

Higher Criticism and the Resistance to Women's Ordination: *Unmasking the Issue* | BY OLIVE J. HEMMINGS

A close look at the dynamics of the debate over women's ordination as it arose in the latter half of the twentieth century reveals that the most influential leaders in Seventh-day Adventism were not in a war against women's ordination per se. They were in a larger cultural war that, for the second time, had enveloped American society—a war against liberalism and liberal religion.¹ A hallmark of liberal religion is higher critical methodology of biblical interpretation. Major institutional leaders perceive this interpretive methodology to be a threat to the very foundations of Seventh-day Adventism. Because the women's movement was a major contender in the culture war of the twentieth century, women's ordination became, in the minds of many, a signifier of this major enemy of the church: higher criticism. Thus, in the struggle to preserve the foundational doctrines of the church, women's ordination became collateral damage.

This paper argues that the debate over women's ordination has been caught in the crossfire between liberal and conservative religion. It highlights two contending interpretive approaches to demonstrate that interpretive methodology has never been the real issue, but became a viable talking point in the quest to block the ordination of women that by the 1980s had taken on symbolic weight as the enemy of the denomination. The aim of this paper is to call attention to the real issue lying beneath the surface issue that is women's ordination. Hopefully this may serve as an important step towards resolving this protracted conflict.

In 1973 the Biblical Research Institute (BRI) of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists² convened the Camp Mohaven Conference with the expressed purpose of steering the denomination towards the ordination of women. At this conference, the General Conference *ad hoc* committee on the role of women in the

church (comprising thirteen men and fourteen women from North America) met to review twenty-nine papers on the issue. A glowing argument for gender mutuality based on Genesis 1–3³ opened the Camp Mohaven Document and set the pace for the conversation for the ordination of women. Director of the BRI Gordon Hyde stated that he was “an advocate for new opportunities and wider authority for women in the church.”⁴ While, as Hyde admits, there were papers at Camp Mohaven that argued against the ordination of women,⁵ the resulting document, *The Role of Women in the Church*, appeared with only twelve of the twenty-nine papers reviewed by the committee, all presenting biblical arguments for the ordination of women. The committee recommended that women be ordained as local elders,⁶ that those in theological training be hired as “associates in pastoral care,” and that a pilot program should be established immediately leading to ordination of women in 1975.⁷

However, by the onset of the 1980s the conversation took a radical turn. The same powers that led the way towards women's ordination joined the movement against it. These were conservative Adventists who consistently maintained the only method of interpretation accepted by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Why, then, did they go back to the same Bible with the same conservative approach and come back with arguments to oppose the ordination of women? There had to be something else at work here.

Careful observation of the titles of two opposing arguments by the same author who opened the Camp Mohaven Document demonstrates at

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face value how the conversation about women's ordination shifted. The opening paper of the Camp Mohaven Document by Gerhard Hasel



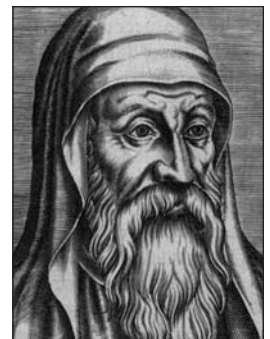
(left), then dean of the SDA Theological Seminary at Andrews University and one of Adventism's most respected scholars, is titled "Man and Woman in Genesis 1–3." The article makes a compelling

argument for gender mutuality. In 1988 and 1999 respectively, the same author's papers stridently opposing women's ordination carry the titles "Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics, and the Role of Women,"⁸ and "Biblical Authority and Feminist Interpretation."⁹ These papers display a progressive shift of concerns from the need for a gender-balanced ministry to interpretive methodology to the specific concern over the feminist threat. Indeed, two popular books against women's ordination published in 1994 and 1995 in anticipation of the Utrecht General Conference session took incisive aim at the feminist agenda and the interpretive methodology associated with it.¹⁰

Liberal modernity, biblical interpretation, and Seventh-day Adventist identity

The official biblical interpretive stance of the Seventh-day Adventist Church does not of necessity place it in opposition to women's ordination, and the Camp Mohaven Document demonstrates that. However, in any struggle it is the most socio-politically vulnerable that becomes the scapegoat. The issue of women's ordination stood in the middle of a fight to protect the church against a major icon of liberal religion, namely higher criticism, also called the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation. A closer look at the competing approaches to Scripture as they appear in the debate is helpful in understanding the deeper issue beneath this surface issue of women's ordination.

Inerrancy The Seventh-day Adventist approach to Scripture places it among that group of Christian denominations called "biblically inerrant denominations."¹¹ The term inerrant or inerrancy often brings to mind ideas of verbal inspiration—God speaks directly to the authors of the Bible and therefore it can have no error. If God speaks, then the text is ahistorical and thus must be applied literally without regard to socio-historical context. This is the original use of the term inerrancy and this use is rooted in fundamentalism. This, however, is not the meaning of the term "biblically inerrant" as it refers to Seventh-day Adventism and many other Protestant denominations. This term refers "more broadly to those denominations with an intellectual commitment to the basic consistency and authority of the Bible."¹² This principle of inerrancy operates on two basic axioms. The first is that the Bible is the authoritative source of every aspect of human life. The second asserts that it can contain no internal contradictions. Thus in the face of ambiguity, the interpreter wrestles to find meaning based on the assumption that there is internal harmony. This approach to Scripture emerges from the historical-grammatical method of biblical interpretation—the formal Protestant interpretive methodology. The historical-grammatical method arose out of the theological/political conflict of the Reformation. The purpose of this method was to arrive at the fully intended meaning of the text's author by a study of the text's language along with its literary, historical and cultural contexts. While it presupposes that the text is the work of the Holy Spirit, its account of the historical context and the grammatical choices which the author makes is similar to a valid approach to literature. Thus when the Protestant reformers discouraged a move beyond the text to discover the meaning,¹³ what they were concerned about was the imposition of meaning in the allegorical



method used by Origen (*opposite, below*).¹⁴ The allegorical method was highly subjective, and therefore gave the text no fixed meaning. This invested the church with the exclusive authority to determine the meaning of a given text. Theologically it was intended to discover the real meaning of Scripture and politically it was intended to take power from the church to determine what the Scripture means. However, many have distorted the well-meaning assumptions of the historical-critical method by subscribing to verbal inspiration and by persistent use of proof text—i.e., matching text with text without regard for the context of each of those texts. The historical-critical method is an inerrantist approach, committed to the authority and consistency of the Bible. Its original aim was to find out what the author really meant. It is in this sense that many Protestant denominations carry the label “biblically inerrant.”

As it relates to women’s ordination, biblically inerrant denominations stand against sacramental denominations. Besides Roman



Catholicism, this latter group also includes Episcopalian, Eastern Orthodox, and to a lesser extent, Lutheran churches (*left, Martin Luther*). In these denominations, those who oppose women’s ordination

argue that for the sacramental act of changing bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ to be efficacious, the agent must resemble Christ. Maleness (unmarried male in the case of Roman Catholicism) is the essential factor in that representation. On the other hand, biblically inerrant denominations commit to the Word rather than to the sacrament. For these, the sacrament has been consummated in the sacrifice of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. Of such, the ministry is prophetic mediation of the Word, rather than priestly mediation of the sacrament. This makes it possible for Seventh-day Adventism



to affirm a woman—Ellen G. White (*left*)—as its greatest source of authority outside of Scripture. Biblically inerrant denominations are therefore less resistant¹⁵ to women’s ordination. Why then is

Seventh-day Adventism among those that continue to resist women’s ordination? A look at the church’s relationship with inerrancy may take us a step closer to the answer.

Inerrancy and fundamentalism Again, this broad use of the term “inerrant” must be distinguished from its original use which is rooted in its alliance with fundamentalism. Fundamentalism carries with it a cultural symbolism of resistance to modernity. In order to carry forth its ideological agenda, fundamentalism tends to stress (to the point of distortion) the second axiom on which the Protestant principle operates, namely that the Bible can contain *no internal contradictions*. It overlooks *internal* thus stressing that it contains *no contradictions*. As such the approach tends to universalize *selected* practices in the world from which the Bible arose (such as male dominance) that reinforce the cultural status quo. Any attempt to contextualize these *selected* cultural practices is met with statements such as “God does not change.” The term *selected* indicates that not even fundamentalists are able to consistently universalize the cultural practices of biblical times. Indeed many tried to hold on to slavery and the flagrant racial discrimination and injustice that resulted from that, but that has proven too formidable a foe.

Seventh-day Adventism and fundamentalism

Seventh-day Adventism has succeeded thus far in its resistance to women’s ordination largely because of its alliance with the fundamentalist movement. This alliance has been forged by a few on behalf of the many who merely follow without fully knowing.

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As in the nineteenth century, by the beginning of the 1980s the Seventh-day Adventist Church was pulled into the fundamentalist movement within Protestantism. This movement defines itself in opposition to the world of liberal religions. Because gender equality is such a defining core of the modern liberal agenda, resisting



women's ordination became a way to symbolize anti-liberalism within the religious world. As author Mark Chaves (*left*) notes, as biblical inerrancy took on the symbolic weight of defining an anti-liberal Protestant

religious subculture, it became very difficult to combine inerrancy with support for women's ordination.¹⁶ This may explain why the Seventh-day Adventist Church (among other denominations) remains resistant to women's ordination since the onset of the conflict in the 1970s.¹⁷ A decided effort on the part of influential leaders in the denomination to find biblical reasons for ordaining women transformed into a political struggle occurring at the site of Scripture.

A minority within the Seventh-day Adventist theological academe grew to have so much power precisely because it aligns itself with the larger anti-liberal inerrantist world. It calls upon the power of the anti-liberal inerrantist movement to define and defend Seventh-day Adventist separatism and exclusive claims to truth.

Higher criticism

For some of the church's theologians and leaders, the higher-critical method of biblical interpretation poses a serious threat to the very identity and survival of Seventh-day Adventism as the true church of Bible prophecy.

Higher criticism refers to a method of literary analysis of the Bible to determine the texts' type, source, history, and original intent. At the most basic level, higher criticism does not assume that there is consistency in the Bible, or that the accounts are *necessarily* literal. In the classic sense,

it carries with it an anti-supernaturalist assumption. Like the historical-grammatical method, the historical-critical method analyzes the Bible as any other literary text, but without the assumption of supernaturalism. However, its basic anti-supernaturalist assumption needs not accompany any use of higher-critical tools. Indeed, scholars and church leaders have found its basic methods of investigating sources and analyzing content valuable not only in biblical understanding but also in contemporary historical research. Indeed, both methods run parallel up to the point where both agree that study of the original language, literary structure and historical background is important to understanding the Scriptures, and thus they are often indistinguishable.

Now here is an instance in which even a sanctified use of the higher-critical tool proves dangerous to Seventh-day Adventism. Let us take the case of the Genesis account of creation. A higher-critical analysis of the Genesis account of creation renders the story a myth (referring to the type of literature). The term "myth" in literary analysis does not mean "untrue." Rather, it means that there is an essential truth that the story conveys. The truth of the story is not in the details (which may be themselves symbolic rather than literal), but in the message that the story conveys. Myth in higher-critical methodology is a vehicle of truth. Thus the Genesis story from this interpretive standpoint is not a literal scientific or historical account of origins, but a theological thematic account. This is to say that the perfect act of creation by the Creator may be true, but the precise scientific "how" is not present in the story, and that such a scientific account was not the intent of the author.

It is quite clear, therefore, that higher-critical methodology tends to disrupt the basic dogmatic assumptions of Seventh-day Adventism. The denomination invests its defining doctrines, including the doctrine of the Seventh-day Sabbath, in an assumption of biblical authority and a literal interpretation of certain biblical accounts such as the literal six-day creation.

The problem of association

The nagging question remains: why should women's ordination become a casualty here when the major defenders before or at the heated 1995 General Conference session never used higher-critical methodology to defend it? Higher-critical methodology is nowhere to be found in the Camp Mohaven Document, *The Role of Women in the Church*. As Mark Chaves argues:

*...the strong association that we observe today between a denomination's commitment to biblical inerrancy and its official resistance to women's ordination cannot be explained entirely as a matter of intellectual consistency. Biblical inerrancy does not cause resistance to women's ordination as a matter of logical deduction. The association is very much a cultural association, and it begs for a sociological explanation.*¹⁸

As noted above, in both culture wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a major contender was the women's movement. Chaves argues that the rise of the women's movement changed the meaning of women's ordination and its "symbolic significance."¹⁹ For Seventh-day Adventists, the symbolism goes even deeper because major feminists and feminist sympathizers of the twentieth century used the tools of higher criticism to defend women's ordination and critique the patriarchal heritage of the Bible. Women's ordination consequently took on symbolic weight as the enemy of the denomination. It became a perceived threat to the authority of Scripture and the very identity of the church. Such perception is a matter of association—association first with liberalism, and second with higher criticism, the perceived archenemy of Seventh-day Adventism. The debate over women's ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is thus a cultural-ideological war between perceived liberal and conservative camps fighting over an issue that is really not the issue, and the Bible serves as weapon rather than a means of instruction.

The real battle

The resistance to higher criticism by major opponents of women's ordination did not necessarily begin with the women's movement. Rather, it coincided with a period of rigorous challenges to traditional Adventist beliefs and practices, chief of which are the foundational Sanctuary Doctrine,²⁰ the inspiration and authority of Ellen G. White²¹ and the literal six-day creation on which the doctrine of the Sabbath hangs. The cultural and intellectual climate of the 1960s served as a precursor to those challenges. The Association of Adventist Forums²² appears to be the representative body in Adventism that engaged the denomination in closer scrutiny of its beliefs and practices. In a statement regarding its formation, the Association of Adventist Forums states:

*During the uproar of the 1960s the younger generation questioned everything. It focused its attention on such major issues as the Vietnam War, civil rights, traditional morality, and ecology. Patriotism, rules, and values were no longer taken for granted. Seventh-day Adventist students were no exception. As more and more church members began to attend non-Adventist universities and colleges they applied critical thinking learned in their studies to other topics—including their church's beliefs and practices—that meant much to them.*²³

The church's initial response to the concerns regarding higher criticism came in the form of a symposium on biblical hermeneutics conducted by the BRI in 1974. This was only a year after the institute convened the Camp Mohaven Conference with the goal of women's ordination. A significant result of the symposium was a published document edited by BRI director Gordon Hyde titled *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*.²⁴ In the preface of this document, Hyde notes that while Seventh-day Adventists have been historically a "people of the Book" and have "accepted its authority in the tradition of the Protestant Reformation, holding to the principle of *sola scriptura* and allowing the scripture to be its own interpreter, "recent generations of the Church in

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their quest for advanced education have had increasing exposure to the presuppositions and methodologies that have challenged the Protestant principle.”²⁵ As the hermeneutical crisis mounted, a conference held in Rio de Janeiro in 1976 resulted in *Methods of Bible Study*, the church’s official statement on biblical interpretive methodology.

The issue of women’s ordination stood in direct crossfire of this intellectual conflict that continues to foment, and it has taken on symbolic weight in the minds of many as the enemy of the denomination. This explains why the debate over women’s ordination morphed into arguments about interpretive methodology. This is the context of Hasel’s regression and his resulting papers, “Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics, and the Role of Women” and “Biblical Authority and Feminist Interpretation.” The arguments over biblical interpretation result mostly from an anxiety over the survival of Seventh-day Adventism, and resistance to women’s ordination therefore became a symbol of denominational loyalty. Thus the very organ of the church, the Biblical Research Institute, which initiated and organized the push towards ordination of women, enabled the campaign against it as part of a larger effort to protect the church from liberalism and liberal religion. Women’s ordination was a tangible and winnable foe in a battle over hermeneutics that the church would not soon win. At the point that the most influential leaders of the denomination had the power to educate and lead the world constituency regarding women’s ordination, it turned around and used a largely uninformed constituency to push an agenda which was not the real agenda.

Summary and conclusion

In the effort to protect the church from liberal religion, the top leaders of the denomination abandoned a decided effort to lead the world church towards the most significant affirmation of gender equality—women’s ordination. Women’s ordination was not the denomina-

tion’s enemy, but it became the scapegoat in a monumental conflict that posed a mortal threat to Seventh-day Adventism as we know it. Is there a wrong here that the church must right? It may help to return to the starting point of the hermeneutical conflict to find out what really happened in the case of women’s ordination. ■

Olive Hemmings, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Religion at Washington Adventist University. She has been teaching in Seventh-day Adventist higher education since 1983. She is a member of the Columbia Union Conference clergy and has recently published *Sacred Texts and Social Conflict*, a case study of the women’s ordination debate.



Footnotes

1. This too was precisely the case in 1881 and Ellen White herself stood the risk of falling as a casualty in that war.
2. The BRI is the section of the world church responsible for providing the biblical perspective from which the denomination may approach major issues that arise.
3. Hasel, Gerhard, “Man and Woman in Genesis 1–3,” *The Role of Women in the Church* (Washington, D.C.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1984), 10–27.
4. Hyde, Gordon, “The Mohaven Council: Where it all began,” *Adventists Affirm*, Fall (1989), 43.
5. Ibid.
6. The position of an ordained local elder is a voluntary lay position unlike the ordained pastor who is employed by the denominations and has full clergy rights. The question of women’s ordination in this study refers to the granting of full clergy rights that entail full rights to congregational leadership.
7. Watts, Kit, “The Long and Winding Road for Adventist Women’s Ordination: 35 Years and Counting,” *Spectrum* 31:3 (Summer 2003), 56.
8. Hasel, Gerhard, unpublished manuscript prepared for the Commission on the Role of Women (March 1988).
9. “Biblical Authority and Feminist Interpretation,” *Adventist Affirm*, Fall (1989), 12–23.
10. See Holmes, Raymond C., *The Tip of an Iceberg: Biblical Authority, Biblical Interpretation, and the Ordination of Women in Ministry* (Wakefield, MI: Pointer Publications, 1994); and Koranteng-Pipim, Samuel, *Searching the Scrip-*

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tures: *Women's Ordination and the Call to Biblical Fidelity* (Berrien Springs, MI: *Adventists Affirm*, 1995).

11. Chaves, Mark, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 84.

12. Ibid.

13. Luther protests that there is nothing recondite in Scripture. He goes on to say, "many passages in Scripture are obscure and hard to elucidate, but that is due not to the exalted nature of the subject, but to our linguistic and grammatical ignorance; and it does not prevent in any way our knowing all the contents of the Scripture." See Dillenger, John, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 172.

14. Origen believed that only those with higher rational powers could understand obscure passages in Scripture. See "Homily XXVII on Numbers," *Origen*, trans. Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist Press).

15. Non-sacramental denominations began ordaining women in 1918. None of the sacramental denominations began ordaining women before 1970. (The American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church of America began to ordain women in 1970; and the Episcopal Church began the same in 1976.

16. Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, 102.

17. Chaves lists six other denominations beside Seventh-day Adventism in which the conflict regarding women's ordination arose in the 1970s. These include the Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the Mennonite Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is listed among the three denominations which remain resistant to women's ordination. The other two are the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. See *Ibid.*, 162–163.

18. Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, 92.

19. *Ibid.*, 10.

20. This major crisis resulted from the study of Desmond Ford in 1980. A major problem that Ford has with the doctrine is that there is no biblical basis for the "year-day principle" on which the doctrine recons 2,300 days in Daniel 8:14 to be 2,300 years. Ford's arguments reveal that the texts of Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6 that Adventists use to prove the year-day principle are taken out of context. He argues that 1.) the 2,300 evenings and mornings met their original fulfillment when Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the tem-

ple in Jerusalem. He however proposes the "apotelesmatic" principle as a solution to the damage this may cause to the doctrine. This principle assumes a two-fold application of prophesy, one primary and contextual, and one secondary. He therefore expresses his belief in the 1844 event that gave rise to Adventism as part of the divine providence. 2.) Based on a contextual interpretation of Hebrews 9, the high priest's ministry in the holy of holies symbolizes the whole period from the cross to the return of Christ, not a period that began in 1844. Thus he argues that the Adventist doctrine of an "investigative judgment" that began in 1844 is not biblical. (See Ford, Desmond, "Daniel 8:14 and the Day of Atonement," *Spectrum* 11:2 (Nov. 1980), 30–36.

21. See Rea, Walter, *The White Lie* (Turlock, CA: M&R Publications, 1982). The publication questioned the divine inspiration of Ellen White because of her alleged extensive plagiarism. The church drew upon higher critical methodology (source criticism) to respond to the allegations.

22. The Association of Adventist Forums is an umbrella organization of diverse discussion groups throughout the world—a result of the gathering of Seventh-day Adventist graduate students to discuss current issues affecting the church, and to closely examine the church's traditional beliefs and practices. While many Adventists believe this organization to be the "liberal" wing of the church, it has sought to avoid this label. In 1968 the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists officially endorsed the association in *Adventist Review*. The Journal of the Association of Adventist Forums is *Spectrum*. This journal provides the richest source of published information concerning the ethical, doctrinal, theological and ecclesiological issues that have affected the Seventh-day Adventist Church since the 1960s, and is an excellent reference for issues that have affected the church throughout its history.

23. See *Spectrum* online, accessed April 15, 2014, <http://www.spectrummagazine.org/aaf/index/html>.

24. Hyde, Gordon, ed., *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974).

25. *Ibid.*, iv.