the pre-Fall Eden;
3. Male headship did not exist in the Garden of Eden; it is a result of the Fall and applies only to the marriage relationship and not to the church;
4. The qualification lists in 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1 are gender neutral; therefore they do not need to exclude women from serving in these ministries;
5. Junia in Rom. 16 was a female apostle;
6. Gal. 3:26–29 applies not only to salvation, but it also abolishes the subordination of females to males;
7. 1 Tim. 2:12–14 applies only to a specific situation in Ephesus and does not refer to the relationship that should universally exist between men and women;
8. The priesthood of all believers permits women to be ordained;

9. Ministry in the New Testament Church was non-hierarchical;
10. "Head" in 1 Cor. 11 has the meaning of source rather than authority.

After listing the arguments against each of these points, Pfandl also faulted the other side on their Bible reading. He said, "The hermeneutics used by egalitarians goes beyond the grammatical-historical method. For example, the *ad hoc* argument restricting Paul's counsel in 1 Tim. 2:12–14 to a specific issue in Ephesus is exegetically not a valid argument. All of Paul's letters, with the exception of Romans, 'are *ad hoc* responses to deal with specific problems,' yet no one limits the other letters of Paul to the original recipients. Why should 1 Tim. be limited to the local situation?"⁶ The paper continues:

In order to accommodate the push for women as elders in the church, every biblical argument that in the past had been used against women's ordination to pastoral leadership has been explained away or reinterpreted by seeking a deeper meaning in the text, by an appeal to other supposedly contradictory texts (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:33–35 speaks against 1 Cor. 11:5), or by a reinterpretation of the meaning of biblical words. Some of the arguments are based on imaginative or creative reasoning and assumptions which are not supported by Scripture. At times, questionable information from non-biblical sources and hypothetical situations are brought into play in order to reinterpret or set aside the plain meaning of the text. We believe that what is simple and clear to the common reader of the Bible has been mystified and relativized.⁷

He concluded that if the women of the church could only respond like Paul when he said that "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel," then they could preach the gospel as a "lifelong career—without violating Scripture or dividing the church."⁸

Pfandl's conclusion was that with a different credential women might preach, which is essentially the current situation. It was C. Raymond Holmes who got the assignment to suggest "What We Should Do Now," for those who oppose women's ordination. And while he wanted to affirm women in ministry, he suggested that a completely different track be created for them at the seminary and that the vote to allow for women elders be reversed:

Should the reasoning and arguments in favor of ordaining women as elders not be challenged, how will texts such as 1 Cor. 6:9–10 (RSV) be interpreted in the future? "Do you not know that the unrighteous

will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the [sexually] immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals. . . will inherit the kingdom of God.” Most proponents will passionately insist, and sincerely mean, that they would never interpret texts such as this in ways that would support the approval of same-sex marriage, or the ordination of practicing homosexuals. However, no confidence can be given to such assurance because the contemporary history of some Protestant churches proves otherwise. The one has inevitably led to the other. Throwing the Seventh-day Adventist Church over the hermeneutical cliff will eventually produce the same result. The same arguments of gender-neutralizing passages used for the ordination of women as elders would eventually be used in support of gay marriage and the ordination of homosexual clergy, because we would have already allowed for it hermeneutically.⁹

Holmes lamented the long argument over the issue of whether women should be ordained as elders, saying that it had become wearisome. The debate has gone on long enough, he declared. But he had qualifications for the solution:

Any solution that would ignore the biblical principle of headship, as well as the plain Bible facts that there were no female priests in Old Testament times, that there is no direct biblical evidence that Jesus appointed any female apostles or that female elders were appointed in the early church, is simply untenable for a church that claims to be the extension of the Reformation in an uncompromising stand on sola scriptura.¹⁰ (emphasis in the original)

It is imperative that we all submit to the direction and guidance we have been given, and recognize formally that the ministry to which women are set apart by “laying on of hands” is complementary to, not identical with, the ministry to which men are set apart. Recognizing also that in terms of ministry a prophet’s authority, whether male or female, is direct from God; that the male minister’s authority is derived from Christ who is the head of the church and the “head of every man” (1 Cor. 11:3), and who thereby has something to say about how the church and its ministry functions; and that the female minister’s pastoral care role is delegated by those holding the office of overseer/elder exercising the authority of their headship role. This trajectory preserves the biblical principle of head-

ship, understood by all concerned that headship is not, repeat not, a license for cruel domination or the exercise of hierarchical power.¹¹ (emphasis in the original)

He also called for repentance and the rescinding of all previous actions permitting the ordination of women as local elders, as well as “careful reconsideration” of the 1990 General Conference action allowing women to perform most of the functions of an ordained minister in their local churches. After repenting of these past sins, our academic institutions must cease “training women for the same ministerial role as men” and instead develop “a specialized track . . . that would prepare women for the ministry to which God is calling them, for which they are uniquely qualified and gifted, and recognizing that call by the ‘laying on of hands.’”¹²

Barry Oliver, the president of the South Pacific Division, presented the paper for the pro-ordination side on where to go from here: “Moving Forward in Unity: Differing positions on ordination without gender distinction can be respected in the global Seventh-day Adventist Church and enhance the unity and mission of the Church.” In his paper, Oliver called for flexibility in practice. He reminded the committee that appropriate flexibility of practice had been a significant reason for the growth, development and sustainability of the global SDA Church. His examples of flexibility were drawn first from Christ, and then from James and Ellen White, both of whom spoke out for specific forms of organization only to change their minds within a few short years.

Next, the action on local women elders voted by the General Conference Executive Committee in 1975 said each division was free to make provision as it may deem necessary regarding women elders. He declared that this action has served the global Church well. There have been no deep schisms, and it has promoted the preservation of unity. He recommended a similar type of action regarding the ordination of women ministers with the following possible wording:

That each division be given the prerogative to deter-

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*mine and make provision as it may deem appropriate within its territory for the ordination of men and women to the gospel ministry.*¹³

In practical terms, he said that this would require an enabling action for *The Working Policy*. It would recognize that global nature of ordination, but leave the authorization of a person for ministry to the local territory. He made it clear that such an action would impact only those divisions which are ready to proceed with the ordination of women.

*This Church exists because there are people who have given their allegiance to God and the church, and they act on it. They come from "every nation, kindred, tongue and people" and they go to "every nation, kindred, tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6). They are one but they are different. Difference requires adaptation. Unity is ultimately dependent on the recognition that diversity exists. We can move forward together as the Holy Spirit leads us to love and respect one another and to find a solution which works.*¹⁴

Oliver's proposal just might have a chance to work, given the recent reports from the Divisions. According to Denis Fortin's analysis of the reports that were given at the same meeting in Columbia, Maryland, only one division is totally opposed to any action in support of ordaining women, and even in that division there are churches which support women's ordination. The reports from the other twelve, even those who are not in favor of ordaining women, suggest that for many this is a cultural issue and they would be agreeable to whatever the church decides or allowing other divisions to do so. In the end, this decision will hinge a lot on how church leaders will frame this recommendation to the larger church. It remains to be seen whether the committee will endorse the approach suggested by Holmes, which returns the church to the mid-1970s, or the possible way forward presented by Oliver, or yet another path. The final session of TOSC will take place in June 2014. ■

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