

*Adventism and the Past:*  
**WOMEN AND  
LEADERSHIP**



**The Marketplace** | by Jeanne Lamar | watercolor

# “Quench not the Spirit” *Early Adventist Hermeneutics and Women’s Spiritual Leadership* | BY GINGER HANKS HARWOOD AND BEVERLY BEEM

The Seventh-day Adventist Church identifies itself with the tradition of bold Christians who have always endeavored to follow Jesus’ teachings. In many ways, the Sabbatarian Adventism that emerged as a remnant of the Millerite movement views itself as an extension of the Protestant Reformation, with its emphasis on Scripture and the faith that God provides ongoing spiritual guidance.

During Adventism’s earliest years, believers were at odds with their larger religious and social communities on a number of theological issues. They repudiated popular understandings of the millennium, the state of the dead, the Sabbath, and the place of women in the mission of the church. Even as Millerite women had defied convention by preaching, despite opposition, certain Sabbatarian Advent women braved public censure and evangelized publicly. In the March 7, 1871, edition of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, a short editorial comment appears with an advertisement for a monthly journal, *Woman and Her Work*. The editors noted, “We are not among those who would hedge up before woman any avenue of labor or usefulness. . . . Let woman work in public, and in private, in whatever position her varied capacities may render her efficient.”<sup>1</sup>

How, then, did Adventist pioneers, as people of the book, respond to women as spiritual leaders? Given their commitment to Scripture, what did they say about the commonly held conviction that “the” biblical stance was that women should be silent in the church? Prominent Adventist leader David Hewitt noted in an 1857 *Review* article titled “Let your Women keep Silence in the Churches” that “many sincere and honest souls have been very much perplexed respecting this declaration of the apostle Paul.”<sup>2</sup> How did they understand the Scriptures that were then, and are today, applied to limit the roles women may perform within the church community? As Adventist women were licensed to preach in the 19th century, and

Ellen White served in a public role of ministry and leadership, Adventists had to address the issue of women in ministry. The *Review*, as the community’s official voice, provides a significant guide as to how early Adventist leaders read and understood biblical guidance on this topic.

## Historic Adventist hermeneutics

The Adventists who eventually became the Seventh-day Adventist Church retained the characteristic Millerite regard for systematic study of Scripture even as their study widened beyond the topic of Christ’s return. They began the ambitious task of reevaluating what the Bible said on various topics, searching for truths that furthered their spiritual quest to “draw near to God.”<sup>3</sup> In preparation for life in the kingdom of God, they sought to purify their minds: to strip away the dogma, creeds, and social conventions that distorted their perception of God’s Word. For them, the question was not only a matter of what the Bible said but also how to understand what it meant in their time and place. The meaning of gender for religious life provides an excellent case study on how early Adventists grappled with biblical texts and applied them to their own context.

As William Miller expounded his beliefs concerning the Second Advent, he modeled a process for biblical study and exploration. His method contained several points eventually adopted by the Seventh-day Adventist Church: (1) lay aside preconceptions concerning meaning of a text or biblical teaching on a particular subject; (2) compare scripture to scripture; (3) intentionally pursue a topic in a regular and methodical manner; (4) do word study; and (5) harmonize all collateral texts. The role of reason was central. His method rejected the absolutist literalism that comes from looking only at the surface meaning of any particular text. In Miller’s model, the intellect was employed to judge evidence, test logic, and reach conclusions.

## “Despise not prophesying”

In their approach to Bible study, the Advent community embodied Paul’s advice to earlier Christians awaiting Christ’s return: “Quench not the Spirit; despise not prophesying. Prove all things. Hold fast that which is good.”<sup>4</sup> The process of discernment required both humility and faith that God would increase understanding. The hermeneutic required the recognition of individual spiritual freedom and responsibility, respect and tolerance for others’ views, and willingness to privilege study over tradition or creed.

Respect for the Holy Spirit’s leading mandated a spirit of continued openness and a willingness to abandon previously held positions when they came into conflict with new evidence. The emphasis on honest and open inquiry yielded the concept of “progressive revelation”: the idea that God would impress believers as they studied together to better understand Scripture. The pioneers believed that both the corporate church community and individual believers must stay engaged in a quest for truth. Congregants were seen as active participants rather than passive recipients of traditions and predetermined “truth” supplied by religious leaders.

The search for truth included wrestling with questions of application, as application is the point of interpretation. James White observed that discerning God’s revealed will was more than simply following a list of biblical dos and don’ts. When R. F. Cottrell wrote a letter to the *Review* decrying the danger of becoming Babylon, claiming that the church should not be taking a name and owning property because there were no instructions to do so in the New Testament, James White responded, “In all this where is the proof that it is wrong to take those steps necessary to legally hold church property? Where are the strong reasons? Where are the plain texts from the Book?” White extended his reply to the question, answering unapologetically: there is no such text for that or many of the other practices that Adventists have used to spread the gospel, including publishing the

*Review* or using a printing press. He rested his defense on Jesus’ command to “let your light so shine before men,” but he [Jesus] “does not give all the particulars how this shall be done. The church is left to move forward in the great work, praying for divine guidance, acting upon the most efficient plans for its accomplishment.” White then proposed a general rule for determining the right course of action: “All means which, according to sound judgment, will advance the cause of truth, and are not forbidden by plain scripture declarations, should be employed.”<sup>5</sup> This was the principle the pioneers applied to the question of discipleship and women’s responsibility to exercise their gifts of leadership: it was not forbidden by Scripture, and it advanced the gospel work.

Early Adventist leaders utilized the entire Scripture to illuminate their stance on women as disciples, not just those passages that addressed women. They saw the gospel commission as inclusive and binding: every disciple was needed to carry the last warning to a perishing world. The belief that they were living in the last days brought urgency to the task, and they were convicted that Joel’s prophecy, “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Joel 2:28, NKJV), applied directly to them.

The promise of the Father to bestow the gifts of the Holy Spirit on both sons and daughters became an essential component of the early Adventist vision of the church and proof that they were God’s last-day people. Though their numbers and financial resources were few, they trusted that they could accomplish their task by utilizing the gifts of the Spirit, particularly the gift of prophecy. This necessary gift was poured out on the disciples without regard to status or gender, simply according to the will of the Spirit. It is significant to note that they repeatedly defined the gift of prophecy as speaking to the church for “edification and exhortation and comfort” (1 Cor. 14:3, NKJV).

Grave responsibility rested on the church to use and to honor the spiritual gifts that God

**Certain**

**Sabbatarian**

**Advent women**

**braved public**

**censure**

**and evangelized**

**publicly.**

provided: to neglect these gifts risked their withdrawal. James White located the resistance to women's gifts in personal prejudice ("they do not like to hear the Marys preach a risen or coming Saviour"<sup>6</sup>), while other noteworthies, such as B. F. Robbins, pinpointed the problem as the "defective" teaching of the churches to which they previously belonged.<sup>7</sup> Adventists concluded that even without specific scriptural instruction to recognize women's spiritual leadership, an analysis of the message of the gospel and the prophecies concerning the last days provided sufficient warrant for the endorsement of women's spiritual leadership when it was accompanied by clear signs of God's Spirit. To fail to do so would be to despise the good gifts God was sending and to quench the presence of the Holy Spirit among them.

### Dealing with the Pauline texts

As time tarried, Adventists needed to explain their practice of inclusive ministry to converts who had not been part of the Millerite movement. As believers joined, questions concerning the propriety of women spiritual leaders increased, as most were recruited from religious groups that taught that Paul commanded women's silence.<sup>8</sup> The *Review* received an ever-increasing number of inquiries: what about Paul? They were a people of the book, so how did their inclusive ministry harmonize with particular Bible statements?

Women's leadership in the religious context defied social mores and was generally assumed to be contrary to Scripture. Adventist leaders used Miller's methods of biblical interpretation to address the topic, exegeting the Pauline verses most frequently cited as obstacles to women's full participation. David Hewitt's article in 1857 summarized both the questions of readers and the Adventist position. Hewitt invited readers to move their understanding from that of relying on isolated texts to considering the larger context of Scripture. He stated:

*Many sincere and honest souls have been very much perplexed respecting this declaration of the apostle Paul. Many have inferred from this that women professing godliness should keep silent and not speak in prayer and social meetings for religious worship. But the candid reader of the sacred pages will find other declarations of the same apostle that must be brought to harmonize with this in order to get a clear understanding of the Apostle's meaning in 1 Cor. xiv.<sup>9</sup>*

Hewitt's article was one of 15 major *Review and Herald* articles in the last half of the 19th century designed to help individuals resolve the tension between specific Pauline admonitions and the church practice of licensing women as preachers and evangelists.<sup>10</sup>

The need to harmonize Adventist ministry practices for newcomers led church leaders to publish some of their clearest and most explicit examples of how to approach biblical interpretation. Each of these major articles, as well as numerous lesser articles, utilized established Adventist hermeneutics to defend women's spiritual leadership. The various articles enjoined readers to set aside their preconceived ideas and study the issue carefully, remembering that their conclusion needed to "harmonize with both revelation and reason."

Various authors acknowledged that the most difficult parts of the hermeneutical process were to put aside personal prejudice and also the expectation that scriptural meaning was transparent without study. James White's article, "Paul Says So,"<sup>11</sup> provides an example of an appeal to push beyond facile assumptions: he asked the reader to examine what he or she thought they knew about Paul's teaching on women and the church. He queried the reader as to "what is it that Paul actually says?" The premise of his article was that Christ's followers needed to have answers that were based on careful study. This required the use of scholarly tools to investigate the topic, a review of the Pauline verses in their social and historical context, comparison with Paul's other writings on the same and related subjects, consideration of the text in its context (the meaning of the entire passage and the book), and Paul's general teachings and practice. Additionally, the interpretation of the verses studied needed to be congruent with the rest of scriptural teaching.

In short, a biblical answer on any topic demanded far more than accepting the meaning of a text "just as it reads." Adventists were expected to be familiar with basic tools for biblical study, such as commentaries and concordances. Scholarly works were consulted to provide additional information where the original meaning of a passage was obscured by translation choice, alternative renderings, or cultural and textual contexts. Complex questions were sometimes referred to J. N. Andrews, a scholar who could read the Bible in seven languages. Adventist leaders did not hesitate to use scholarly resources and cite them for the light they shed on biblical texts.

Isolated verses, even several of them combined, were not accepted as a solid basis for establishing a position

on questions of doctrine or practice. The process demanded more than a compilation. Hewitt explained the dangers of the simple proof-text approach:

*It is a custom with all Bible students to find all the important texts that bear on any one subject, and compare them together until they come to a satisfactory understanding of what the inspired penman means. No one should found a theory on one single isolated passage, for this mode of proving things has produced many discordant theories in the world.<sup>12</sup>*

Nineteenth-century Adventist leaders maintained that a position on a topic (including women's leadership) had to be based on all the information on the subject from the entire Bible. Even then, before a verse could be vetted as speaking to or definitive of an issue, it had to be examined in the flow of the larger argument in the passage and connected with the author's intent. Apparent meaning was compared with other statements a biblical author had made on the same point or related issues. Assuming authorial consistency, they insisted that everything an author said must be reviewed and "harmonized" with the author's overall teachings. They felt the responsibility to "harmonize" apparently conflicting texts to find their consistency and obtain fuller understanding of the Word. Failure to wrestle with "problematic" texts would result in the "discordant theories" that Hewitt warned against.

In this case, they insisted that serious study had to place Paul's counsels on women's public speaking alongside the information given on his recorded practice as he spread the gospel and commended women as co-workers. I. Fetterhoof, in a detailed article entitled "Women Laboring in Public," asked,

*What did those women do, of whom Paul said that they labored with him in the gospel? How could they have labored with him in the gospel, if they did not join in the same work that he was engaged in, that is, urging the people to leave their sins, and receive Christ?<sup>13</sup>*

Fetterhoof insisted, "We learn from this that Christian women, as well as men, labored in the ministry of the word." This ministry of the word was the "duty of the preacher, to teach, exhort, edify, and comfort," the same descriptors used to define the gift of prophecy. Clearly Paul's command to keep silent did not apply to the teaching and preaching ministry of the church. "Would Paul contradict himself thus?" he asks, and then answers, "No."<sup>14</sup>

Where apparent discrepancies between texts surfaced, the cultural contexts of the verses were considered to determine if certain instructions were location or situation specific. Early Adventist leaders incorporated the investigation of the cultural context as a necessary step in understanding the Pauline verses and used contextual arguments to explain the biblical soundness of women's spiritual leadership. One clear example of this practice appeared in an 1879 article, "May Women Speak in Meeting?" where J. N. Andrews explained the Corinthian text used against women's public speaking, asserting vigorously that the text "can have no such application." He demonstrated that the careful scrutiny of both letters to the Corinthians established that the counsel was given to address the "state of great disorder" in the Corinthian church, and thus was situation specific. "So that what the apostle says to women in such a church as this, and in such a state of things, is not to be taken as directions to all Christian women in other churches and in other times, when and where such disorders do not exist."<sup>15</sup> The *Review* also published other articles addressing the contextual specificity of Paul's statements.<sup>16</sup>

Andrews harmonized "restrictive" verses with other statements Paul made concerning women in the worship context. He noted that in 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul instructed women how to dress when praying and prophesying, which he presented as "positive proof" that Paul did not countermand women's public work. He cited Paul's definition of prophecy, "He that propheseth speaketh unto men, to edification, exhorta-

**James White  
observed  
that discerning  
God's revealed  
will was more  
than simply  
following a list  
of biblical dos  
and don'ts.**

tion, and comfort" (1 Cor. 14:3, KJV) and concluded, "It was not a shame for women to do this work. Therefore Paul did not refer to such acts when he said, 'It is a shame for women to speak in the church.'"<sup>17</sup> Andrews was not alone in this effort: several authors asked if Paul were inconsistent in either his thought or the application of his teachings to his practice ("Does Paul contradict Paul?").<sup>18</sup> As it could not be assumed that Paul contradicted himself, the reader had to read Paul's instructions as nuanced by the whole picture: women's worship leadership did not violate the orderly speech that Paul sought for the church. Nor did it violate Paul's command that women not usurp authority over men (another text used to silence women), as study showed the instruction to refer to disruptive "loquacity, impertinence, arrogance" that worked against gospel order, "but that does not prove it improper to speak in a proper manner."<sup>19</sup>

After identifying an author's particular stance on a topic, that view was then compared with the guidance offered by other biblical writers. Statements from one author could not be privileged to support a position that contradicted the general trend of the biblical writings. The tentative conclusion from the study of biblical statements had to be scrutinized for consistency with the picture of God's redemptive plan, the records of his past actions, and promises for "the last days." The articles frequently cited examples of women's leadership roles throughout Scripture as evidence that God chose women to lead his people consistently throughout salvation history. After a thorough review of women's effective witness in Scripture, S. C. Welcome concluded,

*Seeing that females were admitted to the high office of prophecy under the old dispensation, and in the promise of the more general effusion of this gift, the daughters and handmaidens were equally included with the other sex, that they were among the first messengers of the gospel, and after the churches were formed and settled received particular instruction how to conduct themselves in the church, in exercise of their gifts, it is strange that the privilege should have ever been called in question.<sup>20</sup>*

Finally, numerous articles noted the negative effect of restricting the gifts women could exercise in church. Appeals were made to stimulate readers to examine the ways these restrictions hindered both the functioning and spiritual development of God's people. In his 1860 article, S. C. Welcome compared this enforced silence to

bondage, an image that created a strong response in the paper's predominately Northern readers. Adventists were abolitionists and understood slavery to be unbiblical, immoral, and harmful to all parties involved. His conclusion: the restrictive texts "had no relation to the exercise of a gift which God had given them [women] to use for the advancement of his cause." He observed that select women have the same God-given abilities as do men to preach the gospel, and appealed to the church to

*let no stumbling-block be thrown in their way, but let them fill the place that God calls them to fill, let them not be bound down to silence by church rules, but let their tongues speak forth the praises of God, and let them point sinners to the Lamb of God, and grieve not the holy Spirit by silence in the congregation.<sup>21</sup>*

## Hold fast to the good: The future of Adventism

A review of the writings of the church founders adds clarity concerning the roots and practices of our church: their concerns, intentions, and understandings need to be recognized. We do well to "hold fast to that which is good" in the theological and practical legacy left for us. The positions they adopted were the result of careful study and prayerful dialog. When we disregard their wisdom, we discard our own rich heritage.

The early expositions on women in ministry remain helpful as we formulate our response to the same questions that emerge today from those from other religious traditions, especially so where traditional social contexts have limited women's public and religious roles. As we review our predecessors' conclusions, however, we must carefully distinguish their issues from our own. Each historic era produces its own questions out of its own challenges and context. The 19th-century discussion of women's spiritual leadership centered on the propriety of women speaking publicly, as it was counter-cultural. The writings in the *Review* addressed the questions as they were shaped during that period. This means that early Adventist practices cannot be used as the final answer for questions they were not designed to address.

This leaves many with two significant questions: Do our church founders have useful counsel for us today as we meet the challenges of a diverse, worldwide church? Is the work that Adventist pioneers did on the issue of

women in ministry, even though the principle of progressive revelation demands that we scrutinize their answers and move beyond them where further “light” has emerged, applicable to our situation today?

The answer to these questions is affirmative for at least three reasons: (1) the Pauline passages that troubled Adventist converts earlier still trouble many today. The work our founders did on the topic can clear up much confusion on Paul’s view of women and spiritual leadership; (2) the misunderstanding of Paul’s writings also complicates our 21st-century question: is it proper (“permitted”) for the church to ordain women in ministry? Until individuals are familiar with the trajectory our founders set and their advocacy for women in ministry, the discussion of this question will create great angst for those who wish to be faithful to Scripture and our heritage and not compromise with “secular” influences on the church; and (3) the Adventist heritage is as much in the method of procedure as in the final “answer” produced by the deliberations. The careful hermeneutic used by the Adventist pioneers prevented a method of reading Scripture that settled for wooden literalism and promoted engaged, careful study. Early Adventists did not pretend to fully comprehend every passage in Scripture or the changes that might yet be asked of them as they continued their pilgrimage, but they had faith that God would continue to lead them into further truth that would change the way they understood and lived their lives. Perhaps this faith was the most significant legacy that they left for their spiritual heirs. Whether or not we hold fast to that heritage may be the most critical element in the shaping of the future of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. ■

**Ginger Hanks Harwood** resides in Chico, California, where she



researches and writes in the fields of Adventist history and Christian ethics. She is in the process of retiring from teaching religious and theological studies at the H. M. S. Richards Divinity School at La Sierra University.

**Beverly Beem** is a professor of English at Walla Walla University, with a



specialty in Renaissance literature and classes in medieval, classical, and biblical literature. She has been researching and writing in biblical narrative and early Adventist spirituality. She is retiring in 2015 after 47 years of teaching.

The authors wish to thank the Faculty Grants Committee of Walla Walla University and the H. M. S. Richards Divinity School of La Sierra University for their support.

## References

1. “Woman and Her Work,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 7, 1871, 96.
2. D[avid] Hewitt, “‘Let your Women keep Silence in the Churches,’ ” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 15, 1857, 190.
3. “Drawing Near to God,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 22, 1857, 195.
4. 1 Thess. 5:19–21, NKJV. See James White, “Unity and Gifts of the Church. No. 4,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 7, 1858, 68, 69.
5. James White, “‘Making Us a Name,’ ” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 26, 1860, 180–82.
6. James White, “Paul Says So,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 10, 1857, 152.
7. B. F. Robbins, “To the Female Disciples in the Third Angel’s Message,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 8, 1859, 21, 22.
8. Sarah A. Hallock, “A Query.—Bro. Smith,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 12, 1860, 64.
9. Hewitt, “‘Let your Women keep Silence in the Churches.’ ”
10. For an analysis of all these articles, see Beverly Beem and Ginger Hanks Harwood, “‘Your Daughters Shall Prophesy’: James White, Uriah Smith, and the ‘Triumphant Vindication of the Right of the Sisters’ to Preach,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 41–58; and Ginger Hanks Harwood and Beverly Beem, “‘It Was Mary that First Preached a Risen Jesus’: Early Seventh-day Adventist Answers to Objections to Women as Public Spiritual Leaders,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 45, no. 2 (Autumn 2007): 221–45.
11. White, “Paul Says So.”
12. Hewitt, “‘Let your Women keep Silence in the Churches.’ ”
13. I. Fetterhoof, “Women laboring in Public,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 8, 1871, 58.
14. *Ibid.*, 59.
15. J. N. A[ndrews], “May Women Speak in Meeting?” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 2, 1879, 4.
16. An anonymous article published in 1871 begins, “Among some Christian sects it is considered disorderly for women to speak or pray in a public assembly. Of course they quote 1 Cor. 14:34, 35, as deciding the case.” It concludes that “nothing is proved by this in regard to what is proper in orderly, sober assemblies.” “Shall Women Speak in the Church?” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 14, 1871, 99. The piece is reprinted from the Free Will Baptist journal, *Morning Star*.
17. J. N. A[ndrews], “May Women Speak in Meeting?”
18. “On Keeping Silence,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 16, 1858, 27.
19. Adventists understood instructions on decorum to be contextual. “Shall Women Speak in the Church?” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 14, 1871, 99.
20. S. C. Welcome, “Shall the Women Keep Silence in the Churches?” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 23, 1860, 110.
21. *Ibid.*