

George R. Knight, *Adventist Authority Wars, Ordination, and the Catholic Temptation* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak and Acorn Publishing, 2017)

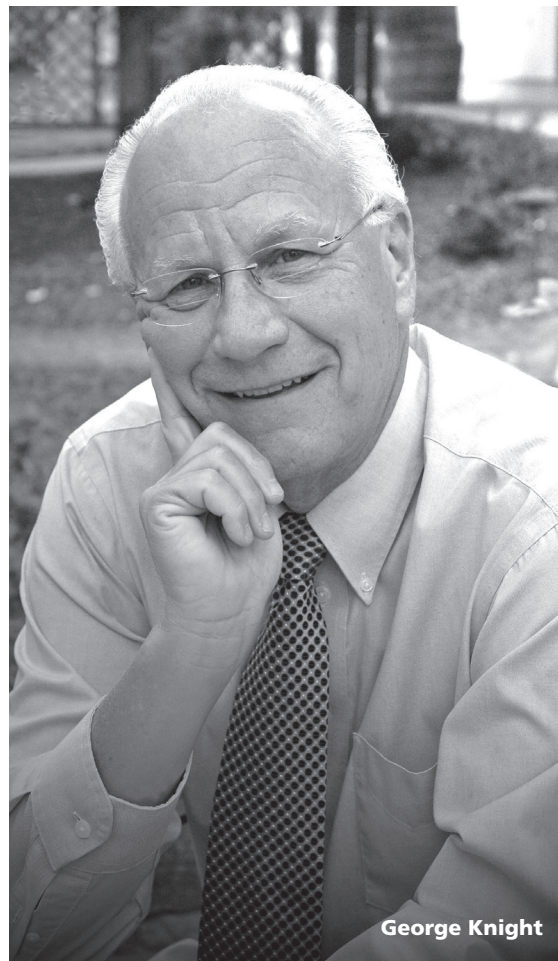
Has George Knight Gone Rogue in Rogue River?

| BY JONATHAN BUTLER

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Not really. In this slim, thought-provoking volume, Knight reflects on women's ordination without thinking only about women's ordination. He encourages a wide, well-informed view. He wants Adventists to reflect on their history in order to properly deal with this intractable, contemporary problem. But he has not gone rogue. If Knight were a different sort of person, he could easily have turned volatile and strident in this book, as if he were a bloviating cable-television host. Instead, he maintains his composure. Ever the prudent professor, he mostly confines himself to balanced historical narrative, some sound biblical exegesis, and, here and there, a soothing pastoral tone. He understands that regardless of whether Adventist women become ordained ministers, there is a deeper question of the nature of ecclesiastical authority. Does ordination emanate from the top down or the bottom up? Does church hierarchy bestow it through the "laying on of hands"? Or, rather, do only God's hands single out men and women for the ministry, which leaders and laity alike are left simply to acknowledge? He also understands that when Bible-believing Adventists quote scripture on opposite sides of the same argument, it can be unsettling to the faithful. Or worse, how can Adventists believe in the "Bible alone" if they confront such a significant issue and the Bible offers no unequivocal word?

Knight was coaxed from an idyllic little village of 2,100 people along Oregon's Rogue River, where he enjoys retirement, to speak at the Adventist Unity Conference in London, a city of nearly nineteen million, where all the



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residents of his hometown could fit on a single subway platform. He spoke on the provocatively titled topic: "Catholic or Adventist: The Ongoing Struggle Over Authority + 9.5 Theses." For Knight's trouble, the Michigan Conference chose to be more medieval Catholic than modern Adventist and placed his heretofore popular and admired books on its Index of Forbidden Books. Fortunately, conference officials quickly gained the victory over their temper tantrum. In *Adventist Authority Wars* (AAW), Knight

IMAGE SOURCE: <https://www.andrews.edu/agenda/35986>

rightly titles his preface, “You Must Read This First: It Sets the Stage.” And there seems nothing disingenuous about the way he concludes it: “I love my church and only want the best for its leaders. And ‘best’ always means being faithful to the Bible, the prophetic gift of Ellen White, and the great principles demonstrated in Adventist history.”

That does not sound like a man who has gone rogue. Knight acknowledges that he can rub people the wrong way. But he rightly points out that his critics come at him from both the Adventist “right” and “left,” which is a good indication that he stakes out a middle ground from which the largest number of Adventists can benefit. His flamboyant style, however, can be mistaken for heretical substance. In fact, he is more like the pastor who wears flashy clothes to the church picnic, but he is still in a suit and tie. I have read and appreciated all of Knight’s historical books. What I most value in him as an author is that, in making his argument, he supplies his readers with enough evidence that they can form their own differing opinions on the same subject. They can reach more liberal or more conservative conclusions than he does. As a writer, he is unflinchingly generous in this way. This is certainly true with Adventist Authority Wars. I do not view him as swinging a wrecking ball at the church or its leadership. Even when compelled to oppose the brethren here, he is part of the loyal opposition. Thinking of his role within Adventism in the language of contemporary politics, it is as if Knight were a fan of Ronald Reagan and distressed that his party has been taken over by Donald Trump.

Knight reminds us that the “authority war,” which enlists Adventists at the moment, is hardly their first one. Despite their noncombatant stance militarily, Adventists have been historically prone to “war” in both doctrine and practice. In the 1850s, they fought over whether to organize at all. In 1888, they went to “war” over the law and the gospel and, surprisingly to a later generation, the meaning of the ten horns in Daniel 7. By the early 1900s, a new “author-

ity war” was waged to establish a more modern corporate identity. For many Adventists around the world, Adventist leadership needed to be responsive to a wider constituency, with more flexibility and less autocracy. By 1901, Adventist plutocrats were passé; populists wanted their day in the sun.

Knight makes clear that Adventism’s initial organization in the 1860s was the brainchild of James and Ellen White. Drawing my own conclusions from his narrative, I see the church’s first couple as distinctly heavy handed in dealing with vociferous opponents of ecclesiastical structure. And in the White campaign to establish an organization, things got ugly. After all, any organizing had been anathema among Adventists, including a younger James White and Ellen Harmon, since suffering abuses as Millerites at the hands of the organized churches. But in a familiar turn of events, the Whites were anti-establishment until they were in charge of the establishment; they then became the thing they had once despised. Knight emphasizes the startling fact that James White had no qualms about making such a momentous change in Adventism without the “Bible alone” as a basis, though others (including his wife) euphemized the process by evoking the term “gospel order.” Nothing would deter the Whites from organizing the church, not even Bible-toting fellow believers.

For a couple of decades, institutional Seventh-day Adventism mostly involved a mom and pop store in which James wore many hats and Ellen supported him with her invaluable gift for publicly branding the enterprise. In his coverage of this period, Knight goes easy on the Whites. He could be a lot more critical of James White, who proved as authoritarian as any nineteenth-century Adventist leader, and of Ellen, who submissively backed him, in public at least, as a Victorian wife was expected to do. In time, both of the Whites would complain of G. I. Butler’s brief for an autocratic leadership model in his book *Leadership* (1873), but Butler had only articulated in principle what James White had practiced for years. White had practiced what

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Butler preached. When White died, however, his widow cut quite a different swath among church leaders than she had when her husband was alive. She complained vehemently of ecclesiastics who mirrored the very qualities she had defended in her husband. Ellen White came to denounce “kingly power,” and she gravitated towards the innovative and more representative “unions,” promoted by her son Willie and A. G. Daniells; she saw this as a structural fix. But my sense is that the real solution for her was always more personal than structural. She complained of “two or three men” controlling everything if, in her eyes, they were the wrong men. With the reorganization of 1901, Daniells was her pick to lead the church, but by 1903 he had disappointed her. A revamped church structure had not bullet proofed the church against the wrong man in power.

Knight offers a revealing illustration of how early Adventism’s interpretation of the Bible—its hermeneutics—actually worked. Adventists clearly brought to the scriptures their own experience, their own perspective. They did not simply read the Bible; they read into it what they wanted to find there. When they read

Revelation 14:8 or Revelation 18:2—that “Babylon is fallen,” and they should “come out of her”—they believed these passages represented the churches that had disfellowshipped them and the civil authorities that had harassed and arrested them. James White and his wife Ellen had suffered these very indignities in the 1840s and embraced the first Adventist interpretation of “Babylon.” In the late 1850s and a decade and a half older and wiser, however, they returned to the same texts in Revelation but from a quite different vantage point. They saw “Babylon” as their own church, crippled and confused by its disarray, and they preached that Adventists should come out of the “Babylon” they had become. Reading Knight’s account of this, it is impossible to picture James White quietly secluding himself in his study to seek a fresh exegesis of these passages in Revelation. Rather, White had been embroiled in the pragmatic demands of his active life as an Adventist churchman. He had been kept up at night by the concerns of paying off mountainous bills and avoiding frightening financial liability, and his wife had stayed awake with him.

What resulted was a dramatic new Adven-



**Whore of Babylon illustration
from Martin Luther's 1534
translation of the Bible.**

IMAGE SOURCE: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Whore-Babylon-Luther-Bible-1534.jpg>

tist interpretation of scripture, and not just any scripture. This was rock-ribbed Adventism—the second of the vital three angel’s messages. Introducing such a revolutionary paradigm shift might have called for a little finesse, but the Whites were not inclined that way. Both of them could be harsh, unsympathetic, and unduly personal in their criticism of detractors. For the Whites to transform “Babylon” from an onerous symbol of the “Other” into that of Adventists themselves, at inconveniently the same time the couple hung “Laodicea” around the necks of their fellow Adventists, demanded much of an already self-critical people. Ellen White further bolstered the ad hominem attack on opponents of organization by writing that they “revealed a great lack of moral courage,” among other character flaws. In the 1840s, the Whites had been as important as anyone in solidifying the “three angel’s messages” as a basic tenant of Adventist faith. By the late 1850s, however, they had turned their backs on the sacrosanct “second angel’s message” and bitterly undercut their critics for biblical arguments they had once embraced.

Knight does get around to women’s ordination, and it is worth the wait. He wastes no time in insisting, “ordination is not a biblical topic.” And “laying on of hands” became linked to the word “ordain” in the “post-apostolic history of the church.” Therefore, the “usage is not biblical but post-biblical.” In New Testament times, Paul and Barnabas were ordained, according to Ellen White, “as a public recognition of their divine appointment.” For White and Knight, the Roman Catholic view implies that, by way of ordination, some sort of “magical, and even god-like power” has been added to the one being ordained. The Protestant view, on the other hand, suggested “nothing is added except public recognition of what has already taken place in a person’s calling and ministry. . . .” Knight argues that ordaining a woman only becomes a problem for a Roman Catholic, not a Protestant. In Catholicism’s sacramental practice, ordination is a gift from the hierarchy. In



James and Ellen White

Protestantism, ordination is an ordinance that recognizes a gifted person and celebrates his or her gifts.

Knight remains baffled by the irony that Seventh-day Adventists, by and large, refuse to ordain women when “the most influential person in the history of Adventism has been a female—Ellen White.” On its face, it seems as if a female prophet would be an advantage to Adventist women. Her empowering role in the community should have empowered them. Yet it is worth mentioning that, to Knight, the prophet may have proven an unintended obstacle to Adventist women’s ordination. In the first place, as Knight notes, she herself declined the brethren’s “laying on of hands.” But Gil Valentine, Knight’s most productive protégée, informs me that his professor could be splitting hairs here on the prophet and ordination. She declined the formal “laying-on-of-hands” ceremony, but she agreed that the brethren in

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council could “raise their hands” in public to acknowledge her credentialing as an “ordained minister.” The difference seems negligible; though raising hands from the audience may have been slightly more populist than the hierarchic “laying on of hands.” She had nevertheless rejected the more formal ceremony, and I think that this was a mistake on her part, which Adventist women have probably paid a price for ever since. As Knight puts it:

She held that her ordination came from God. While she held a certificate of ordination from the General Conference, she had never been ordained by a man. She didn’t need it. She had been called and ordained (appointed) by God.

Yes, but in declining the “laying on of hands” had she not conceded that, even for Adventists, the practice had taken on a sacramental, Roman Catholic character? She declared that, in the long history of the church, ordination had assumed “unwarranted importance,” and then her refusal of it suggested that the same had happened to Adventists. But in Acts of the Apostles, she made clear that ordination was Protestant for Seventh-day Adventists—a public recognition of a “spiritual gift”—not a sacrament transmitted by hierarchical clerics. There was no need, then, to revert back to a medieval or patriarchal worldview. No Adventist minister—man or woman—needs ordination. He or she accepts it as an acknowledgment of what is already plain to their community: that God alone has called them to the ministry. But if Ellen White rejected the “laying on of hands,” how could other Adventist women seek ordination?

The fact that Ellen White was such a special case may have hurt Adventist women as well. She was a woman who displayed extraordinary spiritual gifts. It does not necessarily follow, then, that other women, with lesser gifts, will receive the recognition they are due. She did not so much provide a mold, which could contour the lives of other Adventist women; in a sense, she broke the mold. The racial metaphor comes to mind here. We make an exception for the gifted black or Hispanic athlete on the field of play, but we nonetheless remain racist in our ordinary lives. The gifted female prophet likewise does not dismantle the patriarchal system in which she existed or the misogynistic biases we maintain. Ellen White herself was a Victorian woman. She also saw her time as the

very end of time. Her writings and her life enhanced the lives of Adventist women, spiritually and socially. But the prophet did little to transform Seventh-day Adventism’s patriarchal nature. She no doubt felt that there was little time to do so. And as God’s messenger for the last days, she seemed to have formed an implicit social contract between herself and the brethren. She supported them in their privileged position as long as they supported her in hers. And she provided little in the way of coattails for Adventist women in her time or a later time she never imagined for this world.

George Knight has gone back to Rogue River, but I hope he continues to get out and serve as a gadfly of Adventist thought. He is no rogue, which will delight many and disappoint some. But his book provokes serious thinking on a whole range of topics; I am still thinking about it. In his breezy, conversational style, he throws his readers into the deep end of the pool on women’s ordination. I am grateful to him for it. ■



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Footnotes:

1. George R. Knight, *Adventist Authority Wars, Ordination, and the Catholic Temptation (AAW)* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak and Acorn Publishing, 2017), 10.
2. *AAW*, Chapters 1-3.
3. *Ibid.*, 28-37.
4. *Ibid.*, 84-85.
5. *Ibid.*, 89-90.
6. *Ibid.*, 42-59, 100.
7. *Ibid.*, Chapter 1 and pages 149-155.
8. *Ibid.*, 28-37.
9. Cited in Barry Oliver, “Reorganization of Church Structure, 1901–03: Some Observations,” *Spectrum* (Summer 2017): 16.
10. *AAW*, Chapters 4 and 5.
11. *Ibid.*, 121-122.
12. *Acts of the Apostles*, 161-162; cited in, *AAW*, 123.
13. *AAW*, 131.
14. *Ibid.*, 134.
15. *Ibid.*, 132.