

WHY I CHANGED MY MIND ABOUT WOMEN'S ORDINATION

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I. WHY WRITE ABOUT WOMEN'S ORDINATION?

It's safe to say that Adventism is currently divided over the issue of women in leadership. It's a pretty big deal right now in some circles. There are sincere and devoted Christians on both sides of this issue, many of whom I know and respect.

A few years ago, I began to study the issue of women in leadership from the Bible so that I could answer some nagging questions of my own and also provide guidance to my congregation. When I began this study, I was convinced from my understanding of certain Bible passages that women's ordination was unbiblical. As I launched into this study, my goal was to take an honest look at all that the Scriptures had to say on this topic and see where that led me. What follows is a synopsis of some of the questions that I asked and the answers that I found. These are the reasons why I changed my mind about women's ordination.

My goal in sharing this paper is to provide a resource and perspective to members of my own congregation and any others who are studying the issue of women's ordination and women in leadership. First, we will look briefly at the concept of ordination in the Bible. How important to God's work is the ordination received by human hands? We'll then ask whether the Bible prohibits women from functioning in any church office or ministry or receiving any particular spiritual gift. We'll see examples of women who were given certain spiritual gifts in Scripture and who functioned in leadership roles in the church "over" men. We'll ask: Is the real issue that women should not fill certain symbolic church *offices* or are there certain *functions* they are prohibited from performing? Ellen White weighs in next on whether women should serve as pastors, and we'll query whether she herself was ordained. We will then take a look at the issue of "male headship" and also examine the verses that seem to say that women cannot speak in church or ever be teachers of men. We will study Adam and Eve's relationship to each other at the Creation and after the Fall. We'll see if Paul teaches that only men can be church elders, and ask if pastors are equivalent to the Aaronic priests of the Old Testament. Finally, we'll ask whether the lack of an explicit Scriptural command saying, "thou shalt ordain women" precludes women from serving as pastors or as church elders. I'll finish up with some Scriptural observations and recommendations.

Before we take a look at the issue in question, let me say a short word about my understanding of biblical inspiration and hermeneutics. I believe that the Bible *is* God's inspired word. I believe in "thought inspiration," not "verbal inspiration" (see, for example, the differing yet complementing accounts found in the four gospels; and also 2 Tim. 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21). I believe in taking what a Bible verse says as literally as possible, unless a literal interpretation of that passage contradicts the obvious meaning of what the rest of Scripture clearly says on the topic. For example, when the Bible says that the smoke of their torment goes up "forever and ever" (Rev. 14:11), or that "their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched," (Mark 9:44), we could come to the conclusion, based on a superficial reading of these verses alone, that people burn forever and ever in hell fire. Or, we could dig a little deeper and find out that they actually harmonize with the rest of Scripture on this topic. Elsewhere in Scripture are statements that lend their weight to the opposite conclusion – that the wicked are destroyed both soul and body (Matt. 10:28), consumed (Ps. 37:20), and reduced to ashes (Mal. 4:3). Certainly, a literalistic, superficial reading of every text of Scripture would lead to the conclusion that the Bible contradicts itself. But I believe that the apparent contradictions in Scripture can be resolved if we are willing to dig for the hidden treasure and look at the totality of what the Bible says on a topic. Sometimes – often, in fact – harmonizing Scripture requires that we dig deeper than a mere surface reading will reveal to us. Devoted Bible students have written whole books on "difficult" Bible texts, showing how the Bible harmonizes despite the apparent contradictions that the superficial reader encounters. One thing we can learn is that a careless, literalistic reading of some Bible verses can lead to some very tortured conclusions. The only safe course is to interpret all Bible verses in context with the totality of Scripture or we will inevitably end up misinterpreting the Bible.

There are some issues that we face in our contemporary culture which are not explicitly addressed in Scripture. In those cases, we have to look at the totality of Scripture to extract principles from the examples, stories and statements of the Bible. I respect those who believe that there is too much ambiguity in the Bible surrounding the issue of women's ordination for them to make up their mind one way or the other. As such, it seems that if, after looking at all the inspired evidence, it is possible for reasonable minds to differ on the interpretation of the biblical evidence then we as believers ought not to be too dogmatic about our opinion. Even with issues that are explicitly taught in Scripture, we need to remember to "walk in love" (Ephesians 5:2, KJV), and to disagree without being disagreeable. All that being said, I believe that, looking at the inspired writings, a stronger case can be made for women in leadership and women's ordination than can be made against them.

My hope is that this paper will encourage the reader to lay aside human traditions, distinctions, and barriers and to embrace the unity in Christ as taught in the Bible. As the Apostle Paul put it centuries ago,

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, *there is neither male nor female*: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-29, KJV, emphasis mine).

II. IS ORDINATION BY HUMAN HANDS MORE THAN SIMPLY A RECOGNITION OF GOD'S CALL TO SERVE IN CHURCH OFFICE? DOES ORDINATION INHERENTLY IMPART ANY SPECIAL GIFTEDNESS TO THE ONE ORDAINED?

It was Jesus who chose and appointed – ordained – the 12 apostles. Subsequently, when the disciples wanted to add an apostle to replace Judas they prayed for God to show them whom he had chosen to fill that church office. "And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all *men*, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen." (Acts 1:24, KJV).

Throughout the New Testament, we see the church leaders praying and then laying hands upon newly baptized believers and those selected to be leaders in the church (e.g., Acts 19:6 and 1 Tim. 4:14). In several instances, the Bible indicates that newly baptized believers received special gifts from the Holy Spirit when hands were laid upon them to receive the Holy Spirit. When it came to ordaining leaders in the church, again we see hands being laid upon individuals, by which the church recognized the spiritual gift(s) that God had already bestowed upon that individual. The choice of which spiritual gift each individual received, and when and how that gift was received, was ultimately up to the Holy Spirit who "apportions to each one individually as he wills." (1 Cor. 12:11, ESV). According to 1 Corinthians 12, it is God who ultimately "sets" or ordains even those appointed to govern the church. Speaking of spiritual ministry offices within the church, Paul writes that "God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues." (1 Cor. 12:28, ESV). Apparently, the church's task is to listen to the Spirit and recognize those who should be appointed or ordained to these offices within the church.

Ellen G. White's view on this issue is one worthy of our attention. She notes the following about ordination to New Testament church office:

Both Paul and Barnabas had already received their commission from God Himself, and the ceremony of the laying on of hands added no new grace or virtual qualification. It was an acknowledged form of designation to an appointed office and a recognition of one's authority in that office. By it the seal of the church was set upon the work of God.

To the Jew this form was a significant one. When a Jewish father blessed his children, he laid his hands reverently upon their heads. When an animal was devoted to sacrifice, the hand of the one invested with priestly authority was laid upon the head of the victim. And when the ministers of the church of believers in Antioch laid their hands upon Paul and Barnabas, they, by that action, asked God to bestow His blessing upon the chosen apostles in their devotion to the specific work to which they had been appointed.

At a later date the rite of ordination by the laying on of hands was greatly abused; unwarrantable importance was attached to the act, as if a power came at once upon those who received such ordination, which immediately qualified them for any and all ministerial work. But in the setting apart of these two apostles, there is no record indicating that any virtue was imparted by the mere act of laying on of hands. There is only the simple record of their ordination and of the bearing that it had on their future work. – *Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 161-162.

Notice the order here. Both Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12, and White, in her book above, emphasize that the Holy Spirit first “ordains” or appoints a person to ministry by giving that person spiritual gifts for a ministry or church office; secondly, the church recognizes that gifting by setting the individual apart by the public laying on of hands. Ordination by human hands is simply a recognition of whatever gift that God chooses to bestow.

White seemed to believe that the ordination that ultimately matters is the one given by God. She lamented the fact that one evangelist felt he could not baptize since he had not received ordination by the church. She noted that from God’s standpoint, he was already ordained, inferring that his giftedness to bring souls to Christ was evidence of God having ordained him to ministry.¹ This means that believers, including women, who have been gifted and called by God to ministry have already received ordination from God Himself regardless of whether the church ever recognizes their calling.

When it comes to spiritual gifts, church ministry and ordination, the Bible tells us that the church’s job is to recognize the spiritual giftedness that God has chosen to bestow upon a believer. How does the church do this? By praying for God’s guidance and then appointing – ordaining – the gifted individual to the appropriate church office that correlates with their giftedness. Ordination by human hands does not, in and of itself, impart any special giftedness but is a recognition of the ministry that God has already called the believer to perform.

III. DOES THE BIBLE PROHIBIT WOMEN FROM MINISTERING IN CERTAIN CHURCH OFFICES OR FROM EXERCISING CERTAIN SPIRITUAL GIFTS? CAN WOMEN FULFILL SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP FUNCTIONS “OVER” MEN IN THE CHURCH?

In 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, Paul begins by discussing various spiritual gifts given to believers by the Holy Spirit “as He wills.” (1 Cor. 12:11, NIV). Then, in verses 12-31 of the same chapter, Paul talks about ministries within the church and how the spiritual gifts mentioned earlier in the chapter prepare people to fulfill various church offices and leadership roles.

¹ White wrote, “It has been a great mistake that men go out, knowing they are children of God, like Brother Tay, [who] went to Pitcairn as a missionary to do work, [but] that man did not feel at liberty to baptize because he had not been ordained. That is not any of God's arrangements; it is man's fixing. When men go out with the burden of the work and to bring souls into the truth, those men are ordained of God, [even] if [they] never have a touch of [the] ceremony of ordination.” *Unpublished Manuscript, MS 75, 1896.*

As Paul discusses these spiritual gifts and spiritual ministries, he makes no mention that any of these gifts or offices are limited to men. In fact, if women are a part of the body of Christ, and we know that they are, Paul is arguing for full inclusion and honor for all members of the church, including women, when it comes to spiritual gifts and ministries (see Gal. 3:28).

Opponents of women in leadership rarely question that the Holy Spirit can gift women with gifts as He chooses. What is generally contested is whether women can hold any church office or fulfill all roles within the church. Opponents of women in leadership believe that women can only fulfill those roles where women are not required to lead or somehow exercise “headship” over men (but no church job is really exempt from leading men, unless you segregate the church by gender. Even women teaching little boys in Bible class would be a form of leadership over men).

To address the issue of spiritual gifts and ministries, Paul actually gives us a spiritual leadership “hierarchy,” if you will, of ministries within the church. In 1 Cor. 12:28, he states that “God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating and various kinds of tongues.” (1 Cor. 12:28, ESV).

A similar list of church ministries is given in Ephesians. “And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds (pastors) and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” (Eph. 4:11-12, ESV).

Church elders, both the *episkopos* (e.g., 1 Timothy 3:1) and the *presbuteros* (e.g., 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Peter 5:1) in Scripture, have leadership roles in the church that are defined in Scripture as administrative and pastoral (shepherd). As such, words like overseer and bishop are often used to translate the Greek words above. Looking at Paul’s hierarchy of church leadership, take note that pastors and administrators are farther down the list, well below prophets and apostles.

The argument that women cannot be appointed by God to spiritually lead men is demolished by Paul’s spiritual leadership “hierarchy” in 1 Corinthians 12. We will see that in Scripture it is clear that women have been called to the role of prophet in the church. How is this relevant to our discussion on the ordination of women to pastoral ministry? According to Paul, when it comes to spiritual leadership roles in the church, prophets trump pastors. As one pastor queried in an online comment, “A women can be a prophet but not a pastor? A general and not a sergeant?”²

Some will then argue that the roles of a prophet and pastor are mutually exclusive. The role of prophet is somehow not an “ordained” leadership office “over” men as is the role of a pastor in the church. But does Scripture anywhere make this artificial distinction? It does not. Of course, the function of prophet and pastor are different in the sense that a pastor does not generally function as a full-fledged prophet. But a prophet does function in many respects as a pastor. A prophet’s job includes the roles of teaching, preaching, correcting, encouraging, guiding, counseling, and leading – engaging in many if not all of the functions of a pastor. Additionally, a prophet serves in a church office – appointed by God³ – as a leader in the Body of Christ.

DEBORAH – A PROPHET, JUDGE AND MILITARY LEADER OF MEN

The biblical prophetess Deborah is one example of a woman who exercised a leadership role over men. “Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under

² Pastor Jeff Carlson in an online comment.

³ See 1 Cor. 12:28.

the palm of Deborah...and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment.” (Judges 4:4-5, ESV). Note that Deborah had the gift of prophecy and was recognized in the church of that time as holding the prophetic office. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly to those who argue that prophets do not really hold spiritual leadership roles over men, Deborah was also a judge in the church. “And the people of Israel came up to her for judgment.”

The word used for “judged” in reference to Deborah is the same root word (*shawphat*) that is used by the writer of Judges when he notes that “Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them.” (Judges 2:16, ESV). Some have argued that Deborah, due to her gender, was not a full-fledged judge like Samson or Jephthah. But this theory does not come from the text for, just like other judges mentioned in the book of Judges, it is said that she “judged Israel.” While she may not have been appointed as a “usual magistrate” in Israel, her function and role was that of a judge. Ellen White notes that “Deborah the prophet *governed* Israel.”⁴ Additionally, Deborah is one of the few judges who was also said to be a prophet. But she was much more than a prophet.

As one who judged Israel, Deborah undoubtedly decided cases involving both men and women. Her orders were obeyed by men, and men listened to her wisdom and counsel.

Deborah’s leadership also included leading Israel to battle. Notice her command to a man: “She sent and summoned Barak...” (Judges 4:6, ESV). Barak obeyed the command of this female leader of Israel and appeared before her. Deborah asked Barak why he had not fulfilled his duties as a general of the army of Israel. Barak’s response shows the confidence that the people of Israel placed in Deborah, a woman. “If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” (Judges 4:8, ESV). Deborah replied that she would get the credit and the victory would go to a woman (both Deborah and Jael, the woman who drove a tent stake through Sisera’s head, received the credit for the victory). The story of Deborah clearly shows that God uses women to lead His people as prophets, judges and (in the case of the ancient theocracy of Israel) military leaders.

Exactly how long Deborah led Israel we do not know, although it could have been for several decades. One thing is clear, God calls, appoints and uses women in leadership roles over men.⁵ These female leadership roles are not limited to the prophetic office as we see in the case of Deborah, who was also a judge and theocratic military leader.

How can Deborah’s story help us understand how God wants to use women in His church today? What equivalent role for “judge” do we find in the New Testament church? Perhaps the closest parallel is the role of “shepherd” or church pastor. After the time of the ancient judges, we see Israel requesting a king. Israel was dissatisfied with merely having a succession of judges to provide guidance and resolve their disputes. Instead, they wanted royalty – a visible king to sit on their throne – and God reluctantly granted their wish. The king, in addition to fulfilling roles that God had Himself previously filled, also fulfilled the role that the judges had previously filled – that of leader and shepherd to the people of Israel.⁶

⁴ *Daughters of God*, p. 36.

⁵ Some would argue that since the vast majority of biblical spiritual leaders – judges, kings, prophets, apostles – are men, God only used women in spiritual leadership roles as a stopgap measure in extraordinary circumstances. While the prophecy of Joel 2:28-29 directly contradicts this idea, God’s use of even one woman as a spiritual leader “over” men shows us that women serving in such leadership roles is not a sin issue, since God would never lead someone into sin. See James 1:13.

⁶ Among other roles, the new king was to fill the role of judge that Samuel and his sons had previously filled (see 1 Samuel 8:1-7 – “...Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations,” verse 5, KJV). The new kingly role is described as that of a shepherd as he stepped into the void created by the judges who had previously acted as the shepherds of Israel: “Previously, when Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel out and in. And

In the New Testament, those in the office of elder (*presbuteros*) are called to “shepherd” (pastor) the flock of God.⁷ (The word translated “pastor” in Eph. 4:11 is *poimen*, which means shepherd). If God can use Deborah to judge, lead, guide, counsel, and shepherd His people in the Old Testament, surely he can use women to shepherd or pastor and lead His church today.⁸

MARY MAGDALENE – A PREACHER AND EVANGELIST TO MEN

Turning to the New Testament, we see Jesus Himself commissioning Mary Magdalene with the first message of the resurrected Christ. “...Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father...’” (John 20:17, ESV). Mary is sent as a preacher of the good news! She is sent to preach to men, no less. Should women not teach or preach to men? Not according to Jesus, who sent Mary with a message to proclaim to a group of men.

WOMEN MINISTERS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

What about women in the early church? Although Israelite women were accorded some rights, by the time of Christ, ungodly traditions had crept into the Israelite culture and women were treated as second class citizens in many ways. On a spiritual level they were largely excluded – most of the temple was off limits to women and it is likely that they were not allowed to attend the synagogue and learn the law. Jesus’ practice of acknowledging and including women was incredibly radical for His time. Instead of avoiding women (to stay ritually pure or to keep his reputation intact), He had a group of women that followed Him (disciples) from time to time (see Mark 15:41, etc.). The respect and inclusion that Jesus demonstrated toward women was revolutionary for His day. Some have argued that the reason Jesus only ordained male apostles was because church leadership and apostleship is limited only to men in the Bible. This idea contradicts the rest of Scripture, as we have seen and will see. A better explanation for why the apostles were all males is that Jesus knew that formally selecting women to be with him always (as were his male disciples) as disciples would create an appearance of evil (women traveling and camping out with an itinerant unmarried rabbi), and would arouse unnecessary prejudice in a Jewish culture where women were constantly discriminated against.⁹

As soon as we open the book of Acts, we notice something new and refreshing that the church was only starting to understand. Jesus had ascended to heaven. The disciples gathered together – both men and women – and lifted up their voices in prayer. It is significant that Luke, the author of Acts, specifically notes that “all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, *together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus...*” (Acts 1:14, ESV). Jewish men and women were praying together in the same place! Revolutionary.

Even greater things were happening. Artificial distinctions were laid aside; no one was striving for first place – or headship – in the church anymore. Humility, love for Jesus and righteousness, and a desire for unity filled the disciples’ hearts. Meanwhile, something else remarkable was taking place. The Holy

the Lord said to you, ‘You will shepherd My people Israel, and you will be a ruler over Israel.’” (2 Sam. 5:2, NASB).

⁷ See 1 Peter 5:1

⁸ Ellen White agrees, writing that women are called to “be pastors to the flock of God.” *Testimonies for the Church, Vol. 6*, p. 322.

⁹ Some argue that Jesus didn’t care about people’s prejudice – that He didn’t take into account how people’s reaction to his actions could hinder God’s work. But His constant admonitions to beneficiaries of His healings to remain silent about how they had been healed shows us that He was sensitive to arousing the prejudice of the rabbis and the excitement of the general populace and thereby cutting short His ministry efforts.

Spirit began to fall upon both men *and women* and gave them spiritual gifts to do His work!¹⁰ Peter mentions something in his Pentecost sermon – a prophecy about the last days that had been given during the intertestamental period. He noted that what was happening that day “is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel:

‘And it shall be in the last days,’ God says, ‘That I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on My bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit and they shall prophesy.’ (Acts 2:16-18, NASB).

Now, instead of women being excluded – from the congregation, from prayer gatherings, from mission, from evangelism, from leadership, and from the Spirit’s gifts – they are full recipients of the Holy Spirit and all that He brings with Him.

Priscilla was one such recipient of the Spirit’s gifts. In Acts 18:26, we find Priscilla and her husband teaching a man about Jesus. Here, we have a woman explaining (teaching) the Scriptures to a man. In Acts 21:9, we learn of Philip’s four daughters who are prophets. Apparently, prophesying was common in the early church, and Paul noted that a believer who prophesies “speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation... The one who prophesies builds up the church.” (1 Corinthians 14:3-4, ESV). Nothing is said that leads us to believe that Philip’s daughters only prophesied to women and not to men.¹¹ Additionally, Paul makes no such distinctions when he talks about the role of a prophet in the Corinthian church. Finally, an argument can be made that Junia, mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:7, was a female apostle. An excellent article about this is referenced in the footnote.¹²

The biblical record of the Early Church leads us to conclude that there were women in the New Testament church who were gifted and called by God to church offices and ministries where they taught men, prophesied to men, expounded the Word to men, and evangelized men.

Simply put, the Bible does not prohibit women from ministering as church leaders or preclude them from receiving all the gifts of the Spirit. In fact, we have seen that God has called women to the church offices of prophet and judge. Multiple women in Scripture were given the gift of prophecy and called to the office of prophet in the church. Paul noted that the office of prophet was second only to that of apostle, “above” that of pastors, teachers, evangelists or administrators. Clearly, if God can call a woman to the second most authoritative role in the church then, at least, he can use women in any lesser spiritual leadership role in the church (i.e., that of pastor-teacher or administrator). Furthermore, God has used women to lead, exhort, teach, preach to, and evangelize men. The testimony of Scripture is clear: women can minister in leadership roles in the church and function as spiritual leaders of men.

¹⁰ Peter would later comment that the bestowal of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles was evidence of God having accepted the Gentiles and making “no distinction” between them and the Jews. “Who was I to stand in God’s way?” (Acts 11:17, ESV). Is the bestowal of the gifts of the Holy Spirit on women on the day of Pentecost evidence of God’s declaring clean those who were formerly ritually “unclean” (like the Gentiles)? More on this later.

¹¹ Those who argue that women should minister exclusively to women, have to logically conclude that, for example, Ellen White’s writings should only be read by women, and not by men. Of course, this is absurd when one considers that most of White’s testimonies were written to men, giving them counsel and spiritual guidance. Additionally, White regularly taught, preached, evangelized and spoke in meetings where men were present. Either women can be called by God to spiritually lead men or Ellen White was a false prophet.

¹² Nancy Vhymeister presents a clear biblical case for Junia being a woman apostle in the following Ministry Magazine article: <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2013/07/junia-the-apostle>.

IV. WHAT DID ELLEN WHITE HAVE TO SAY ABOUT WOMEN IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP AND PASTORAL MINISTRY? WAS SHE HERSELF ORDAINED?

Ellen White was someone recognized by many Adventists as having been gifted with the biblical gift of prophecy.¹³ While never explicitly claiming the title of prophet, she believed that she had been called and *ordained* by God to be a messenger for Him.¹⁴ She noted that her work, while including that of a prophet, was much broader than that of a mere prophet. She was a messenger¹⁵ and church leader – and she did claim that she had been *ordained* by God to this role. Was she ever ordained by human hands? Not to our knowledge. But she was ordained. Was a human ordination necessary for her to exercise her biblical office and ex officio leadership roles within the Adventist denomination (for which she received a modest church salary from the tithe)? No one would argue that it was. She had been ordained already – by God.

Ellen White called herself a “messenger” of the Lord. Although she satisfied the biblical criteria for a prophet, her ministry title and function encompassed much more than merely relating her visions and dreams. In a way, she was a modern-day Deborah – judging “Israel,” leading the way into spiritual “battle” as Deborah did, and exercising spiritual authority over men in the church as Deborah did over Barak and those she judged. Instead of merely relating visions and dreams, Ellen White’s ministry involved leading the way as a co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. She also, taught, counseled, evangelized, corrected, exhorted, and preached to both men and women.

As such, God’s call to Ellen White as His messenger shows us that God, at least, does not consider using women in a spiritual leadership role over men and women in the church to be a sin. In actuality, her ministry evidences God’s implicit endorsement of women serving in recognized spiritual leadership posts, leading both men and women, in the church.

One reason why White and other women were not ordained by the church of her day likely had to do with the prejudice it would have created for the cause of truth. In her day, women had very limited rights in society and in the church. For example, in society they were not allowed to vote and property rights were limited. In the church, things were not much better. Adventists were socially progressive in that they licensed women to preach and do evangelism¹⁶ and, at White’s insistence, paid women clergy with tithe money¹⁷ (reserved in the Bible exclusively for recognized church elders and servant-leaders who “rule” or manage the church, “especially those whose work is preaching and teaching”¹⁸). Nonetheless, women’s rights still had a long way to go. White, in keeping with her measured and pragmatic approach to similar social issues (like racial segregation), seemed cautious about moving too quickly on all aspects of gender equality within the church lest unbelievers be turned off to the truth.¹⁹

¹³ See this website for more reading on Ellen White and her prophetic gift: <http://www.whiteestate.org>.

¹⁴ “In the city of Portland the Lord ordained me as His messenger, and here my first labors were given to the cause of present truth.” *RH, May 18, 1911*.

¹⁵ An analogous church office and function in the Bible can be seen in the ministry of Deborah, who was a prophetess, judge in Israel, and leader of Israel’s army in battle.

¹⁶ See Bert Haloviak’s excellent article on the history of women and the Adventist church at <http://session.adventistfaith.org/assets/439713>.

¹⁷ “The tithe should go to those who labor in word and doctrine, be they men or women.” *Manuscript Releases 1:263 (1899)*.

¹⁸ 1 Timothy 5:17, NIV.

¹⁹ C.C. Crisler shared his opinion of what Ellen White thought about the ordination issue: “Sister White, personally, was very careful about expressing herself in any wise as to the advisability of ordaining women as gospel ministers. She has often spoken of the perils that such general practice would expose the church to by a gainsaying world; but as yet I have never seen from her pen any statement that would seem to encourage the formal and official ordination of women to the gospel ministry, to public labor such as is ordinarily expected of an ordained minister. This is not suggesting, much less saying, that no women are fitted for such public labor, and that none

Despite her measured approach, Ellen White encouraged young women to become “pastors to the flock of God.” She wrote,

All who desire an opportunity for true ministry, and who will give themselves unreservedly to God, will find in the canvassing work opportunities to speak upon many things pertaining to the future, immortal life. The experience thus gained will be of the greatest value to those who are fitting themselves for the ministry. It is the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit of God that prepares workers, *both men and women*, to become pastors to the flock of God. – *Testimonies for the Church, Volume 6*, p. 322, emphasis mine.

Here, Ellen White refers to both men and women as “pastor.” In keeping with her counsel elsewhere in her writings, she noted that the literature evangelism work was the best line of work to prepare men and women for the function and office of church pastoral ministry.²⁰

Lest we be left in the dark as to whether Ellen White believed that women could actually lead and manage a church, in other words, fill the biblical office of “overseer,” here’s what she had to say: “It is not always men who are best adapted to the successful management of a church. If faithful women have more deep piety and true devotion than men, they could indeed by their prayers and their labors do more than men who are unconsecrated in heart and in life.” *Pastoral Ministry*, p. 36. Note what she is telling us here: women are sometimes better adapted to manage a church than are men! In fact, managing a church is exactly what an elder (*presbeturos*) does (the word translated “rule” in 1 Timothy 5:17 is *proistemi* which means to manage or lead). Would Ellen White suggest that women do something that she knew to be unbiblical or sinful?

White elsewhere advocated for both men and women doing the Lord’s work – and doing it together: “Place the burdens upon men and women of the church, that they may grow by reason of the exercise, and thus become effective agents in the hand of the Lord for the enlightenment of those who sit in darkness.” *Pastoral Ministry*, p. 75. Again she wrote, “When a great and decisive work is to be done, God chooses men and women to do this work, and it will feel the loss if the talents of both are not combined.” *Letter 77, 1898*.

Another clue into Ellen White’s views on women in ministry comes from her explicit and numerous statements where she advocated for women being paid from the sacred tithe money. In the New Testament era, the tithe is reserved for church elders and servant-leaders who “rule” or lead the church, “especially those whose work is preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17, NIV). White agreed, writing that “Each...[should] set apart the tithe as a separate fund, to be sacredly the Lord’s. This fund should not in any case be devoted to any other use; it is to be devoted solely to support the ministry of the gospel (a term she used to refer to ordained pastors). After the tithe is set apart, let gifts and offerings be apportioned, ‘as God hath prospered’ you.”²¹ Later, White specifically noted that “the tithe should go to

should ever be ordained; it is simply saying that so far as my knowledge extends, Sister White never encouraged church officials to depart from the general customs of the church in those matters.” *C. C. Crisler. DG 255*.

²⁰ Some suggest that Ellen White was saying that literature evangelism *is* pastoral ministry. But she was very clear that the two ministries were different, noting that literature evangelists should not be paid with tithe money, unlike those in pastoral ministry. The context of 6T 322 clearly is talking about the canvassing work as a *preparation* to work as a pastor. In many other places, Ellen White repeats this: “Missionary work – introducing our publications into families...is a good work and one that will educate men and women to do pastoral labor.” *4T 390*. “Those who are fitting for the ministry can engage in no other occupation that will give them so large an experience as will the canvassing work.” *Testimonies for the Church, Volume 6*, p. 334.

²¹ *The Review and Herald*, May 9, 1893.

those who labor in word and doctrine, be they men or women.”²² The old maxim that if A equals B, and B equals C, then A equals C, holds true here as well. If only those in gospel ministry may be paid with the sacred tithe, and if White advocated for women in ministry to receive the sacred tithe, didn’t Ellen White consider women who ministered “in word and doctrine” to be on a par with men who ministered and received tithe?

While White was clear on her views of women in church pastoral ministry and church management offices, she was relatively silent on the issue of women being ordained by human hands to certain ministries even though the issue came up in her day.²³

To Ellen White, ordination did not seem to provide any additional qualification to do “the work,” but was merely a ceremony whereby the church recognized God’s call upon someone’s life to a particular ministry and church office.²⁴ Keep in mind White’s view of human ordination. She wrote, “When men go out with the burden of the work and to bring souls into the truth, those men are ordained of God, [even] if [they] never have a touch of [the] ceremony of ordination.”²⁵ Human ordination is really about helping the church to do all things decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40), and not necessarily about adding any additional qualification from God. Thus, White’s silence is, on one hand, not alarming, seeing as how she did not seem to think that human ordination was unduly important.

On the other hand, if Ellen White considered the issue of women’s ordination to gospel ministry a sin issue, we can be sure that she would not have been silent when this issue arose in her day. If this had been a sin issue or one on which the church could go astray, Ellen White would likely have written or spoken on the issue, since some very influential Adventist ministers were behind an effort to have women ordained in 1881 and there is no record that they ever changed their views. Instead, Ellen White was silent. This is significant. Women’s ordination was a contemporary issue that the church of her day considered. She was never silent where an issue was raised that could lead the church into apostasy.²⁶ Ellen White had an opportunity to write *against* the ordination of women to gospel ministry and she did not. Therefore, we must conclude that to Ellen White, ordaining women to ministry was, at least, not a sin issue that she felt necessary to oppose. We can be certain that, to her, this was not an issue that rose to the level of importance to which today’s opponents of women’s ordination seek to raise it.

In fact, it seems that the reason White did not encourage the church of her day to officially ordain women had to do with her belief in proceeding cautiously with reforms that could produce prejudice against the truth for an unbelieving and chauvinistic world. Unlike today, ordaining women to certain positions in the church would have certainly caused such prejudice in White’s day. She did make one thing clear: women should serve as gospel ministers. In 1898, she wrote the following: “There are women who should labor in the gospel ministry. In many respects they would do more good than the [male] ministers who neglect to visit the flock of God.” *Ms. 431, 1898.*

For a more comprehensive look at Ellen White and women in ministry, see the article referenced in the

²² Manuscript Releases 1:263 (1899).

²³ I say “relatively” silent, because she did encourage women to enter pastoral ministry and manage churches. The issue of officially ordaining women came up at a General Conference Session in 1881. Yet we have no record of her writing one word against the ordination of women even though she had opportunity to do so. No action was taken on the resolution at this Session. It later died in committee. (Ellen White was not in attendance at this GC Session - James White had passed away that year). The language of the resolution was as follows: “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.” DG 248.

²⁴ See, e.g., *Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 161-162.

²⁵ Unpublished Manuscript, MS 75, 1896.

²⁶ Recall the pantheism “alpha” of apostasy that she confronted a few years later.

footnote.²⁷

V. AN OVERVIEW OF MALE HEADSHIP THEOLOGY & ITS IMPLICATIONS

As we jump into the topic of “male headship,” please note that the actual term “headship” does not appear in the Bible. Headship is generally used to refer to the idea that men have a default universal spiritual authority over women in the home and/or in the church and/or in general.

Female ordination opponents generally cite four main passages from the Apostle Paul’s writings that they believe teach universal male headship in the home and church: Ephesians 5:22-33; 1 Corinthians 11:3; 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

Before we examine these verses, it is helpful to note that there are degrees of male headship theology. On one extreme are those who believe that, for example, women cannot work outside of the home in any capacity where they would be in leadership over men; speak in church, teach or instruct men; or in any way exercise leadership – whether secular or ecclesiastical – over men. If the above biblical passages teach universal male headship, then logically this extreme position is the one that all Bible-believing Christians should adopt. Under this model of male headship, it would be sinful for a woman to serve in a management position in a secular company or as a political leader, since she would be exercising headship over men.

A less logically consistent, yet more common, strain of universal headship theology (what I call a “modified male headship theology”) within the Adventist faith community is summed up nicely by a friend’s observation:

Ellen White has basically forced Seventh-day Adventists to admit that *some* forms of female leadership are acceptable. (Otherwise some would attempt to make us as limiting of women's roles as some fundamentalist Protestant churches). So the reasoning goes like this: Women can be prophets, Sabbath school teachers, evangelists and school administrators. But they can't lead congregations as a pastor. I ask, ‘Where does it say they can't lead as pastors?’ And they proceed to show ‘proof’ from a few statements Paul made that [seem to say that] women can't lead at all, [and] that headship statements mean that for a woman to lead a man is unscriptural. So: ‘Women can lead, just not as pastors.’ ‘Why can't women be pastors?’ ‘Because women shouldn't lead.’ Is that called circular reasoning?²⁸

When modified male headship proponents are asked what male headship looks like on a practical level, their answers vary. Generally, though, modified proponents will allow women to *functionally* do pretty much anything that an ordained Adventist pastor can do. Women can teach men, preach to men, give Bible studies to men, prepare men for baptism, chair some committees with men on the committee, and lead certain religious organizations (like church schools), but usually are not allowed to baptize, officiate the Lord’s supper, or chair a church board (even though there is no biblical basis to exclude women from these things).

The real restrictions for women under the modified male headship model are actually more about *form* than function. Modified male headship is more about symbolism – symbolically “powerful” or authoritative spiritual roles that they believe only men should fill. For example, women may be allowed

²⁷ Denis Fortin, *Ellen White, Women in Ministry, and the Ordination of Women* (<http://www.adventistarchives.org/ellen-white,-women-in-ministry-and-the-ordination-of-women.pdf>).

²⁸ Jennifer Schwirzer, a Christian counselor and musician, shared this in a Facebook comment. Ms. Schwirzer does not necessarily share the views expressed in this paper on Women’s Ordination.

to *function* in nearly every respect like a church pastor, but cannot be *called* “pastor” or be recognized as being “ordained” (even though many will admit that human ordination is merely a recognition of God’s calling). Most believe that a woman can be called a “Bible worker” and fulfill practically every function of an ordained pastor but simply cannot fill the *position* of a pastor in the church. When it comes right down to it, modified headship proponents exalt form over function, and symbolism over substance.

What does the Bible actually teach about headship?

VI. IS PAUL’S COMMAND FOR WIVES TO SUBMIT TO THEIR HUSBANDS AT HOME ALSO A COMMAND FOR WOMEN TO BE SUBORDINATED TO MEN IN THE CHURCH?

In his letter to the Ephesians, we find Paul teaching that the husband is “head” (*kephale*) of the wife in the home (see Ephesians 5:21-29). Does it follow then that all men everywhere are the head of all women everywhere? Or is it only married women who are subject to male headship in the church? On a practical level, how would it work for a woman to submit to every man she encountered at church? How could that even be possible (whose authority would trump when there are conflicts among the numerous male heads of any given woman)?

When we look at the immediate context of Paul’s statement in Ephesians 5, it is clear that he is directing one command, to “submit to one another,” to the church in general and the other command, for wives to submit to their husbands, specifically to the context of the home. First, in Ephesians 5:21 he tells the members of the church “to be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.” In other words, in the context of the church all believers are called to submit to one another. There should be no striving to be number one (see Luke 22:24-27). The context of this statement is instructive since two verses later Paul tells us that Christ is “the Head” of the church. In other words, in the body of Christ, there is only one Head – Christ. Therefore, in the context of the church, no person is the “head” of any church – local or otherwise.²⁹ All believers are called to submit to each other.

In the very next verse, Paul counsels wives to “be subject (*hupotasso*) to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” (Eph. 5:22, NASB). Paul’s counsel to the church at Ephesus for everyone to “be subject (*hupotasso*) to one another in the fear of Christ” (Eph. 5:21, NASB) would make no sense unless he is speaking about submission within a different context than he is in verse 22. Otherwise, his counsel to wives to “be subject” to their own husbands is meaningless since he just told *everyone* (including husbands) to be subject to each other. The only conclusion that does not distort the meaning of the whole passage is to understand that Paul is teaching that there is some kind of submission of wife to husband in the home but no human headship of either male or female in the church. Only Christ is the head of the church, and the church (the people of God, both male and female) are to submit to the Head and to each other just as wives are called to submit to their husbands at home. Female church members are not dependent on submission to the male members of the church to have a relationship with God or exercise their spiritual gift; instead, they answer directly to God who is their Head.

Paul continues: “For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself *being* the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives *ought to be* to their husbands in everything.” (Eph. 5:23-14, NASB). Here, Paul makes it so clear that it is

²⁹ There may be overseers, leaders, and ranks of leadership within the church, but no one is by default greater or superior to another in the church community. Men are not heads over women in the context of the church. Masters are not greater than slaves. One race is not superior to another. Instead, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Gal. 3:28, NASB.

impossible to miss. He contrasts the headship of the husband in the home³⁰ with the headship of Christ in the church. The body of Christ, made up of both men and women, he notes, is subject only to Christ (not to all the males in the church).

The husband's "headship" of his wife in the home is not transferrable to the church. There is no statement in Scripture that says that any human being is the head of the church.³¹ Only Christ is the head of His body, the church.³² Ellen White certainly believed this, writing that "Christ, not the minister, is the head of the church"³³ and "Christ is the only Head of the church."³⁴

VII. DOES 1 CORINTHIANS 11:3 TEACH UNIVERSAL MALE HEADSHIP?

"But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God." (1 Cor. 11:3, ESV).

This verse simply restates what we have already seen from Ephesians 5. In the home, there is a default divinely ordained order, so to speak, where the husband is the servant-leader of the home.

The main controversy surrounding 1 Corinthians 11:3 is surrounding the words translated "wife" (*gune*) and "husband" (*aner*) here. The words can also be translated as "woman" and "man." But based on the larger biblical context, especially Paul's clarifying statements in Ephesians 5, the English Standard Version translators got it right. The rest of the Bible teaches that a husband is the head of his wife, but it does not teach that men are the default heads of all women.³⁵

Next, we will examine a verse that appears to forbid women from speaking or exercising any leadership role over men. But, as we dig a little deeper, we'll see that this passage was addressing a specific problem in the church at Ephesus and does not teach general default male headship.

VIII. IS PAUL'S COMMAND FOR WOMEN NOT TO TEACH AND TO REMAIN QUIET APPLICABLE TO ALL WOMEN IN EVERY SITUATION?

³⁰ In case men are confused as to what kind of "headship" in the home Paul is referring to, Paul tells husbands that they are to love their wives like Christ loved the church and give themselves for her. Who is called to be more sacrificial – the husband who is told to love like Christ or the wife who is told to "be subject" to her husband in the context of the home? Ellen White seemed to agree. I have yet to find a statement where she tells a wife to "submit" to her husband – there was already too much oppression of women in her day. Instead, she made statements like the following: "My brother, be kind, patient, forbearing. Remember that your wife accepted you as her husband, not that you might rule over her, but that you might be her helper. Never be overbearing and dictatorial. Do not exert your strong will power to compel your wife to do as you wish. Remember that she has a will and that she may wish to have her way as much as you wish to have yours." *Testimonies for the Church, Volume 7*, p. 48. "Neither husband nor wife is to make a plea for rulership. The Lord has laid down the principle that is to guide in this matter. The husband is to cherish his wife as Christ cherishes the church. And the wife is to respect and love her husband. Both are to cultivate the spirit of kindness, being determined never to grieve or injure the other." *Signs of the Times, November 11, 1903 Par. 4*.

³¹ We will examine the one supposed implicit link between the leadership of the home and that of the church later. Proponents of this theory see a link in 1 Tim. 3:4-5.

³² For an excellent and more in-depth study of the exclusive headship of Christ over the church, see this study published by the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University: https://www.andrews.edu/sem/unique_headship_of_christ_final.pdf.

³³ *Signs of the Times*, Jan. 27, 1890

³⁴ *Manuscript Releases*, 21:274

³⁵ See the excellent paper regarding the headship of Christ referenced above.

“Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” (1 Timothy 2:11-14, ESV).

Note that this passage says nothing about women’s ordination. The word “ordination” is not found in this passage, since that was not Paul’s focus here. Taken at face value, this passage seems to be saying that women should be “seen but not heard” in church and that they should not ever teach men or ever tell a man what to do. However, as one Bible scholar has noted, “it is the witness of Scripture in its totality that should be used to make a decision [on the meaning of a passage], keeping in mind that even in cases where local practices are being used there are always principles involved that are valid for us today.”³⁶ When we look at all of Scripture, we realize that Paul cannot be prohibiting women from ever teaching a man (as did Priscilla, Philip’s daughters, Deborah, etc.), or from exercising “authority” over a man (as did Deborah with Barak). As with the verses on hell fire, we need to dig a little deeper, for the Bible does not contradict itself.

First Timothy 2:11-15 is a favorite verse of those who believe in male headship. Pure male headship proponents take every word of this verse very literally (and out of context from the rest of Scripture) and teach that women are never to teach men, and must remain quiet in church, etc.

Modified male headship proponents take part of this passage literally and extract principles from the rest. Most modified proponents do not believe that a woman must literally “remain quiet.” They will argue that the phrase simply means having a quiet attitude or being quiet at certain times. Furthermore, even though they claim to read this passage literally, they only take part of it literally. For example, modified proponents will read the phrase “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man” and admit that it is acceptable for a woman to teach a man (presumably since there are so many examples in Scripture of women teaching men). In the same breath they will then argue that a woman cannot exercise authority over a man (whatever that means – and we will find out in a moment). So, for modified headship proponents, some of this verse is read with what they would call its “plain meaning” and the rest of the verse is “interpreted” so as to fit with the rest of Scripture. I would argue that the whole passage must harmonize with the rest of Scripture or our understanding of the passage is likely a wrong one.

I believe that this verse must be understood both in the immediate context of Paul’s letter to Timothy – both the linguistic, literary structure, and time, place, and cultural context of the letter – and in the context of what the rest of the Bible says about women teaching men, speaking in church and women exercising authority over men.

Paul begins with, “**Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness.**” Note that Paul is encouraging women to learn. This learning was to be done in a quiet and submissive manner.

To understand this passage, we must read these verses in the context of the larger letter. Paul was addressing Timothy, the pastor of the church at Ephesus. The Ephesian church was experiencing false teachings that were stirring up controversy (see 1 Tim. 1:3-11, etc.). Paul was sending some strong words to some women who were likely involved in stirring up controversy by their attitude and words. He tells them that, instead of teaching, they need to learn – and do so in a quiet (*en hesuchia*), teachable manner. As Angel Manuel Rodriguez notes, “The Greek text says *en hesuchia* indicating, through the use of the preposition *en* (“in”), that silence refers to the condition under which the learning experience takes place

³⁶ Angel Manuel Rodriguez, in his excellent book, *Jewelry in the Bible*, p. 77. You can purchase it here: <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/shop/jewelry-bible>.

and not to the permanent condition of women in church or in society.”³⁷ Paul here was telling these women (and this can apply to men as well) to avoid speaking during the time they should be learning in a way that would stir up controversy and cause a disturbance in the church.

Paul then tells these women to have an attitude of “submissiveness.” Rodriguez notes that again “the use of the preposition *en* (“in”) limits the submission to the context of the learning process.”³⁸ In other words, just as Paul was not commanding these women to always be silent neither is he here commanding them to always be submissive. It is very important to note what Paul does not say here: he does not specify to who or what these women are to submit. I used to read this and immediately assume that Paul was telling them to be submissive to men (or a man, somewhere). But nowhere is that stated here. In fact, elsewhere in Scripture all believers are told to submit to each other (Eph. 5:21), and the newer members are to submit to the older, more experienced members (1 Peter 5:5). Here, Paul is “telling the woman that truth is found only in the instruction that she is receiving at church and not in the teachings of the false apostles and that therefore she is to submit to it, to surrender to it.”³⁹ How can we know this? It makes excellent sense in the context and Paul has used this phrase elsewhere under similar circumstances (false teachers stirring up controversy in the church). Rodriguez notes that this idea “can be supported by Gal. 2:5 where Paul describes his confrontation with some false brothers to whom he did not yield ‘in subjection’ for one moment. In other words, he did not recognize them as true teachers and neither did he submit to or accept their teachings.”⁴⁰

Paul continues: **“I do not permit a woman to teach...”** Under the circumstances at the Ephesian church, Paul, in this specific situation told women not to teach. Is this a universal command for all women everywhere and for all time? If it is, then we must discount the other stories and commands in Scripture, mentioned earlier, where women were teaching (e.g., Acts 18:26). It would also contradict other writings of Paul where he specifically commanded women to teach (see Titus 2:3). Also, we would have to conclude that Deborah was a false prophet and Priscilla an apostate, since they taught men. Therefore, we must conclude that Paul’s command was specific to the Ephesian church and situations like those at Ephesus where women were stirring up controversy. Since these women needed to learn, it was inappropriate for them to teach under the circumstances, since they merely stirred up controversy when they did.

Rodriguez notes that “the verb ‘to permit’ (“I do not permit”) seems to be used here to designate a limitation imposed on account of the situation at Ephesus and is not describing a universal one.”⁴¹ Additionally, due to the linguistic structure of the passage, the two things that Paul does not permit here (teaching and exercising authority) are “to be defined in the context of a discussion of a woman’s proper attitude as she is instructed in church. During the process of instruction she is not to assume the role of a teacher or ‘to have authority over a man.’”⁴²

“I do not permit a woman...to exercise authority over a man.” The meaning of the word for “to exercise authority over” (*authenteo*) is somewhat uncertain, since it is only used in the New Testament one time. However, the meanings that best fit the context of the passage (which speaks about women needing to learn instead of stirring up controversy by teaching or disrespecting the teacher) tell us Paul is not making a general command prohibiting women from ever telling a man what to do. The word *authenteo* here is best translated as “to try to domineer the teacher.” To domineer is to assert authority in

³⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 82.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 84.

⁴² *Ibid*.

an arrogant way, or to flaunt ones authority. Note what is not stated here: Paul does not say that the men should domineer the women. In fact, nowhere in Scripture is anyone called to domineer anyone else! Here, Paul reminds women that they are not to domineer men, in this case the teachers from whom they needed instruction.

One Bible scholar has observed that “the women at Ephesus (perhaps encouraged by false teachers) were trying to gain an advantage over the men in the congregation by teaching in a dictatorial fashion. The men in response became angry and disputed what the women were doing.”⁴³ Dave Gemmell notes that Paul’s instruction was really a solution to this problem. In essence he was saying, “Let a woman learn in a quiet and submissive fashion. I do not, however, permit her to teach with the intent to dominate a man. She must be gentle in her demeanor.’ What is the principle behind this prescription? No man or woman, should ever have a domineering attitude in a church.”⁴⁴

Rodriguez aptly summarizes this part of the passage as follows:

In reaction to the work of the false teachers among the women of the church, Paul is motivating women to grow in the knowledge of the Christian faith. But this is to be done in a state of peace, free from discussions and divisive arguments, subjecting themselves to the Christian doctrine. Since they are not yet ready to be teachers Paul is not allowing them to teach and, in addition, he does not want them to misappropriate authority by acting independently of others in their search for knowledge.⁴⁵

“For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” As Rodriguez notes, the introductory word “for” (*gar*), is an important juncture in this passage. What is its function in this overall passage? Rodriguez notes that “the possibilities are essentially two: to take it as providing a reason for what was said before or an explanation of what was said before using an illustration.”⁴⁶ Male headship proponents argue for the first possibility, believing that

Paul is giving reasons for the prohibitions against teaching and having authority over men... They find two reasons for the subordination of women to man. The first one is the order of creation: Adam was created first and then Eve, therefore women are to be in submission to men... The second is that women are easier to deceive than man and cannot be entrusted with apostolic teachings.⁴⁷

As Rodriguez notes, this interpretation presupposes that Paul’s main point in the previous verses is “the recognition on the part of women that they are to be under the authority of men.”⁴⁸ But we have seen that this is not the case and that, in fact, Paul’s main point is “regulating the attitude expected from women as they are instructed in church. Paul is trying to control the influence of the false teachers as they work through some of the women. He wants men and women to work together against a common threat.”⁴⁹

Why does Paul bring up Adam and Eve and Eve’s deception? Because he is illustrating what he was

⁴³ Linda Bellville quoted at <http://www.nadministerial.org/article/373/for-nad-pastors/pastor-life/women-clergy/why-the-nad-needs-women-pastors/let-the-women-be-silent>.

⁴⁴ <http://www.nadministerial.org/article/373/for-nad-pastors/pastor-life/women-clergy/why-the-nad-needs-women-pastors/let-the-women-be-silent>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 86.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 87.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*.

trying to teach the Ephesian church in the previous verses: that men and women need each other to avoid deception. Eve was created to be a companion for Adam and was deceived when she chose to separate herself from him (had he taken the initiative to separate from her, he would likely have been in trouble as well). Men and women were created to be companions – in life and ministry. That is Paul’s point here.

Some have attached to the statement that “Adam was formed first, then Eve” to suggest that Paul is teaching that because Adam was created before Eve she was inferior to him. But notice that Paul does not say anything about Adam’s superiority over Eve. He simply tells the creation story by making a statement that Adam was created before Eve. In a moment, we will look at what the rest of the Bible says about the relationship between men and women at the Creation.

To summarize 1 Timothy 2:11-14, Rodriguez notes the following:

Paul is dealing with a particular situation that arose in the church in Ephesus. He was giving specific instructions on how to control or even to bring to an end the work of the false teachers in that church, particularly among some of the female members of the congregation. There is practically nothing in his counsel that we cannot implement today in a church that may be facing the same or similar conditions as those found in the church in Ephesus. His advice can be equally applied to men and women who, under the influence of false teachings, create tensions and disruptions in our churches.⁵⁰

IX. WAS ADAM GIVEN AUTHORITY OVER EVE AT THE CREATION, BEFORE SIN ENTERED THE WORLD?

What does the rest of the Bible have to say about Adam’s relationship to Eve? Does the Bible suggest that he had a rulership role over her since he was created first? Was Eve subservient to Adam before the fall?

In Genesis chapter 1, Moses gives his first account of the creation story. He summarizes the story of mankind’s creation by the Godhead:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27, NRSV).

Notice a number of important points that Moses gives us. First, both man and woman – collectively called “mankind”⁵¹ – were created in God’s image. Eve was created in God’s image just as much as was Adam. Secondly, God said “let *them* have dominion...” over the earth. It was not just Adam who was called to have dominion over the earth at creation, both Adam and Eve were given dominion. The Hebrew word for “dominion” here (*radaw*) means to rule, and, written in the plural, it contextually applies to mankind, both “male and female,” whom God created in His image. Eve was given dominion over the earth just as was Adam at the creation of the world.

Ellen White’s comments on this story agree with the biblical account. She notes, “While they remained true to God, Adam *and his companion* were to bear rule over the earth. Unlimited control was given them

⁵⁰ Rodriguez, 90.

⁵¹ As the English Standard Bible notes in the margin, “The Hebrew word for *man* (*adam*) is the generic term for mankind and becomes the proper name *Adam*.”

over every living thing... They were visited by angels, and were granted communion with their Maker, with no obscuring veil between.” *Patriarchs & Prophets*, p. 50. Note that White agrees that Eve and Adam *both* ruled over the earth.

In Genesis chapter 2, Moses re-tells the creation story, giving us some additional details. However, his story in chapter two does not contradict what he already told us in chapter one but merely adds some texture. First, we find out that God formed Adam from the earth. God then brought the animals, who were created before Adam, to him so that Adam could give them names. Adam then presumably realizes that he is alone while all other living creatures have companions that are suitable for them. “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’” (Gen. 2:18, ESV).

Those who argue that because God made Adam a few hours before Eve he was therefore superior to her are confronted with the reality that in Scripture first in time does not necessarily equate with superiority. If that were true, the animals would be superior to mankind since they were created before Adam.

Additionally, some will point out that Eve was to be Adam’s “helper” or “helpmeet.” In the context of the English language, a helper is generally thought to be inferior to the one being helped. The only problem with that reasoning is that in the Hebrew Bible, the opposite seems to be true. The word translated “helper fit for him” (*ezer*) is actually a word used repeatedly, and almost exclusively, in reference to someone with superior strength helping someone weaker and in need of help. For example God, Someone superior in might and power, is repeatedly said to be Israel’s helper (*ezer*).⁵²

This is not to say that Eve was superior to Adam. But it does tell us that she was also not inferior to him. In fact, the next part of the story illustrates and emphasizes their inherent equality: “So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.” (Genesis 2:21-22, ESV).

Ellen White comments on this creation of the woman noting that “Eve was created from a rib taken from the side of Adam, signifying that she was not to control him as the head, nor to be trampled under his feet as an inferior, but to stand by his side *as an equal*, to be loved and protected by him... She was his second self.” *Patriarchs & Prophets*, p. 46, emphasis mine. White agrees with what the biblical account has told us thus far, that Eve was an *equal* to Adam.

What happened after the fall of mankind? God told Eve, “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” (Gen. 3:16, ESV). One thing is clear from this decree: prior to the fall Adam had not “ruled over” Eve. It was only after mankind’s capitulation to sin that God declared that Adam would occupy a protective leadership role over Eve in the home. Why would God have declared this if Adam already “ruled over” Eve prior to the fall?

Of this event, White observes:

In the creation God had made her the equal of Adam (not subject to him). Had they remained obedient to God – in harmony with His great law of love – they would ever have been in harmony with each other; but sin had brought discord, and now their union could be maintained and harmony preserved only by submission on the part of the one or the other. Eve had been the first in transgression; and she had fallen into temptation by separating from her companion, contrary to the divine direction. It was by her solicitation that Adam sinned, and *she was now placed in*

⁵² E.g., Gen. 49:25; Ex. 18:4; Deut. 33:7, 26, 29; Is. 41:10, 13, etc.

subjection to her husband. *Patriarchs & Prophets*, p. 58, emphasis and parenthesis mine.

Note that White says that it was *after* the Fall that she was “now placed in subjection to her husband.” In other words, this “subjection” was a result of the Fall and part of the curse that has fallen on humanity.

Elsewhere, White indicates that this subjection was not God’s ideal:

My brother, be kind, patient, forbearing. Remember that your wife accepted you as her husband, not that you might rule over her, but that you might be her helper. Never be overbearing and dictatorial. Do not exert your strong will power to compel your wife to do as you wish. Remember that she has a will and that she may wish to have her way as much as you wish to have yours. *Testimonies for the Church, Volume 7*, p. 48.

Neither husband nor wife is to make a plea for rulership. The Lord has laid down the principle that is to guide in this matter. The husband is to cherish his wife as Christ cherishes the church. And the wife is to respect and love her husband. Both are to cultivate the spirit of kindness, being determined never to grieve or injure the other. *Signs of the Times, November 11, 1903 Par. 4*.

Dave Gemmell quotes my seminary professor, Richard Davidson, in an excellent article about women in spiritual leadership.

Davidson points out that the prediction that Adam would ‘rule over you’ in Genesis 3:16 was not God’s original plan, but rather a stop gap solution to allow Adam to be the umbrella or protector in order to deal with the disorder that had come as a result of sin. Because the context says that ‘your desire (sexual desire) shall be for your husband’ Davidson believes that this servant/leader role was limited to marriage and cannot be broadened to every male/female relationship. Therefore this passage does not address the role of women in ministry (unless one believes that all women are attracted to all men in the church).⁵³

White goes on to note that Eve had coveted a “higher sphere” than the one assigned her by God. What was the sphere that she coveted? Male headship proponents will argue that her original sphere was subjection to Adam’s rule and that, by wandering away from Adam’s side she had disobeyed Adam. But that could not have been, since White notes that it was God who commanded Adam and Eve to stay together, and we have seen that Eve was given rulership over the earth along with Adam, was his equal, and was not subjected to him until after the fall. What higher sphere was Eve coveting? The Bible clearly tells us. She succumbed to the serpent’s temptation to become “like God” and enter into His sphere of knowledge of good and evil. “For God knows that when you eat of [the forbidden fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:5, ESV).

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul clearly tells us that the cross of Christ has broken down the distinctions between men and women that were instituted after the fall. “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:26-28, NASB). Women, who were formerly in subjection to men after the fall, and were excluded from many of the Jewish religious ceremonies, are now given full equality with men once again.

Ellen White echoes this in distinct tones when she notes that the plan of redemption removes the

⁵³ <http://www.nadministerial.org/article/373/for-nad-pastors/pastor-life/women-clergy/why-the-nad-needs-women-pastors/let-the-women-be-silent>.

“subjection to her husband” that was “a part of the curse” by providing a “second probation” and “another trial.” White writes,

When God created Eve, He designed that she should possess neither inferiority nor superiority to the man, but that in all things she should be his equal. The holy pair were to have no interest independent of each other; and yet each had an individuality in thinking and acting. *But after Eve’s sin*, as she was first in the transgression, the Lord told her that Adam should rule over her. She was to be in subjection to her husband, and this was a part of the curse. In many cases the curse has made the lot of woman very grievous and her life a burden. The superiority which God has given man he has abused in many respects by exercising arbitrary power. Infinite wisdom devised the plan of redemption, which places the race on a second probation by giving them *another trial*. *Testimonies for the Church, Volume 3*, p. 484 (emphasis mine).

The first probation and trial for man and woman occurred in the Garden of Eden. Now God, through the cross of Christ, has removed the distinctions between men and women that were brought about as a result of the fall. As we near the second coming of Christ, God wants to fulfill that which the cross provided for by indiscriminately pouring out the gifts of His Spirit in the church and using both men and women to the fullest to do His work (see Acts 2:14-21).

X. WHAT ABOUT 1 CORINTHIANS 14:34-35 WHERE PAUL TOLD THE WOMEN TO KEEP SILENT IN THE CHURCHES?

“The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.” (1 Cor. 14:34-35, NASB).

Dave Gemmell asks,

Should this text be applied universally for all women in all churches for all times? If so most Christians, including Adventists, are in violation of this teaching. A literal application of this text would ban women from teaching Sabbath School, reading the scripture, giving the mission report, participating in class discussion, and dozens of other talks by women in the church. The co-founder of the church, Ellen White, would have been in violation of this text from the inception of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.⁵⁴

Or perhaps we’re misunderstanding what Paul was trying to say here.

Once again, we must seek to understand this verse in context with the rest of Scripture. A “narrow understanding [of this passage] would be inconsistent with the rest of the teaching of scripture including Paul’s own teaching in 1 Corinthians 11:5 where he does not ban women from praying or prophesying in church.”⁵⁵ Indeed, we have seen examples of women whom God commissioned to teach, judge, prophesy, evangelize, and exercise spiritual leadership over men. Is Paul laying down a new commandment that applies to all times, places and churches? Or was something happening at the Corinthian church and at that time in history that caused Paul to write what he did?

Even many proponents of male headship admit that we must take into account the time, place, circumstances and culture surrounding Paul’s admonition in this verse. First, the context of the passage is

⁵⁴ <http://www.nadministerial.org/article/373/for-nad-pastors/pastor-life/women-clergy/why-the-nad-needs-women-pastors/let-the-women-be-silent>

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

that of Paul admonishing the Corinthian church to do all things decently and in order. Secondly, the custom of the early church likely involved a situation where women were sitting separate from the men and were seeking to talk to their husbands on the other side of the room in a manner that was distracting the rest of the church. Since the language of the teaching may have been done in a tongue unknown to the majority of women, they may have been calling over to their husbands asking for them to interpret. Obviously any of the above scenarios would have been disruptive to a worship service and Paul was trying to correct this issue.

Rodriguez notes that “the context of the passage suggests that there was a contentious spirit in the church and that women were contributing to the chaos by asking irrelevant questions or making ignorant statements. The word translated ‘to keep silent’ could also be translated ‘to keep still’ in the sense of not being too outspoken.”⁵⁶

In this case Paul proposed that women should not interrupt the teacher by asking disruptive questions; their education could also take place at home. In that more private setting they could ask their husbands questions and be properly instructed...The discussion was not whether women should preach or occupy important leadership positions in church, but about the proper attitude in church when instruction was being given.⁵⁷

Regarding Paul’s command that women should ask their husbands at home, the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* notes that Paul’s instruction for the women to not speak “would prevent unseemly interruptions in the service of worship and avoid the confusion attendant on such interruptions.”⁵⁸

What about the part of the passage that says that the women should be “in submission, as the Law also says” (1 Cor. 14:34, ESV)? In submission to what or to whom? As in 1 Timothy 2, Paul does not tell us in this verse to what or whom these women should submit. But, based on the wider context of Scripture, we can discover the answer. First, all Christians are to submit to each other in love and in the fear of God (Ephesians 5:21). Secondly, in the context of a church gathering and teaching environment, Paul is exhorting these women not to be disruptive but rather to have a submissive and humble attitude. Rodriguez notes that “this submission is shown in silence during worship and applies not only to women but also to men (see 1 Cor. 14:28, 29-31).”⁵⁹

Ultimately, Paul cannot be saying that women should not speak at all in church since this would contradict his own instruction elsewhere as well as the testimony of the rest of Scripture. Instead, most serious Bible students have interpreted this passage as specific to the time and place to which it was written based upon cultural and congregational concerns present in the Corinthian church.

Interestingly, early Adventists regularly encountered hostile people who used this passage and 1 Timothy 2:11-14 to argue against women like Ellen White speaking publicly or engaging in leadership. Gemmill observes that,

[The Adventist] pioneers routinely dealt with this argument by explaining that these texts were culturally specific but not universally applicable. Denis Fortin tells the story of a note that was passed around the crowd where Ellen White was speaking in [a] Northern California tent meeting

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ <http://www.nadministerial.org/article/373/for-nad-pastors/pastor-life/women-clergy/why-the-nad-needs-women-pastors/let-the-women-be-silent>.

⁵⁸ *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Volume 6*, p. 794.

⁵⁹ Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, *Evaluation of the Arguments Used by those Opposing the Ordination of Women to the Ministry*, (<http://www.adventistarchives.org/evaluation-of-the-arguments-used-by-those-opposing-the-ordination-of-women-to-the-ministry.pdf>), 46.

in March of 1880. The note asked the question of ‘why there was a woman speaking when the Bible says that women are not to speak in church.’ The note eventually made it to the platform where Steven Haskell fielded the question by saying that Paul’s advice was only addressing a local situation in one of Paul’s churches, and didn’t apply to all settings. The next day White reflects on the incident in a letter to her husband James and in the letter affirms Haskell’s interpretation of the text.⁶⁰

Denis Fortin, another one of my seminary professors, has written a fascinating historical piece on how early Adventists understood 1 Timothy 2:11-14 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. The link to this article can be found in the footnote. It is well worth reading.⁶¹

XI. DOES PAUL TEACH THAT ONLY MEN CAN BE CHURCH ELDERS?

Here’s what Paul wrote:

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. (1 Timothy 3:1-7, ESV).

Proponents of universal male headship believe that Paul was spelling out a requirement here that all “overseers” or “bishops” (*episkopos*) of the church must be men. They base this on the use of the Greek word *tis* (correctly translated “anyone” in the ESV and which they argue should be translated “a man”) in verse 1, and the phrase “the husband of one wife” in verse 2.

Regarding the translation of the word *tis*, Rodriguez has noted that in the Greek this is an “indefinite pronoun that as such is not interested in defining gender.”⁶² He notes that Paul’s use of this pronoun shows that he is not actually trying to bring up the issue of gender but is simply commending the office of overseer to those who aspire to it.⁶³

Most Bible students agree that Paul’s focus in this passage is on what character qualities should define an overseer. Paul’s emphasis does not seem to be focused on the gender of the overseer. Rodriguez notes that Carl Cosaert has shown that the other cases in 1 Timothy where Paul uses the indefinite pronoun [*tis*] by itself is in a “generic reference to humans.” Therefore, Rodriguez concludes, when Paul says anyone (*tis*), he means “anyone.”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ <http://www.nadministerial.org/article/373/for-nad-pastors/pastor-life/women-clergy/why-the-nad-needs-women-pastors/let-the-women-be-silent>.

⁶¹ Here is the excellent article by Denis Fortin regarding early the Adventist pioneers’ views on women in ministry: <http://www.memorymeaningfaith.org/blog/2010/04/adventist-pioneers-women-ministry.html>.

⁶² Angel Manuel Rodríguez, *Evaluation of the Arguments Used by those Opposing the Ordination of Women to the Ministry*, (<http://www.adventistarchives.org/evaluation-of-the-arguments-used-by-those-opposing-the-ordination-of-women-to-the-ministry.pdf>), 59.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Regarding the phrase that an overseer must be “the husband of one wife,” Rodriguez notes that “if the requirement is that an elder should be a married man, single men and even widowers would be excluded from the ministry.”⁶⁵ Additionally, the elder is supposed to keep “his children submissive” (verse 4). Reading this in literalistic way, all overseers must also have at least two children. Of course, this would contradict the rest of Scripture. Elsewhere, we find that Paul was likely unmarried for at least part of his ministry, and even Jesus was, of course, unmarried and childless. Paul even recommended singleness in certain situations (see 1 Cor. 7:1-9, etc.). Paul would have excluded himself from being a leader of a church if we are to understand his command here to be emphasizing the word husband.

Instead, Bible scholars have noted that the emphasis in this phrase is actually on the word “one,” as in “the husband of *one* wife.” Ekkhardt Mueller notes that “the phrase discusses the relation of an overseer to his wife by stressing that he must be completely devoted and faithful to his wife.”⁶⁶ Rodriguez notes that “the best textual evidence to support this” is found “in 1 Timothy 5:9, where Paul writes concerning a widow that she should have been a ‘one-man woman.’ In this case a literal reading the phrase emphasizing gender specificity would be practically meaningless or stating the obvious: ‘The widow should be a woman married to one man...’”⁶⁷

Additionally, as both Rodriguez and Mueller note, the identical phrase, “the husband of one wife,” appears in 1 Timothy 3:12 in reference to deacons. However, in the context of deacons this did not limit the deacons to only men since women are mentioned as being deacons in verse 11⁶⁸ and Phoebe (see Romans 16:1) was at least one female deacon in the Bible.

Mueller summarizes all of this nicely by noting the following:

The apparent existence of women deacons in Scripture and later on in church history militates against the view that the phrase “husband of one wife” would mean that only men can function as deacons. Instead it points to their marital faithfulness. The same phrase “husband of one wife” is used in connection with bishops/elders in the same context of 1 Timothy 3. It cannot be interpreted differently from the identical expression found in 1 Timothy 3:12. Since in the case of deacons this expression does not rule out deaconesses, in the case of bishops/elders this phrase cannot be used to claim that a bishop/elder has to be male. Obviously, the biblical text in 1 Timothy 3:2 does not address the question whether or not women can serve as elders. This does not seem to be Paul’s concern, and we should avoid reading it back into the text. Furthermore, we should refrain from using 1 Timothy 3:2 as a divine command opposing the involvement of women in leadership positions of the church.⁶⁹

XII. ARE NEW TESTAMENT PASTORS THE EQUIVALENT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT AARONIC PRIESTS? WHAT DOES THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS MEAN?

Some universal male headship proponents reason that since the priests of the Old Testament were all males, only men can be ordained pastors in the New Testament era. They conclude that New Testament

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 60.

⁶⁶ Ekkhardt Mueller, *Husband of One Wife – 1 Timothy 3:2, 4*, (<https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/pdf/husbandof%20one%20wife.pdf>).

⁶⁷ Rodríguez, *Evaluation of the Arguments Used by those Opposing the Ordination of Women to the Ministry*, 61.

⁶⁸ “Women *must* likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.” 1 Timothy 3:11, NASB. Scholars like Rodriguez and Mueller believe that this verse is referring to female deacons.

⁶⁹ Ekkhardt Mueller, *Husband of One Wife – 1 Timothy 3:2, 6*, (<https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/pdf/husbandof%20one%20wife.pdf>).

pastors are equal or comparable to the Old Testament priests. What is missing in this theological assumption, however, is any link in the New Testament giving ordained pastors the exclusive role and function of the priests of the Old Testament.

In fact, the whole people of God are called to be priests in the New Testament era. Speaking to the whole church of God Peter writes,

You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for *God's* own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:5, 9, NASB).

John the revelator also refers to the redeemed of God as priests (see Rev. 1:6; 5:10). Never are pastors referred to as priests in the New Testament, apart from their common priesthood with the whole people of God.

Some have pointed out that this idea of the priesthood of all believers is nothing new. Old Testament Israel was also called to be a kingdom of priests during the Exodus. Others will note that, even though the whole nation was called to be a kingdom of priests, there was still a special “priest class” – the family of Aaron and the tribe of Levi. They will then argue that the pastor of New Testament times is equivalent to the Aaronic priests in that he is in a special “ministry” category separate from the rest of the people of God.

This idea, that of a special New Testament clergy class which is separate from the laity, is not a biblical one. In fact, it crept into the church during the dark ages when the church leaders sought for more power – both ecclesiastical and political – to be consolidated into their hands. Rex Edwards has written an excellent paper discussing the biblical idea of the priesthood of all believers and its implications.⁷⁰

In the New Testament, God has called every believer to be a priest to Him. It is true that there are leadership roles within the Christian church, such as that of the pastor, prophet or evangelist.⁷¹ But these leadership roles do not make the pastor or prophet the equivalent of the Old Testament priests in either their role or status. Their roles are different from those of the Old Testament priest in several important ways.

⁷⁰ Rex Edwards, *Priesthood of Believers*, (https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Edwards-Priesthood_of_believers.pdf).

⁷¹ Rex Edwards notes that it is really unbiblical and catastrophic to mission to exclusively refer to pastoral ministry as “the ministry”: “In the light of the doctrine of the priesthood of believers it would seem that the central integrating principle around which the preacher's ministry is to be built is to ‘equip the saints for the work of the ministry.’ Thus the so called ‘clergy,’ themselves members of the *laos*, have their own special ministry within the priestly community. And this ministry enjoys ample biblical warrant but when it is identified as ‘the ministry’ of the community itself, as has been the tendency within the history of the church the result is a theological disaster. For the *laos* then delegates the ministry, primarily if not exclusively, to the ‘clergy,’ and the ‘clergy’ relegates the ‘laity’ (now understood as non-clergy) to the role of a ‘supporting cast.’ Further, this identification of the ministry of the *laos* with the special ministry of the *kleros* (clergy) also introverts the direction of the ministry of God's people. For the ministry of the ‘clergy’ is directed predominantly to the community itself with the result that the ministry of the community to the world is shamefully neglected. The ministry inevitably becomes self-serving, directed *inward* toward the development and preservation of individual faith and institutional health.” Rex Edwards, *Priesthood of Believers*, (https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Edwards-Priesthood_of_believers.pdf), 9.

First, the Old Testament priest was the representative of the people before God in the temple. Where in the New Testament is there any special class that represents believers before God? There is none. In fact, in the New Testament all believers have direct access through Jesus Christ. “There is...one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” (1 Tim. 2:5, NASB). Additionally, unlike the Aaronic priests, the New Testament leaders are not chosen based on bloodline or succession (or gender) but instead are recognized by the people of God based on the Spirit’s bestowal of certain spiritual gifts (skills) that they possess.

In the New Testament era, the earthly sanctuary is superseded by a heavenly sanctuary. The New Testament church is not the sanctuary. The pastor is not the priest of a church sanctuary. Instead, the sanctuary of the New Testament is the heavenly sanctuary where Jesus is the High Priest and all believers have access as priests. Jesus is a High Priest after the order of Melchizedek, since He lives forever.

During Old Testament times, the Aaronic priests, a select group of God’s people, had exclusive access to the temple. In the New Testament, all believers have access to within the veil of the heavenly temple, “where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 6:20, NASB).

The Old Testament priest was to care for the temple, to act as a mediator between God and sinful humanity, to teach, to judge, and to perform the services of the sanctuary. In the New Testament each and every believer is a mediator between lost and sinful humanity and Jesus, the High Priest of all believers, who is in His heavenly sanctuary. Each believer has equal access to God and does not need to go through any other human being to access God. Each believer is called to “teach all nations” (as were the priests and Levites) and to perform the services of the sanctuary (i.e., prayer – the altar of incense; ministering the word – the showbread; witnessing – the candlestick) in their own life as well as the lives of others.

Ellen White agreed that all believers were priests, noting that "the same obligation (as had the Old Testament priests) rests upon every follower of Christ." (*Patriarchs & Prophets*, p. 362). That includes female followers of Christ.

During the Protestant Reformation, some Christians re-discovered the priesthood of all believers. They learned that the Bible does not teach that there is a distinction between the laity and the clergy, or that the church leadership is the New Testament equivalent of an exclusive Aaronic priesthood. Instead, all Christian believers are called to the priesthood – men and women alike. The Holy Spirit bestows His gifts upon believers and some of those gifts are leadership gifts that give believers special skill to be servant leaders of God’s people. The gift of “pastor-teacher” in Eph. 4:11 is one such gift. The Spirit can choose to give this gift to whomever He chooses (1 Cor. 12:11) and Ellen White agrees that women as well as men can serve as pastors (see above). The ordination given by the church simply recognizes this calling by the Holy Spirit. Church pastors have certain roles within the church, but these roles are given by the Spirit, not based on their gender as a male or upon their genealogy, as with the Old Testament Aaronic priests, but rather based upon their relationship with Christ.

XIII. IS IT A SIN FOR THE CHURCH TO ORDAIN WOMEN AS PASTORS SINCE THE BIBLE DOES NOT EXPLICITLY SAY: “THOU SHALT ORDAIN WOMEN PASTORS”?

As we learned above, the ordination by human hands is mainly a recognition of God’s calling and gifting in someone’s life. We have also seen that God can give all of the gifts of the Spirit as He chooses, including giving a woman the skills and spiritual gifts to be a pastor. The prophetess and judge Deborah is perhaps the clearest example of a woman whom God used in a pastoral (shepherd) leadership role in

Israel. Ellen White affirms that women should be “pastors to the flock of God.” So, looking at the totality of Scripture there are examples of women serving in management (overseer/elder) and shepherd (pastor) positions in Israel. Therefore, the church is not sinning to recognize (by ordination) women as pastors or elders but is actually following biblical precedent by recognizing that the Holy Spirit can call women to spiritual leadership roles.

Have Adventists forgotten our Protestant roots to the point that we now place more importance on ordination – of either men or women – than the Scripture does? Recall White’s observation that after the time of the early church, “the rite of ordination by the laying on of hands was greatly abused; unwarrantable importance was attached to the act, as if a power came at once upon those who received such ordination, which immediately qualified them for any and all ministerial work.” *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 162. It seems as though Adventists have backslid to a place where “unwarrantable importance” is attached to the issue of ordination – of men or women.

Is it therefore wrong to ordain women since there is no explicit command to do so? Not if you use the principles that the early Adventists used to deal with issues that the Bible was silent or vague about. And “ordination” is something that the Bible says very little about.

Gerry Chudleigh tells a story about the early Adventist movement that may shed some light. He relates how Alexander Campbell was a religious leader who had a number of followers. Campbell went around teaching that “any religious practice not clearly employed in the New Testament church was forbidden in modern times.”⁷² Early Adventists took the opposite approach. When asked whether there was Scriptural authority for the church to own property, James White responded:

“All means which, according to sound judgment, will advance the cause of truth, and are not forbidden by plain scripture declarations, should be employed. If it be asked, where are your plain texts of scripture for holding church property legally? we reply, The Bible does not furnish any; neither does it say that we should have a weekly paper, a steam printing-press, that we should publish books, build places of worship, and send out tents. Jesus says, 'Let your light so shine before men,' etc.; but he 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.” (James White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 26, 1860).

Chudleigh notes that “Campbellites, then, tended to treat ‘let your women be silent’ as a fact, but ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek ... bond nor free ... male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3:28) as ‘abstract generality.’ These two rules of interpretation — doing only what is specifically commanded or practiced in the New Testament, and paying attention to concrete words, not abstract principles — prevented Campbell from condemning slavery during the American Civil War, but caused him to condemn women preachers. Meanwhile, Adventists condemned slavery and encouraged women preachers.”⁷³

XIV. WHAT GOD’S TREATMENT OF SLAVERY AND POLYGAMY IN BIBLICAL TIMES TELLS US ABOUT GOD’S PLAN FOR WOMEN IN SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP AT THE END OF TIME

⁷² Gerry Chudleigh, “The Campbellite and Mrs. White,” *The Pacific Union Recorder*, July 2012 (<http://pacificunionrecorder.adventistfaith.org/issue/66/16/1170>).

⁷³ *Ibid.*

People have wondered why, if it was God's purpose to have women serve in church leadership, there is not an explicit command in the word of God saying "women should be ordained."

First, I would point out that Paul's statement in Galatians 3:28 *is* an explicit declaration of God's plan for equality between men and women in the church. There can be no "headship" other than that of Christ's in the church. For, "There is... neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28, NASB). Furthermore, Joel's prophecy echoed by Peter is about as explicit a you can get. "It shall be in the last days, that... your daughters shall prophesy... even on My bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit and they shall prophesy." (Acts 2:16-18, NASB). Prophesying here cannot be limited to merely the foretelling of future events, as Peter said that what was happening that day (the day of Pentecost) was a partial fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. Therefore, women "prophesying" must include teaching, preaching and proclaiming. There are explicit declarations in the word of God that women will be used by God's Spirit to their fullest potential at the end of time.

But why weren't Jesus and Paul more forceful and explicit in attacking the male chauvinism of their day? Why aren't more women church leaders profiled in the New Testament? Recall that there *were* a number of women in both the Old and New Testaments who were involved in church spiritual leadership. Even one woman in spiritual leadership would be enough to tell us that God is not opposed to the practice.

God's treatment of slavery and polygamy in Bible times (and how He gently and gradually confronts our own ungodly attitudes and practices) is a lesson in how God also dealt with repression of women in biblical times and more recently. God does not forcefully and explicitly condemn all sins at every stage of history. Truth is progressively revealed. The wise man said that "the path of the just *is* as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." (Prov. 4:18, KJV). And Paul reminds us that "the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent." (Acts 17:30, KJV). God's goal for his end-time church is to help us to grow into the fullness of His ideal where there "is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28, NASB).

Throughout biblical times, slavery was almost universally practiced. During New Testament times, "laws of terrible severity" kept slaves in subjection, and masters had "full control over the souls and bodies of these helpless beings," inflicting any "suffering he chose" upon them. "The tendency of the whole system was hopelessly degrading."⁷⁴ Interestingly, God did not initially confront the issue of slavery with explicit commands that it be abolished. Instead, His instructions to the ancient Israelites served to mitigate the effects of slavery by ensuring that those who held slaves treated them in a humane manner (see, e.g., Exodus 21).

But it has always been God's goal to bring freedom to the captives. God works with humanity – both individually and collectively – at a pace that He knows we can bear. Jesus told His disciples that there were many things He could not tell them because they were not yet ready to hear them. (John 16:12). God allowed slavery for millennia because the world was not yet ready to confront the issue. But at the right time, God's Spirit moved upon people's hearts to bring an official end to slavery in most parts of the world. (Sadly, unofficial slavery is still widely practiced in our world. Christians ought to be on the front lines of fighting against modern day human trafficking and sex slavery).

Paul chose not to confront the issue of slavery head on in his day. Notice the reasons why:

It was not the apostle's work to overturn arbitrarily or suddenly the established order of society. To attempt this would be to prevent the success of the gospel. But he taught principles which struck at the very foundation of slavery and which, if carried into effect, would surely undermine

⁷⁴ *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 459.

the whole system. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty,” he declared. 2 Corinthians 3:17. – *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 459.

Slavery was part of the “established order of society” in Paul’s day and the world was not ready to fight that battle yet. In fact, several of Paul’s statements seem to implicitly endorse the institution of slavery.

Servants, obey in all things *your* masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God... (Col. 3:22, KJV).

Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and *his* doctrine be not blasphemed. (1 Tim. 6:1, KJV).

Exhort servants to be obedient unto their own masters, *and* to please *them* well in all *things*; not answering again... (Titus 2:9, KJV).

Some have used these verses to justify slavery. Can you see why? But note Ellen White’s point above: “It was not the apostle’s work to overturn arbitrarily or suddenly the established order of society. To attempt this would be to prevent the success of the gospel.”⁷⁵ Paul did not openly fight against the status quo of slavery, opposed to it though he was, knowing that the world was not yet ready to confront this evil.

Instead of attacking the institution of slavery head on, he taught principles which, if people thought about them and accepted them, would eventually do away with slavery. There is no explicit condemnation of slavery in the word of God. Instead, God worked with the culture of the time and countenanced this sinful (and often barbaric) practice until people were ready for reformation. Notice the statement of Paul that Ellen White links to his opposition to slavery: “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty,” (2 Corinthians 3:17). Is this passage somewhat cryptic in its application to slavery? Perhaps. Is it explicit condemnation of slavery? No. Is it a general principle and not a specific command? Yes. But, according to Ellen White, a closer look reveals a powerful principle that “struck at the very foundation of slavery.”

In like manner, the subjugation of women has been “the established order of society” for millennia. The world has not been ready to fight that battle until rather recently. Instead of attacking male chauvinism in their day, both Jesus and Paul taught principles and gave us examples that would not arouse undue prejudice from a unready world, but which, if people thought about them and accepted them, would eventually do away with gender inequality in the church.

Is there a biblical principle statement that shows us what God thinks about gender inequality in the church? Absolutely. Paul wrote, “There is... neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28, NASB). Is this passage an explicit endorsement of women in church leadership? No. Does it contain a general principle and not a specific command? Perhaps. Is it an explicit endorsement of gender equality in the body of Christ? Absolutely. And if we follow this principle to its logical conclusion, it will also strike at the very foundation of male chauvinism and gender inequality within the Christian church.

Ellen White was also cautious in confronting gender inequality head on. Like Paul, she did, however, lay down statements and principles that, if accepted, will do away with the unbiblical gender discrimination within the church. She counseled women to become pastors to the flock of God.⁷⁶ She taught that

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Testimonies for the Church, Vol. 6, p. 322.*

women could manage churches more capably than unconsecrated men.⁷⁷ She urged women to teach, preach, and evangelize to men. She urged women to labor in “gospel ministry.”⁷⁸ She taught that they should receive the tithe since they, like male ministers, labored in “word and doctrine.”⁷⁹

The world of White’s day was not yet ready for women to be fully recognized as spiritual equals with men in the church. The work of the gospel would have been retarded due to the prejudice against women in certain leadership roles at that time. “The times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent.” (Acts 17:30, KJV).

Joel’s prophecy will be completely fulfilled, whether men stand in the way or cooperate with God’s Spirit. He wrote, "It will come about after this That I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; And your sons and daughters will prophesy, Your old men will dream dreams, Your young men will see visions. "Even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days." (Joel 2:28-29).

God chooses not to confront certain cultural issues at certain times. He allowed slavery in Israel even though His ultimate plan was for slavery to be abolished. He allowed polygamy in ancient Israel and even provided laws to regulate it (Deuteronomy 21:15 NIV), even though His ideal has always been lifetime marriage between one man and one woman. God allowed a male dominated society in ancient Israel, with laws that improved but did not completely obliterate the cultural wrongs regarding women, even though His goal is that we could all be “one in Christ Jesus.” But now in the end of time, God no longer winks at our ignorance. He wants to reveal his ideal of perfect unity – in race, class and gender – through His last-day Remnant Church. This is what Paul envisioned when he wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28, NASB).

XV. THE WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE & THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE EARLY CHURCH: CIRCUMCISION & WOMEN’S ORDINATION – A MODEL FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

The story of the Jerusalem Council in Acts chapter 15 and how the church dealt with the controversy over circumcision is instructive and enlightening when it comes to the issue of how the church of today should deal with women’s ordination. The early church determined from the *principles of Scripture* and the *witness of the Holy Spirit* that God had accepted the Gentiles as full-fledged believers in the newly formed church – without those Gentiles needing to become circumcised in the flesh.

Some Adventists get nervous when Acts 15 is brought up, believing that what happened then can somehow be misused to justify things like the change of the seventh-day Sabbath to Sunday by the Catholic Church. However, the issues under consideration in Acts 15 had nothing to do with the moral law of God. The Ten Commandments, spoken by God from Sinai and written in stone, are as immutable and eternal as God Himself. They existed before Sinai and before sin entered the world, and Jesus assured us that He did not come to destroy this law, including the beautiful gift of the weekly seventh-day Sabbath. The church in Acts 15 dealt with other issues, namely institutions that had been put in place *after* sin came into the world and as a consequence of sin. These institutions in some way pointed forward to Christ and helped us to see and understand Him in our weak and sinful state. So, no justification for attempts to abolish God’s Ten Commandments can be drawn from the actions of the church in Acts 15.

⁷⁷ *Pastoral Ministry*, p. 36.

⁷⁸ *Ms. 431, 1898*.

⁷⁹ *Manuscript Releases, 1:263 (1899)*.

The question for the church in Acts 15 had to do with circumcision in the flesh, a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham's descendants (see Genesis 17:9-12). God had commanded Abraham to be circumcised and to circumcise the men in his household. Fast-forward to the early church, and certain Jewish Christians – Judaizers, as they were called – are arguing that the newly converted Gentiles must be circumcised in the flesh in order to be saved.

Ellen White notes the following about this situation:

While the apostles united with the ministers and lay members at Antioch in an earnest effort to win many souls to Christ, certain Jewish believers from Judea “of the sect of the Pharisees” succeeded in introducing a question that soon led to wide-spread controversy in the church and brought consternation to the believing Gentiles. With great assurance these Judaizing teachers asserted that in order to be saved, one must be circumcised and must keep the entire ceremonial law. – *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 188.

Sound familiar? While the church of today ought to be engaged in an “earnest effort to win many souls to Christ” we have many who are making women's ordination a sin issue, leading to “wide-spread controversy in the church.”

From the Old Testament Scriptures, you can see how the Judaizers made a good case for circumcision. For example, God had commanded the following: “This *is* my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.” (Gen. 17:10-11, KJV). And,

A foreigner residing among you who wants to celebrate the Lord's Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat it. The same law applies both to the native-born and to the foreigner residing among you. (Ex. 12:48-49, NIV).

Many of the Jewish Christians could see no explicit command in the Old Testament Scriptures (the only Scriptures they had at that point) permitting the Gentile converts to forego circumcision. In fact, the Scriptures *seemed* to say that they should be circumcised – after all, they were the “foreigner” residing among the Jewish Christians.

The early church then determined to find out God's will by looking at two things:

1. The witness of the Holy Spirit – His decision to give gifts to the Gentiles; and
2. The witness of Scripture – allowing the principles of God's word to speak to this specific situation.

The church gathered together. Much prayer undoubtedly ascended to God for guidance and wisdom.

The various points involved in the settlement of the main question at issue seemed to present before the council insurmountable difficulties. But the Holy Spirit had, in reality, already settled this question, upon the decision of which seemed to depend the prosperity, if not the very existence, of the Christian church. – *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 192.

Peter then related to the gathered church how God “bore witness to [the Gentiles], by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them...” (Acts 15:8-9, ESV).

Peter was referring to his experience with Cornelius. Peter had received a vision from God in which he saw unclean animals and was told to “rise, kill and eat” (see Acts 10). Peter soon learned that the vision was not about eating unclean animals, which were still as unclean and inedible as ever,⁸⁰ but rather about the unclean, uncircumcised Gentiles. Peter goes to the home of Cornelius, a believer who is also a Gentile. Cornelius received Jesus and the Holy Spirit fell upon him and his household. Peter and the other Jews who were with him witnessed the gifts of the Spirit (see 1 Cor. 12) being poured out on these uncircumcised people and were flabbergasted (Acts 10:45). Could God inhabit uncircumcised, unclean Gentiles, they wondered?

News about this spread. Some of the Judaizing Christians were angry that Peter had gone into the same house with uncircumcised Gentiles. Notice Peter’s response:

So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.” (Acts 11:17-18, NIV).

Again, the Scriptures were ambiguous about the issue of whether Gentiles could forego circumcision in the flesh and still be counted among God’s people. Peter realized that in this situation where the Scriptures were relatively silent and ambiguous, the Spirit had already spoken by pouring out Himself though His gifts upon these uncircumcised believers. “Who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” he asked.

Now, with equal fervor and force, he said: “God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as He did unto us; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” This yoke was not the law of Ten Commandments, as some who oppose the binding claims of the law assert; Peter here referred to the law of ceremonies, which was made null and void by the crucifixion of Christ. – *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 193.

It was the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures and He will never contradict the Bible. It’s His book, after all (2 Tim. 3:16-17). When God has given explicit commands (like the Ten Commandments or any other command in Scripture), we must listen and obey. But, when the Word is silent, when some Bible verses seem to contradict other verses, or when there are only general principles regarding a given topic, the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth. He opens up our minds to see and understand the principles of God’s word, how to apply them to our current situation, and how to harmonize the apparent contradictions.

Keep in mind that, at this point, the early church had no New Testament verses (like Ephesians 2:15 and Colossians 2:14-17) teaching that the ceremonial law was fulfilled in Christ, as those verses had not yet been written. The early church also had no Old Testament text that explicitly stated that the ceremonial law was made “null and void” by the death of Christ. Instead, there *were* the ceremonial laws of Moses that God had given Israel that *seemed* to be still binding. However, the Holy Spirit led the apostles and

⁸⁰ The distinction of clean and unclean animals was never done away with in the New Testament, since this distinction predated the ceremonial law given to Moses and was given for health purposes. In Genesis 7:2-3, we see that Noah and his family were aware of the distinction between clean and unclean animals (long before the existence of the ceremonial law given to the Jews) and that these distinctions had to do with how the animals were adapted after the Fall – some for scavenger purposes (the unclean) and others more suitable for human consumption (the clean).

assembled church to understand – through the witness of the Holy Spirit and the testimony of Scripture – that the ceremonial law, including the law of circumcision, had been done away with.

After Peter spoke, “The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.” (Acts 15:12, NIV). Again, the church listened to the witness of the Holy Spirit as they sought God’s will as to whether circumcision should be required of the Gentiles as the Old Testament *seemed* to command.

When they finished, James, the brother of Christ, spoke up. Notice what he said about how the church would now come to a decision:

“Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, *even all the Gentiles who bear my name*, says the Lord, who does these things, things known from long ago.’ It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.” (Acts 15:13-21, NIV, emphasis mine).

From the one phrase, “even all the Gentiles who bear my name,” James taught that God was calling the Gentiles – those who were not circumcised – to be a part of God’s family. Notice that this passage does not explicitly say that the ceremonial law was done away with, or that circumcision is not required of the Gentiles. Yet, the church felt that the principle contained in this verse *plus* the witness of the Holy Spirit were enough to know that it was not God’s will to require that the Gentiles be circumcised.

How does the early church’s experience at the Jerusalem Council apply to the issue of women’s ordination today? As with the circumcision issue, there are Bible verses that *seem* to say that God will not use women to speak in church, teach men, or lead men. (We have studied these passages above and shown that they actually say something different than commonly thought, or that they apply to specific situations, not to all women in every situation). On the other hand, there are numerous examples in Scripture of God using women to speak in church, teach men, and lead men (again, see the examples mentioned above).

With an issue like women’s ordination, God’s church today needs to discern His will from the two sources that the early church used: the witness of Scripture and the witness of the Holy Spirit.

The principles of Scripture witness clearly to the fact that God has and will use women to speak and teach (Acts 2:17-18; 18:26), and there are passages that tell us that in the church, both men and women are “one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). What about the witness of the Holy Spirit? Clearly, He has fallen upon women and given them the gifts of pastor, evangelist, prophet and teacher, as well as many other gifts “as he decides” (1 Cor. 12:11).

Like the uncircumcised, unclean Gentiles, women were at one time considered “unclean.” A woman could not enter into the inner court of the temple and was excluded from fully participating in worship to God. As we near the end of time, God is calling us to lay aside our desire for supremacy and to fulfill His wish for His church – men and women alike – to be “one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28). It is His desire to pour out His Spirit in His fullness once again. Could it be that God is waiting for those in His church to

put aside their pride, love of supremacy and desire for “headship” so that He can fulfill the prophecy of Joel?

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.’ (Acts 2:17-18, NIV, emphasis mine).

XVI. ARE WE READY FOR THE FINAL OUTPOURING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT?

Our understanding of the truths of God’s word is progressive. We can never stop learning or believe that we have arrived at a perfect understanding of the Bible until we meet Jesus. The wise man wrote that “the path of the just *is* as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.” (Proverbs 4:18, KJV). Ellen White agreed, noting the following:

We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed. As long as we hold to our own ideas and opinions with determined persistency, we cannot have the unity for which Christ prayed. – *Selected Messages, Vol. 1, p. 37.*

Here’s a sobering thought: while a world is dying to hear the everlasting gospel of Revelation 14, God’s Remnant Church is embroiled in a conflict about who will have “headship” in the Body of Christ. Like the disciples during Jesus’ final days on earth, we are distracted by the question of who will be the greatest in the church. Something is wrong with our priorities and our spiritual vision if don’t see a problem with that.

Are we ready for the Holy Spirit to fall upon both men and women so that the work of God on earth can be finished and Jesus can return? Are we willing to lay aside our cherished opinions and desire to have control over the work of God so that a dying world can hear the Three Angels Messages? We would be wise to heed the counsel of Gamaliel, who noted that if this “purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men (or women?); you will only find yourselves fighting against God.” (Acts 5:38-39, NIV).

Ellen White prophesied that God will use unorthodox methods to finish His work:

Let me tell you that the Lord will work in this last work in a manner very much out of the common order of things, and in a way that will be contrary to any human planning. There will be those among us who will always want to control the work of God, to dictate even what movements shall be made when the work goes forward under the direction of the angel who joins the third angel in the message to be given to the world. God will use ways and means by which it will be seen that He is taking the reins in His own hands. The workers will be surprised by the simple means that He will use to bring about and perfect His work of righteousness. — *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers, p. 300.*

The Holy Spirit spoke through the prophet Joel telling us that women, as well as men, would be recipients of His gifts in the last days so that His work could be finished by these “simple means” that White wrote about. Repeatedly, White noted that both men and women would play a vital part in God’s end-time work, writing that “when a great and decisive work is to be done, God chooses men and women to do this work, and it will feel the loss if the talents of both are not combined.” *Letter*

77, 1898. She also noted that the effectiveness of women ministers at the end of time would “exceed that of men.”⁸¹

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons *and daughters* will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, *both men and women*, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ (Acts 2:17-21, NIV, emphasis mine).

Is God’s church ready to, like the disciples before the day of Pentecost, set aside our personal ambitions and love for supremacy within the church? Are we ready for the Holy Spirit to be poured out upon men... *and women* so that His work can be finished and Jesus can come again?

⁸¹ “Women as well as men can engage in the work of hiding the truth where it can work out and be made manifest. They can take their place in the work at this crisis, and the Lord will work through them. If they are imbued with a sense of their duty, and labor under the influence of the Spirit of God, they will have just the self-possession required for this time. The Saviour will reflect upon these self-sacrificing women the light of His countenance, and this will give them a power that will exceed that of men.” *Testimonies for the Church, Volume 9*, p. 128-129.