

# When President Wilson Changed His Mind About Policy for Women

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Dr. Margaret Caro | dentist

The role of women in public life has changed slowly but remarkably over recent generations. In past times, the “proper” role for women was considered to be confinement to the home—the domestic sphere. Girls were not permitted to be educated or to work beyond the home. A woman’s identity was linked exclusively to a husband, father, or brothers. But because of rampant abuses and injustices under this patriarchal subordination system, laws were eventually changed to allow women to hold property, sign documents for themselves, and have the same right as their husbands to conclude a failed marriage. Eventually they were able to seek an education.

In the English-speaking part of the world, the state of affairs began to change slowly during the Georgian era (1714–1837), with social reformers like Hannah More (1745–1833), Elizabeth Fry (1780–1845) and Florence Nightingale (1820–1910) breaking out of the traditional mold.

The legal and social reforms were accompanied by expanding opportunities for women in community activities outside the home, in roles like teaching and welfare endeavors for the poor. Then, as the great Protestant world missionary movement expanded during the 1800s, the recruitment of

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women into public work in overseas missions became increasingly important. By 1900, for example, there were more single women and missionary wives on formal overseas appointment for the Church Missionary Society than there were men.<sup>1</sup> From the mid-19th century on, women also slowly found their way into higher education and the professions like pharmacy, dentistry, medicine, law, and academics. These had all been exclusively male preserves.

The wider involvement of women in all of these endeavors was resisted by good conservative church people on the basis that it was not right. Scripture had assigned a different place to women that did not allow their public participation in either the church or wider society. But others read the same Scripture and perceived that the gospel of Jesus removed distinctions in worship and gender barriers and to public service in the kingdom of God. Participation no longer required that a woman first be either attached to or represented by a male. In this regard there is “neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female” (Gal. 3:28, NIV). In fact, the gospel necessitated the welcome of women into the wider public sphere of God’s work with their spirit-given gifts and abilities and their distinctive perspectives.

These social reforms, informed by reflection on the gospel, eventually extended in our modern democracies to allowing women, on an equal basis with men, to participate in choosing national and local leaders. This granting of voting rights to women has been a fairly recent development. It too was resisted by good church people, who thought Scripture did not permit such a role to women. Other good church people, however, saw things differently, and today women in most societies are able to participate in the election of their civic leaders.

Women’s right to vote is of special interest because that social reform occurred during a critical time in Adventist history. Dramatic civic developments were achieved in particular while Ellen White was working in Australia and New Zealand. Reflection on the unfolding

of the women’s suffrage movement and Ellen White’s encounter with it may provide insights for the Adventist Church today that may help us work our way through current decisions concerning the nature of the public role of women in ministry.

Ellen White herself, of course, had a very public role in the development of the Adventist Church. Was this simply because the church recognized in her a unique, distinctive prophetic voice that set her apart from all others and allowed her to go against the social expectations of her time? Or was it rather that changes already taking place in society gave her space to exercise her unique gift, and that her call, and the church’s recognition of it, could become a model for others in public ministry?

For the most part, Ellen White’s own stance toward engaging her culture fitted into the category that H. Richard Neibuhr describes as “‘Christ-against-culture.’”<sup>2</sup> Adventists, she taught, were not to participate in the evil world but to withdraw from it, distinguishing themselves from it in attitudes and by the adoption of distinctive ascetic lifestyle practices. Her cataclysmic, apocalyptic millenarianism so suffused her own life and thought and that of the movement she nurtured that any effort for civil and social reform was viewed as a waste of time and resources. Adventists’ preoccupation with apocalyptic imminence focused their attention almost totally on personal regeneration as the ultimate solution to the ills and injustices of society, for such regeneration would presage the return of Christ. It was much better than seeking any legislative reforms that, no matter how well framed, could not change human hearts.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, legislative effort to reform society and achieve a moral order would risk compromising church-state separation. Adventists were hypersensitive about avoiding anything that might be perceived as compromising individual liberty and the ability to keep the Sabbath.

In two areas, a restrained engagement with the ideals and activities of social reform movements could be undertaken with some safety:

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temperance and women's rights. While Ellen White herself did not engage directly or formally with the organizational activities of these movements, her encounter with them and her implicit support of them while she was in the South Pacific was at much closer quarters than church members today might assume. The encounter is instructive.

## Encountering temperance and women's voting rights in New Zealand

When Ellen White went to assist in the establishing of the Adventist Church in Australia and New Zealand in 1891, she arrived at a significant time in the social development of these countries. We do not know a lot about Ellen White's private attitude to the question of whether women should be allowed to vote, but she certainly knew about it. She gave distinctive and rather provocative advice to Adventist church leaders in the mid-1890s about including women in public ministry, and about paying them fair wages, which was surprisingly radical for the Adventist Church and even for her era. It is counsel more easily understood against the background of her personal experience and in the context of the needs of the church in Australia and New Zealand at the time.

Adventist work was established in Australia and New Zealand with the arrival of American missionaries in 1885. In the same year, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) movement made its way to New Zealand as the result of the efforts of Baptist American WCTU missionary Mary Leavitt. By the next year, 1886, Adventists had established two churches in New Zealand. The WCTU, on the other hand, had established 15 branches around the colony. It became the first national women's organization and found in the deeply religious Kate Sheppard of Christchurch, a New Zealander of Congregational persuasion, a highly effective and respected advocate and organizer.<sup>4</sup> The movement believed in the vital importance of the Christian home and in the need for improving the welfare of women and children. It asserted that the cause of temperance was critical to improving the welfare of families because it was a way of curbing the curse of alcohol abuse. During its first year the WCTU also developed the conviction that women should be allowed to vote for political leaders, by which means a better quality of politician would be elected. The two causes were closely linked.

During the next seven years in New Zealand, the WCTU, and other groups it inspired, worked relentlessly

to educate the public and to promote women's welfare by pressing for both liquor law reform and for extending to women the right to vote in national elections. It was intensive work—convening temperance lectures and conventions all around the country and submitting an increasing number of petitions to parliament. In 1893, the WCTU presented a total of 13 petitions inscribed with almost 32,000 signatures. The women captured headlines when they wheeled the massive pile of documents into parliament in a wheelbarrow.<sup>5</sup> That was the year Ellen White spent 10 months in New Zealand. During the entire year, women's suffrage issues and temperance were the great social issues of the time, constantly in the news and on everyone's lips.

Ellen White arrived in New Zealand on February 8, 1893, and quickly became involved in public evangelistic meetings in Auckland and then further north in Kaeo. After a six-week stay in the north, she stayed for a month in the large, comfortable home of Dr. Margaret Caro, a dentist who, although 21 years her junior, soon became a very close friend. Ellen White referred to her a decade later as "a precious friend and helper."<sup>6</sup>

Margaret Caro, a distinctive New Zealander whom Ellen White described as a "tall queenly looking woman,"<sup>7</sup> was the daughter of Scottish Presbyterian immigrants. Born in 1848 in Richmond, she was educated in a select school for young women. In 1864 Margaret married Jacob Selig Caro, a Polish Jew who had trained as a physician in Berlin, Germany and then in Melbourne. Following their marriage, the couple had worked in a number of places in New Zealand's south island before finally settling in Napier, where Margaret, having trained as a dentist (it seems, under her husband's tutelage), set up her own practice and soon became widely respected for her dental skills. In 1881 she was the first and only woman dentist to be listed on the newly established government register of dentists. In 1890 she was the only woman to attend the first conference of the New Zealand Dental Association held in Dunedin. As a professional woman, she worked throughout her married life, succeeded financially against the odds, and made her mark in a male-dominated occupation.

Margaret Caro had developed a quiet but strong reputation as a social reformer. She actively supported women's suffrage and the work of the WCTU, and later she joined other progressive women's reform organizations such as the National Council of Women of New Zealand, where she advocated her views on diet.<sup>8</sup> Margaret Caro had become

an Adventist in 1888 when she attended evangelistic meetings conducted by A. G. Daniells in Napier. During Ellen White's time in New Zealand, Dr. Caro was also granted a ministerial license by the New Zealand Conference, authorizing the exercise of her pastoral gifts and her involvement in public preaching and ministry.<sup>9</sup> Ellen White noted that "she speaks to the people, is intelligent and [is in] every way capable."<sup>10</sup>

Following her April 1893 stay with Margaret Caro, Ellen White travelled to Wellington, the nation's capital. With Elder George B. Starr she helped launch an evangelistic campaign. A classified advertisement announced that "Mrs. Ellen G. White of California USA" would speak on "Jesus Christ and Temperance Reform."<sup>11</sup> The topic of temperance, large in the public mind, was code language for liquor reform. As a highly charged political topic being debated hotly around the entire country, the theme was tied up in one piece with the issue of women's suffrage. Nationwide agitation soon led to the introduction of two highly contentious bills into parliament that would be debated for weeks, finally receiving passage in September 1893. One bill was for the radical reform of liquor laws and the other for extending the vote to women. In her evangelistic endeavor Ellen White had indeed capitalized on a live current issue. Her title would have been understood implicitly in the public mind as being in favor of the liquor reform legislation and its companion legislation, the bill for women's suffrage. But these initial evangelistic meetings in Wellington, in spite of the bold temperance launching platform, were not successful. There was too much else going on that occupied the interest of Wellingtonians.

The windy and wet weather for which the city is notorious set in during Ellen White's winter stay in the capital. The women's franchise issue remained a hot topic, however. On July 4 the Electoral Reform bill came before the House of Representatives for its second reading and was sent off to committee hearings. But on this date Ellen White was distracted by another concern—her teeth had decayed so badly that they were causing her unbearable pain. She made arrangements to have her dentist friend come to her apartment not far from the parliament building on July 5. Dr. Caro traveled ten uncomfortable hours by train to Wellington to attend to her prophet patient. In a chair in the kitchen, the only professionally licensed woman dentist in New Zealand extracted eight teeth from Ellen White's jaws—without any aid of chloroform. (Ellen

White did not react well to pain relievers.) At the end of the ordeal, the exhausted women comforted each other. Ellen White was glad that Margaret Caro was a "thorough master of her business." She noted that "the muscles of her arms are like steel. She can go through all the disagreeable performances firm and composed," although on this occasion Ellen White knew that the doctor herself was distressed that she had to cause her patient so much pain.<sup>12</sup>

The women's suffrage bill finally received passage in September 1893. In early October, just two weeks after that momentous parliamentary victory, the highly contentious liquor bill received its final reading and was signed into law. These two related events caused a national stir. The temperance people throughout the colony were jubilant.<sup>13</sup> Even the Adventist Church paper in Australia, the *Bible Echo*, although it chose not to report the momentous women's suffrage bill, noted in its columns that the "New Zealand Legislative Council has passed a drastic Liquor Bill."<sup>14</sup>

Local newspapers heralded the voting rights bill as "the most important Parliamentary event in the history of New Zealand."<sup>15</sup> The bill had the effect of "practically doubling the electorates," and was considered an event of "the most portentous import."<sup>16</sup> The editor of the capital's *Evening Post* hoped that now "there will be a higher class of men in the Parliament of the colony, and more just and equitable laws will be passed there, when women have a voice in the choice of legislators."<sup>17</sup> It was also a historic day for the world community. New Zealand had laid down a new path, and many other nations would follow.

On October 10 Ellen White travelled to the city of Gisborne to again assist in evangelistic meetings. The traditional approach of starting with an exposition of Daniel 2 was not working well, and so the leadership decided that Ellen White would speak on temperance because, as she herself reported, this was "a living question here at this time."<sup>18</sup> The Liquor Bill having just been passed, now each local electoral district was beginning to grapple with the issues of how to implement it.

Hundreds of townspeople attended, among them the mayor, the local police sergeant, and "some of the first people of Gisborne." Ellen White was delighted. The next Sunday afternoon they ran a similar meeting, and it too was "a decided success." Prejudice had been broken down, and the meetings soon moved into the local theater and then the church. Local Adventists saw the meetings "as

the best advertisement of our people they have ever had in Gisborne."<sup>19</sup> The church had witnessed a breakthrough. And at least partially, the women's franchise issue and the national temperance debates had made it possible.

With the Gisborne meetings showing such encouraging results, it was time to turn back to the difficult capital city of Wellington to try evangelism there once more. Ellen White was one of the featured speakers. At first the meeting planners feared "a slim attendance," but as it turned out, a good many Adventists came from other towns around the colony to stay at the camp and to loyally support the meetings. And reassuringly there was also "a good-sized congregation of outsiders." Nevertheless, it was a difficult time to run evangelistic meetings simply because the competition for attention was so intense. The national general election that now involved women had been scheduled for November 28, just four days after the evangelistic meetings started, and many election campaign meetings were scheduled. Temperance issues and women's participation in the election occupied center stage in the public mind.

On polling day, Tuesday, November 28, it seemed the whole colony stopped work for what was trumpeted as "one of the most momentous elections in its history."<sup>20</sup> Everywhere "the contest rages" reported the *Evening Post*, "business is practically suspended, and politics and electioneering are on every tongue. In the City the streets are full of people, a large proportion of them being women." Traps and conveyances of every kind carried voters to the polls, young women and men side by side with "old dames who are probably registering their first and last vote."<sup>21</sup> The whole country was in a buoyant mood, and the women in particular appeared "to be thoroughly enjoying the exercise of their new power, and fully alive to their own importance."<sup>22</sup>

As it turned out, after the convulsions of the election passed, the camp meeting, in Ellen White's words, was "a marvel of wonders," a great witness to Wellington and a success. Twenty-four people were baptized at its conclusion.

## Temperance and women's voting rights in Australia

The causes of temperance and women's suffrage were also being agitated in the various colonies in Australia during Ellen White's 1890s sojourn. Huge petitions had been organized both in Victoria in 1891 and in South Australia

on the issue. While the topic appeared not to be as all-consuming an issue as it had been in New Zealand, nevertheless, in South Australia it had achieved considerable momentum. While the agitation in South Australia had stronger ties to social justice issues of working women, nevertheless the temperance issue was still prominent, and the two issues were intertwined and the arguments being made were the same. Campaign literature from New Zealand was used widely. Vigorous agitation continued all during 1894 until, in the dying weeks of that year, the South Australian legislature followed the example of New Zealand and gave women the franchise.

But they went even further. Not only could women vote, but they could also stand for the parliament in their own right. Newspapers throughout all six Australian colonies reported heavily on the news. These were stirring times in the lands down under, where Ellen White, as a woman in a man's world, was more than holding her own, setting a pattern and firmly planting a church to herald the Advent.

While Adventists lauded the work of the WCTU and the general temperance reform, they did not look favorably on political involvement or on the strident public campaigns.<sup>23</sup> The *Bible Echo* commented on the voting issue after the public initiation of what became known as the "monster petition" in Victoria in May 1891,<sup>24</sup> and although clearly sympathetic, the journal, on behalf of the young church, tried to take a neutral stand. "For our own part," observed the unnamed author (possibly the editor, George Tenney), "we would not take extreme grounds on either side, and shall hope to survive whatever the issue may be." He affirmed that "the power for good which womankind possesses" was indisputable and "must be given a foremost place amongst all the moral forces of the world." He cautioned, however, that any public role should not separate women from or lead to a decline in the powerful influence they exercised in "peaceful and blessed homes." He felt that many good women might decline the opportunity to vote should it be offered them, while doubtless others "see in it a means of exerting a wider influence for good." If good women really wished to vote, he concluded, "we wish they might," although he was glad his wife had not authorized him to campaign on her behalf.<sup>25</sup> The paper's editor would also vigorously deny that when it came to leadership in the church, the apostle Paul's words in 1 Cor. 14:34 about women keeping silence should not be interpreted in a way that prevented women from serving as

spiritual leaders. To do so was the result of an inadequate hermeneutic, he asserted.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, as Arthur Patrick has noted in his study of Ellen White's sojourn in Australia, strong convictions about the imminence of the return of Christ and the coming Day of Judgment kept church members focused strictly on religious and doctrinal issues. They were preoccupied with establishing the claims of the commandments and the obligation to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. The plight of a few church members imprisoned briefly or fined in Parramatta and at Kellyville on the outskirts of Sydney for working on the first day so they could keep Sabbath registered more keenly in the denominational consciousness than anything else. In mid-1894, Adventists' sense of eschatological crisis became acute, because these events resonated so strongly as a threat to religious liberty and were interpreted as a striking harbinger of the approaching end of all things.

If 1894 was a year of temperance reform and women's suffrage agitation in South Australia, it was noted even more across all the colonies as the beginning of an extended period of immense economic hardship. The desperate struggle with poverty that women faced became an issue of much community discussion, along with calls to ameliorate it. Ellen White and her church colleagues themselves, impacted severely by the economic distress, became deeply involved in helping destitute families in the church and also in the community via the establishment of effective "Helping Hand" ministries. Bert Haloviak, in his excellent study of the church in Australia in the 1890s, documents Ellen White's extensive involvement in this poverty-relief effort and her repeated calls for church members to see it as evangelistic outreach for the church.<sup>27</sup>

Wider aspects of basic justice were also involved in the poverty women experienced. As the widely read *Australian Home Journal* pointed out in 1894, the fact that women were not paid for their work on the farm, in the shops and offices, alongside their husbands, was a serious inequality and amounted to exploitation. Women needed to

have money of their own to spend and should be remunerated for their labor.<sup>28</sup> This was an issue that Ellen White could speak about, and she did. In this context of linking social welfare work with evangelistic endeavor and pastoral care, and against the background of the exploitation of women, Ellen White made some of her most provocative observations about the need for women to become involved in preaching and public ministry and that they should be employed on equal terms as male pastors and remunerated accordingly as workers in their own right.<sup>29</sup>

### Women leading in ministry

Ellen White had seen Margaret Caro involved in church leadership and community work in New Zealand. She had seen New Zealand church president George Wilson's wife, Jenny, actively involved in ministry in Hawkes Bay. She had seen Julia Corliss tirelessly involved in public work alongside her minister husband, John, in Melbourne. Carrie Hickox, a gifted contralto soloist, ministered effectively beside her husband in Sydney and Queensland. Mary Daniells had sometimes preached when her evangelist husband, A. G. Daniells, could not be present. Ellen White had also spoken of a Sister Walker and a Sister Edwards leading out in home-to-home Bible study work and church leadership and preaching in Sydney. It was undoubtedly in the light of this involvement of women in "public work" that she issued her call in the pages of the *Review* in 1895 for a wider role for women in ministry.

*Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands. In some cases they will need to counsel with the church officers or the minister; but if they are devoted women, maintaining a vital connection with God, they will be a power for good in the church. This is another means of strengthening and building up the church. We need to branch out more in our methods of labor.<sup>30</sup>*

**By 1900,  
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overseas  
appointment  
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there were  
men.**

Three years later, Ellen White was even more assertive in her call for a wider role for women when she wrote,

*Seventh-day Adventists are not in any way to belittle woman's work. If a woman puts her housework in the hands of a faithful, prudent helper, and leaves her children in good care, while she engages in the work, the Conference should have wisdom to understand the justice of her receiving wages.<sup>31</sup>*

*If women do the work that is not the most agreeable to many of those who labor in word and doctrine, and if their works testify that they are accomplishing a work that has been manifestly neglected, should not such labor be looked upon as being as rich in results as the work of the ordained ministers? Should it not command the hire of the laborer? Would not such workers be defrauded if they were not paid? This question is not for men to settle. The Lord has settled it.<sup>32</sup>*

Ellen White believed so strongly that women should be remunerated for their labor as individual workers in ministry in their own right that on occasion she would feel it her duty to “create a fund from my tithe money” to ensure that they would be paid. And she used it to support women ministers.<sup>33</sup> As Arthur Patrick has noted insightfully, only the conviction that such men and women had the call “to preach and teach the word” could enable a Seventh-day Adventist to so use the sacred tithe.<sup>34</sup> This helps us to understand the nature of the ministry Ellen White meant.

Ellen White concluded in her 1895 counsel,

*Not a hand should be bound, not a soul discouraged, not a voice should be hushed; let every individual labor, privately or publicly, to help forward this grand work.<sup>35</sup>*

## **Postscript: Why President Wilson changed his mind about policy for women**

In the United States, the path to women's full participation in the electoral process was a much more tortuous and complicated process. Because conservative attitudes favoring the status quo were more deeply rooted, activists adopted more radical measures to bring about change. During the years before Ellen White's death, the cause of women's greater participation in the public sphere continued on the slow burner, with agitation of women's political action groups steadily working at raising public awareness at the state level, and during the 1910–1914 period, several states granted suffrage for state elections. Ellen White herself was granted the right

to participate in California state elections (if she should ever have decided to do so) in 1911.

The entry of the United States into the First World War in November 1917 changed the calculus for women's participation in the political process. The call for women to support the war effort was answered by women in a wide variety of ways. The demands of the war increasingly involved American women in the public sphere.

Although President Woodrow Wilson was sympathetic to the cause of women's franchise, at first he tried to deflect the contentious issue by insisting that it was one for the states to resolve. But only a handful of states had taken the step. Frustration was building.

During 1917, women activists aware of what had been granted to women in New Zealand, Australia, and Finland brought the issue closer to home by picketing the White House. Some activists chained themselves to the front fence. Wilson did not like these radical tactics, but the vigils continued. When newspaper reports exposed the savage mistreatment and abuse of some of the women arrested, the nation was shocked and the president keenly embarrassed that this was happening at his front gate.

Eventually one of the moderate advocates won the confidence of the president. Carrie Chapman Catt of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, together with Helen Hamilton Gardener, persuaded the President of the importance of dealing with the issue by constitutional amendment. They suggested he explain his new advocacy of the cause by recognizing the contribution women were making to the success of the war effort. By January 1918 Wilson had given women's suffrage his support, arguing it as “an act of right and justice to the women of the country and the world.”

It was not until the early summer of 1919, however, that Congress in both houses voted to approve universal suffrage, and not until 1920 that the amendment was finally ratified.

President Woodrow Wilson changed his mind on policy concerning the women's issue not only because of the embarrassing mistreatment of the women along his front fence, but, as he explained to the nation, because women across the nation had participated wholeheartedly in the critical mission of supporting and winning a war. Recognizing their right to vote was a way of recognizing that contribution and of the critical need for their continuing full participation in the life of the community.

The Advent cause is still as much in need of the contribution and full participation of women as it was in the 1890s

when Ellen White asserted, "This question is not for men to settle. The Lord has settled it."<sup>36</sup> Might that be a good enough reason for any president to change his mind? ■

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