

Ordination: Disentangling the Gordian Knot

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The Myth & the Metaphor

During a time when Ancient Phrygia (central, modern-day Turkey) was without a king, an oracle said that the next man to enter their capital city pushing an ox-cart would be king. Gordias was that next man and the priests declared him king. The man's son Midas tied their cart to a post thanking the gods as he did so. Although it's not clear why, for hundreds of years the cart remained tied to the post. A new legend was told: the man who could untie the cart from the post would become king of all of Asia. There are several different versions of what happened next. Alexander the Great, when he came through Phrygia, saw the knot, and figured it out and untied it. And when the people saw what he had done, they all proclaimed him king of Asia! Another version of the story says that Alexander worked on the knot for a while, but when he couldn't figure out a way to undo it, he took out his sword and chopped it in two. In this version, the people responded in awe at Alexander's "thinking-outside-of-the-box" attitude, and he was proclaimed king of Asia.¹

The Gordian Knot myth has become a metaphor for something impossible to resolve; a problem that, due to its complex nature, goes unsolved and unresolved for centuries.

The year 2012 was historic for the ordination of women in the Seventh-day Adventist church. What does it all mean? This presentation will include a brief history of the issue, personal reflections as a woman in ministry during the past (almost) twenty-five years, and possibilities for the recent study commissions. What created the knot in the first place? What efforts have been made to untie it? Which recent events pulled it tighter? And is it finally loosening?

First, I want to give credit to my sources. I am grateful to acknowledge those who have worked long on this topic, and whose work made this presentation possible. Several papers by my father, Bert Haloviak, were extremely helpful. Many of his works may be accessed at the Office of Archives, Statistics and Research (On-line Archives). The two I used the most are titled: "Longing for the Pastorate: Ministry in 19th Century Adventism" written in 1988, and "Money and Theology: IRS and the Redefining of SDA Ministry" written in 1996. I am also grateful for Josephine Benton's book, *Called By God* that was published in 1990, and an article by Kit Watts, "An Outline of the History of Seventh-day Adventism and the Ordination of Women" made available in 1995. Various issues of *Spectrum* are helpful on this topic. For recent developments, the Fall 2012 (40:4) issue is a gift to the church.

Early Adventism's women ministers

The earliest Adventists were suspicious of organizations: Jesus was coming soon, and they had been "called out" of organized protestant religions in order to preach the soon return of Jesus.

However, both the needs of the local congregations and the need to distinguish themselves from "false preachers" caused James White and others to justify their concession to organizing as

¹ See Wikipedia.org/wiki/Gordian_Knot.

preferable to falling into ecclesiastical chaos (we have not left Babylon in order to fall into Babel). The earliest Adventist references to those called by God did not typically use the words “ordained” or “ordination,” but “setting apart” or “laying on of hands” probably due to a desire to follow the words of Scripture.

Because there was such suspicion of human structures, every precaution was made to avoid drawing unnecessary lines of power. For example, J. N. Loughborough recalled his first years within the Advent Movement (1849-52) as a time when no records of church membership were kept, no church officers were appointed and “no ordination of any kind except that of one preacher.” Apparently that one preacher urgently requested ordination. After a group of leading ministers reluctantly agreed to ordain the man in 1851, Loughborough recalls the almost non-event: “instead of its being a solemn and impressive ceremony before the body of believers, the ministers waited until the congregation had left, when one of the ministers offered a dry, formal prayer. There was no laying on of hands; no charge given” (*The Review and Herald*, May 28, 1901). No one would mistake this event as embracing any kind of apostolic succession, even if it did require the prayer of a minister.

Beginning in 1853, cards of official approval from the Advent Movement were issued with signatures from James White and Joseph Bates. In November 1853 the authority to preach was associated with ordination in order to deal with “unworthy” teachers. By the next month, the importance of ordination in order to baptize was mentioned specifically. (As churches grew in membership, local needs caused the Movement to ordain deacons and local elders to care for the local congregations. However, these lay leaders were typically not able to baptize.)

In 1861, the Michigan Conference formalized the policy of granting a license to preach to qualified ministers (renewed each year), assuming that after a “testing time” the minister would be granted ordination credentials, which would then allow the minister to perform baptisms and other ordinances. When the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists was organized in 1863, the Michigan Conference policy was adopted for the entire denomination.

Within seven years (1870) of the first issuing of ministerial licenses by the newly established Seventh-day Adventist denomination, women held them, although there is no evidence that after a “testing time” they were ordained. It is interesting to see the ways in which their ministry paralleled their male colleagues: (1) their training as ministers was encouraged by Ellen G. White; (2) their examination committees often included Mrs. White being present to listen and to ask them questions; (3) they followed the same path to the ministry as that followed by men; (4) they typically served as part of husband-wife ministry teams; (5) sometimes they served on their own; (6) they participated in evangelistic efforts; (7) they preached; (8) they were licensed by local conferences, including Iowa, New York/Pennsylvania, Michigan, Kentucky/Tennessee, Kansas, Illinois, Minnesota, Vermont, Alabama/Mississippi, Wisconsin, California, Oklahoma, Arizona, South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska, Oregon, Utah, (and outside the United States in Finland, New Zealand and Britain); (9) they were paid by the local conference or by the General Conference with tithe funds; and, (10) when Adventist ministry shifted from an itinerant ministry to a more local church ministry, they continued to contribute as licensed ministers.

Since by 1881, women ministers had been holding ministerial licenses for over a decade with successful ministries but had not been ordained (and therefore were unable to conduct baptism and other ordinances), the following resolutions are not surprising:

- (1) “RESOLVED, That all candidates for license and ordination should be examined with reference to their intellectual and spiritual fitness for the successful discharge of the duties which will devolve upon them as licentiates and ordained ministers.
- (2) RESOLVED, That females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry” (*Review and Herald*, December 20, 1881, page 392).

While the first resolution was adopted, the second was not mentioned again.

On July 9, 1895 there was a statement by Ellen White in the *Review and Herald*:

“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 of 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... 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.”

While the setting aside of the second 1881 resolution might be credited to “a cultural knot” or “a knot based on society’s patriarchal assumptions,” this did not need to be a Gordian knot. The second resolution deserved a vote. In light of Ellen White’s later statement about setting women apart by “prayer and the laying on of hands,” there seemed to be nothing standing in the way of *both* resolutions being adopted. But the second resolution remains dormant to this day.

In this early part of Adventism, my great-great-great grandmother, Belinda Loveland, who had gone through the Great Disappointment, writes of losing three daughters to consumption. In the pages of the *Review and Herald*, she talks about how she missed their presence at family worship and she longed for the second coming of Jesus so that she might see them again.

We have occasionally talked as a family and wondered what those three women might have contributed to the young church that they loved so much. What might have happened to them had they not died as teenagers?

The IRS and the blocking of women ministers

In the early 1960s, the Adventist church still granted a “ministerial license” to ministers in training – ministers who had usually finished their formal education but were now getting ministerial experience. It was considered a “testing time.” If no problems presented themselves, after several years a minister would be ordained and then received “ministerial credentials,” authorizing the minister to baptize, and perform other ordinances such as marriage and burial services, and communion. In the early 1960s, seven women had ministerial licenses. They, along

with their male colleagues, were assumed to be on the track towards ordination even if the “testing time” of women ministers never seemed to come to an end.

Conferences treated the salaries paid to these “license ministers” the same as the salaries paid to ordained ministers, which resulted in lower income taxes paid by the interns and lower Social Security contributions paid by the conferences. However, in 1965, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) notified the denomination that licensed ministers must be “fully qualified to exercise all the ecclesiastical duties” of the ordained ministers in order to receive parsonage and other tax benefits. Suddenly, if the ministers in training, those holding licenses but not yet ordained, did not receive government tax benefits, the denomination would have to make up the difference. This was a very costly possibility.

In 1966 when Robert Pierson became General Conference president and Neal Wilson became GC vice-president for North America, they inherited the IRS problem. Would the church be able to define those with ministerial licenses in a way that met IRS standards? Or would the General Conference have to spend millions of dollars to make up the difference for their employees? The amounts involved large sums of tax needing to be paid to the IRS in arrears. Future employment of ministers would have been much more costly. The problem took over a decade to resolve.

The first attempt at a way out of the dilemma was suggested by a lawyer. Licensed ministers who had also been ordained as local church elders were considered “ministers of the gospel.” So why couldn’t an ordained elder/licensed minister be seen as similar to an ordained minister?

The 1975 Spring Meeting consequently made two changes to church policy: (1) those with ministerial licenses and on their way to ordination who had been ordained as a local church elder were allowed to perform communion services, baptisms, and funerals. Since at the same Spring Meeting women were approved for ordination as local elders and deaconesses, this first action would have opened the door for women with ministerial licenses to perform almost all the functions of ordained ministers. Hence, the second action: (2) where women “with suitable qualifications and experience are able to fill ministerial roles, they be assigned as assistant pastors, their credentials being missionary license or missionary credential.” Just like that, and after holding ministerial licenses for over 100 years, women ministers could no longer have ministerial licenses. They were no longer on the track toward ordination.

Neal Wilson wrote to the IRS in December 1975 stating that: “the role of the licensed minister has been re-defined by the SDA Church.” The licensed minister was *not* a separate category of minister. He could have added that *women* ministers had also been re-defined by the church.

However, after all that, Elder Wilson’s description still did not satisfy the IRS. From their perspective, to be considered a minister deserving of tax benefits, the minister needed to be able to solemnize marriages. Wilson’s appeal was rejected, and some conferences received final notices from the government warning of the seizure of church property in order to pay outstanding IRS amounts.

In 1976 the president’s executive advisory agreed: “To ask the Presidential staff to study the suggestions for changing the authority of the licensed minister.” Elder Wilson’s proposal to

Annual Council read: “A licensed minister is authorized by the Conference Executive Committee to perform all the functions of the ordained minister in the church or churches where he is assigned.” The union presidents and officers from around the world did not agree, and the 1976 Annual Council did not approve Wilson’s proposal. They voted “no” to this change in policy. So, the North American Division went it alone. They voted “yes.” The definition of minister would be different in the North American Division than anywhere else within the church. In an article in the *Review* (Dec 30, 1976), Elder Wilson explained “with the view of preserving the unity and strength of the church,” the Annual Council had “voted to amend the policy governing licensed ministers to provide for appropriate latitude and flexibility within each division of the General Conference.” Apparently the world church would have to live with a diversity of policies when it came to defining the minister, at least where so much money was involved.

By 1977 the IRS had agreed that the changes were sufficient to warrant tax benefits for those with ministerial licenses not yet ordained. The 1977 NAD Annual Council added a new term: “associates in pastoral care” for women pastors and those who held ministerial licenses had them withdrawn. Those receiving the new “associate” title were “persons who are employed on pastoral staffs but who are not in line for ordination.” The tax benefits issue had been resolved for male pastors, at the expense of the women pastors. The Gordian knot was fixed.

Loosening the knot?

At the same time that the IRS issue was being debated and the knot was being tied tighter and tighter, the beginnings of a formula for loosening the knot were also discovered. In 1968 Ellen White’s 1895 statement about “laying on of hands” in order to set them apart was rediscovered. Subsequently, in 1973 the “Council on the Role of Women in the Church,” (made up of fourteen women and thirteen men) met at Camp Mohaven in Ohio. They were called to deal with the rediscovered 1895 statement. The council included 27 study papers that reflected diversity, yet there was remarkable consensus on the following: (1) women should be ordained as deaconesses and elders; (2) a program should be initiated for licensing women ministers in appropriate locations; (3) if the responses from local congregations was positive after two years, an action should be taken to the 1975 General Conference Session to approve the ordination of women as pastors in appropriate locations; (4) no scriptural evidence precluded women from ordination as ministers.

Elder Pierson, president of the General Conference, thought that the study commission’s recommendation went too far and decided that this issue needed to go before the world church. In 1974, the Annual Council decided that “the time is not ripe.” In the 1975 Spring Meeting, it was decided that women could be ordained as local church elders and deaconesses. That was the same meeting that changed policy so that women ministers could no longer receive ministerial licenses. They could only receive missionary credentials, which meant that they were no longer on the track toward ordination. Women receiving the same ministerial training as male colleagues could now be ordained as local church elders, but were not able to baptize, celebrate communion or perform marriage ceremonies because they no longer held ministerial licenses but were “associates in pastoral care” holding “missionary licenses.”

This was the year after I gave my first public presentation in church. I was eight and it was Thanksgiving Sabbath at my local church, the Beltsville Seventh-day Adventist Church in

Maryland. I remember the Friday evening before I was to speak. My dad kept having me go through the five-minute talk on the subject of what I was grateful for, over and over again. I got tired and cranky. That's when my dad told me something I have never forgotten: "if you are not prepared, and if you waste people's time, you are not wasting just five minutes. You are wasting five minutes *times* how many people are in the room." It made an impression and I went over the talk several more times. The next day, when I got up in front of my local church, I remember thinking how nice it was that people were looking at me and smiling. I also remember thinking, "this is fun!"

In the early 1980s Elder Neal Wilson, now president of the General Conference, occasionally allowed a woman who was trained as a minister and who had been ordained as a local church elder, to baptize in remote areas (e.g., Marsha Frost, pastor in Virginia). But in 1984, when the Potomac Conference president, Ron Wisbey, gave the green-light for a woman pastor (Jan Daffern) at Sligo to perform baptisms so close to the General Conference and with male ordained pastors present who could have been called upon, things became tense.

It was some time in the mid-80s that I was asked to give a week of prayer at the General Conference. I was serving the local day academy as the pastor of the student association. I was either a junior or senior at the academy (16-17 years old). I remember sharing stories from the gospels that week. And I also recall Elder Wilson talking with me one of those mornings. He encouraged me not to give up. Changes were taking place, he said, and it would not be long now. Certainly by the time I finished college... was the understanding he conveyed.

I finished college and accepted an invitation to join the pastoral staff at the Seventh-day Adventist Church at Kettering (Ohio Conference) in May, 1989. At the 1989 Annual Council Elder Wilson pushed through an action that stated that unordained and ordained pastors would be allowed to perform the same functions. The new action was made policy at the General Conference session in Indianapolis (1990). This meant that for the first time I could baptize someone I had prepared for baptism. I did so that year at the Kettering Church.

At the next General Conference Session later, in Utrecht (1995), the North American Division asked the world church to allow each division to decide the matter. It was denied. I was now serving at the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church in Takoma Park, Maryland (Potomac Conference). In a Sabbath school session that was reporting on events at Utrecht, church members began to be convinced that, for our local congregation, it was time. Many conversations and prayer sessions followed, including a business session that voted overwhelmingly in favor of going forward with a local ordination service. This congregation had embraced women pastors since 1973. It was time.

On September 23, 1995, the Sligo SDA Church ordained three women to gospel ministry in a local church worship service on Sabbath afternoon. Norma Osborn, Penny Shell and I were ordained. This did not receive official affirmation from the Potomac Conference nor from the Columbia Union. Later that year, the three of us flew to Southern California to participate in the ordination services of Madelyn Haldeman and Hallie Wilson (La Sierra University Church) and Sheryl Prinz-McMillan (Loma Linda Victoria Church).

Not long afterwards, the Southeastern California Conference, whose Gender Justice Commission had been working for years, began issuing the same credentials for all pastors, regardless of gender. The credential card equated ordination and commissioning and certified that the bearer had been “ordained-commissioned.” This policy was further changed in March, 2012, when the conference voted to delete the word “commissioned” and issue “ordination” credentials to all its pastors, without regard to gender.

There was a price to pay. Some of the men involved in these early (1995) ordination services were reprimanded and pressured in various ways. I was scheduled to participate in a speaking tour in the South Pacific Division, and my participation would have been cancelled except that Rose Otis, then director of Women’s Ministries at the General Conference, and Carole Ferch-Johnson, the director of women’s ministries for the South Pacific Division, intervened and spoke on my behalf urging that the invitation to me not be withdrawn. Also I recall a conversation with a Union President after I was asked by a search committee to join the faculty of an Adventist college. After a pleasant conversation together about Adventist theology, history and mission, I felt that everything came down to his final question: would I recant my participation in the ordination service at Sligo? I remember my response even clearer than his question: “Elder ____, I hope that someday my church’s policy changes and Adventist pastors, women and men, are treated the same. On that day, if someone knocks at my door and says, ‘great news! We can ordain you now!’ My response will be, ‘thank you, but I was ordained on September 23, 1995 at the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church.’” That was the end of the interview.

Recent happenings on this issue have worked in various ways to loosen the Gordian knot. At the Annual Council in 2009, a seemingly innocent question about ordination of deaconesses created discussion about the Adventist theology of ordination. And in 2010 the manual was changed to reflect the 1975 decision to ordain deaconesses.

In October, 2011, the North American Division made a request to Annual Council asking that commissioned (women) ministers be allowed to serve as conference presidents. This was denied.

Then in 2012 at a regular committee meeting the Mid-America Union Executive voted to approve the ordination of women ministers. Shortly afterwards, the North German Union session and then the Columbia Union (July 29, 2012), and the Pacific Union (August 19, 2012) voted actions to approve the ordination of qualified ministers without regard to gender. In the Columbia and Pacific Unions ordination services have now taken place. And in some conferences in the Pacific Union, qualified women ministers who were previously commissioned have received ordained ministerial credentials.

The international Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) met for the first time January 15-17, 2013. The North American Division task force has also been meeting regularly during the past year, with its next meeting scheduled for June 3-4. The plan is that each division will share papers with the international committee, which will present a consensus statement to Annual Council in 2014, and then perhaps to the General Conference in 2015.

Is the knot tightening or loosening?