

ORDINATION OF WOMEN: A HERMENEUTICAL QUESTION

By: John Brunt

Whenever Seventh-day Adventists discuss the ordination of women to gospel ministry, they inevitably quote certain New Testament passages. Adventists are committed to Scripture. It is our norm for faith and practice, and we turn to it for guidance on this issue. But how shall we understand Scripture aright? That is the hermeneutical question.

Does Scripture forbid or encourage the church to authorize women in ministry as it has traditionally authorized men? Some feel that 1 Corinthians 14:33-37, 1 Timothy 2:11-15, and 1 Timothy 3:2 are conclusive evidence that Scripture forbids the ordination of women. Do they? In fact, do they speak to ordination at all?

Two significant problems

Those who would use these texts against the ordination of women face two significant hermeneutical problems.

First, none of these texts specifically addresses the ordination of women. They address other issues. If they are to be considered relevant, some bridge must be found from the issues that are focused on in the texts to the ordination of women.

Second, using these texts against the ordination of women assumes a hermeneutical principle that is neither acceptable nor traditionally practiced in Adventist theology. That is, the texts may be used against women's ordination only if they are read in a literalistic way that divorces them from their historical and literary contexts.

Let's review the texts:
1 Corinthians 14:33-36

“As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only

people it has reached?*

1 Timothy 2:11-15:

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be kept safe through childbirth, if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety.”

1 Timothy 3:2:

“Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach. . .”

Some believe these texts settle the issue. As we study the texts, however, we see that not one of them speaks to ordination. They can only be used against women's ordination when one argues, “If not this [speaking in church; teaching men], then certainly not ordination.”

This kind of argument will work only if the texts are understood in a literalistic way. But Seventh-day Adventists long ago decided not to interpret Scripture this way.

Let's compare the two possible positions before us if we first interpret the material in a literalistic way, and second, if we look at the texts in a principled way, seeking to understand which principles Paul was addressing within his original context.

A literal view

Assume that we as a church had adopted the literalistic interpretation of these texts. How would it affect what the church does today?

First, we would have to forbid women from speaking publicly in church, for 1 Corinthians 14 says women are to be silent in church. Under these circumstances women could not be Sabbath school teachers. Sabbath school superintendents, or speak in any other way. But the church has not taken that position.

Second, if 1 Timothy 2:11-15 were taken literally, we

would have to forbid women from accepting any position in which they would teach or have any authority over men. This would exclude them from being teachers or supervisors of any kind in Adventist institutions. For instance, a woman could not be the director of nurses in a hospital in which there were male nurses. A woman could not be a college teacher in any department in which she would be teaching male students. But the church has never done this.

Finally, if we took 1 Timothy 3:2 literally, we would have to insist that all elders be married, the husband of one wife. Unmarried individuals could never serve as elders or ordained ministers. But the church has ordained many single men.

What does all this mean? It means that we have not chosen to interpret these passages in a literalistic way. Rather, we have attempted to understand them in context.

It will not do to say that these texts should not be taken literally but that they still forbid ordination to women. Only two possibilities are open to us.

Either we must return to a literal reading of the texts and drastically change our current church practice to bring it into line. Or we must recognize that these texts in and of themselves cannot settle the issue of women's ordination. There is no middle ground. This is not to say that the texts speak for the ordination of women. It is only to say that they cannot be used against the ordination of women.

Inconsistent use of Scripture

An honest hermeneutic must be consistent in its use of Scripture. We must either forbid all positions of teaching and supervision to women, forbid ordination to single men, and keep women totally silent or we recognize that these texts cannot be made to speak directly against the ordination of women. To interpret Scripture correctly, we must find which principles the texts were addressing within their literary and historical contexts.

The same approach must be used when evaluating other biblical arguments advanced against the ordination of women. For example, a number of Adventist interpreters view the fact that Jesus chose only male apostles as evidence that He intended ministers for all time to be male. They go on to argue that because Jesus broke down certain barriers between men and

women and opened the way for a new understanding of women's role, He certainly would have chosen women apostles had He ever intended women to function as ministers.

That foolishness of such an argument is apparent when we realize that in His ministry Jesus also broke down barriers between Jews and Gentiles. On several occasions He willingly flouted conventional rules of conduct by interacting with Gentiles. And yet all of His apostles were Jews. Does this mean that all ministers for all time should be Jews? Such an argument is equivalent to the one that Jesus' choosing only male apostles means that women can never be ordained.

One of the dangers we face today is that in the effort to forbid ordination to women by appealing to Scripture we will so misuse it that the result will be hermeneutical inconsistency. We must not let this happen.

Another hermeneutical approach

But what would happen if we were to look at the New Testament in a principled way that seeks to understand relevant new Testament passages within their literary and historical context? What would it mean for the question of ordaining women?

First, it would mean that the specific passages that are often used to speak against the ordination of women are rather to be understood as specific instructions to specific circumstances.

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul's concern is for order in worship within the context of a discussion about speaking in tongues. He obviously is unhappy with certain practices in Corinth and forbids a certain kind of participation by women. This seems to be some type of speaking in tongues.

That Paul does not intend to silence women in worship is obvious from 1 Corinthians 11. He permits them to both pray and prophesy in church as long as they are appropriately attired (which in the cultural context of Corinth meant wearing veils) Since Paul uses the term "prophesying" to include what we would call preaching-this passage proves that Paul did not really intend to silence women in church.

If we work in a principled, contextual way, we will also recognize that 1 Timothy 3:2 Paul appears to address a situation

in which activities by certain women have brought disrepute on the church. But his advice must not be taken to controvert his permission for women to pray and prophesy within the church.

Additional relevant passages

If we take Scripture in a principled, contextual way we discover other relevant New Testament passages that need to be considered as we discuss women's ordination.

For example, in Galatians 3:28 Paul sets forth the principle that in Christ there is no male or female. Obviously this does not mean that sexual distinctions between male and female should be disregarded. But it does mean that there are no longer any spiritual distinctions between male and female (as there had so definitely been in Judaism). In Christ they are equal. Any attempt to deny salvation or the exercise of spiritual gifts to women goes directly against the grain of this great principle.

We also find that the New Testament moves in a definite direction toward the participation of women in ministry.

The Old Testament completely closed the priesthood to women. But the New Testament sets forth the profound truth of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5). As a result, amazing changes come about in a short period of time. Paul takes on women coworkers such as Priscilla and Phoebe. Romans 16:1 seems to indicate that Phoebe was a deacon (not a deaconess, as some translations indicate).

Did God's initiative in this new direction of involving women in ministry reach its climax in New Testament times? Or did God intend the church to continue on today in the same direction?

Helpful analogy

Although such questions are never easy, an analogy can help us find a clear answer. We know that in certain cases God intended the church to continue movement after New Testament times in the direction of revealed principles.

Take the issue of slavery, for instance. In the Old Testament God set forth rules governing the practice of slavery. In the New Testament (in fact, in Galatians 3:28, the very same

passage that speaks to the oneness of male and female in Christ) Paul sets forth the principle that there is no slave or free in Christ. Yet he does not completely forbid the practice of slavery.

If we accept Ellen White, however, we recognize that God did not intend the church to stop with the New Testament, for Ellen White forbade the practice of slavery. She went so far as to suggest that those who permitted or advocated the continuation of slavery should not have a place within the fellowship of the church. Obviously God intended movement in the direction that the New Testament pointed.

Applying principles today

How do we know whether or not God expects continued progress in breaking down spiritual barriers that stand between men and women? How do we know whether it is consistent with New Testament principles to ordain women to gospel ministry today?

I believe there is evidence that God does expect continued progress. I believe there is evidence that God does want us to open the doors of ministry to all of His children. I believe there is evidence that within the cultural milieu of North America today God does intend us to invite women into full participation in ministry, including ordination.

Where do I see this evidence?

First, I see it in Scripture in which the spiritual oneness of male and female in Christ, and the priesthood of all believers, lead in the direction of full participation of male and female in ministry. I believe we should move as far as possible in our cultural context to make this principle a reality without bringing undue disrepute to the gospel of Christ. In the cultural context of North America, only the full ordination of women would appropriately represent our commitment to those principles.

Second, I find women sensing God's call in their hearts to prepare for ministry. I see that God has equipped them with the spiritual gifts necessary to carry out the difficult task of pastoral ministry. As a theology teacher, I have for years asked students who want to study for the ministry what has led them to feel God's call. In fact, we as a theology faculty search for evidence of such a call before we recommend students to

ministry. We find that women express the same deep conviction and sincere commitment to ministry that we take as evidence of God's call in men.

Third, I see God blessing the ministry of women. I am privileged to be a member of a Seventh-day Adventist church that has had women as local elders for more than a decade and a woman pastor for half a decade. I have seen the blessing that these women have brought to the ministry of the church. I have seen God use them to bring women and men to Jesus Christ. I have heard God speak to my heart through them.

All of this leads me to believe that we now stand in the very same position in which Peter and his fellow Christians stood when they went to preach the gospel to Cornelius and his household. They witnessed the Spirit being poured out on these Gentiles who had heard the Word.

It was a shocking event. These early Christians did not believe Gentiles were worthy of the gospel. They did not yet understand that there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, in Christ. Dumbfounded though he was, Peter found these words: "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" (Acts 10:47).

Adventists do not believe that ordination adds any "new grace or virtual qualification." It is rather the public recognition of divine appointment (The Acts of the Apostles, pp. 161, 162). But ordination is the way our church recognizes the validity of a genuine call to minister full-time for the gospel.

As we look at the ministry that women have been and are performing through the gift of God's Spirit in the church, can we do anything else than follow Peter's example and say, "Can anyone keep these women from being ordained? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."

*Bible texts in this article are from the New International Version.

John Brunt
Vice-President for Academic Administration
Walla Walla College

First published in *Ministry*, September 1988, pp 12-14.

® John Brunt