

REPORT SUMMARY

This report is the product of our assignment by the North American Division to conduct a comprehensive review of the theology of ordination—its theory and practical implications—and to present our conclusions and recommendations for action.

PROCESS

Since May 2012 our diverse committee of pastors, theologians, and administrators has been engaged in a thorough exploration of ordination, identifying current policy and practice and considering the appropriateness of ordaining women to pastoral ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

In addition to studying Scripture, we considered numerous papers, books, and resources, and we undertook various assignments for in-depth research. We exercised accountability to each other by reading drafts together aloud, discussing our findings, and incorporating peer feedback in revisions. And we prayed together, inviting the Spirit to govern our process and guide us into all truth. The unified desire of our hearts has been to bring glory to God and to obey His will.

DEFINITION OF ORDINATION

We understand all believers to be called and equipped—anoointed—by God for service.

Individuals are imbued by the Holy Spirit with spiritual gifts in order to edify the body of Christ and fulfill the gospel commission, and in this general sense all believers are “ordained.”

The committee agreed on the following statement as a common point of reference:

Ordination is a formal acknowledgment and authentication of one’s call to service ministry by God. Authentication should be understood as ratifying what only God can dispense. Ordination neither supersedes God’s call nor enhances it. Ordination affirms the genuineness of the call as having borne the proper fruit of the Holy Spirit’s work. God initiates the call and equips the recipient for enacting it. God’s person accepts the call. God’s people affirm the call.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the recommendations in this report represent the position of the overwhelming majority of the

The Holy Spirit inspired the Bible writers with thoughts, ideas, and objective information; in turn they expressed these in their own words. Therefore the Scriptures are an indivisible union of human and divine elements, neither of which should be emphasized to the neglect of the other.

“Methods of Bible Study” document

committee, not all concur; however, the committee stands in unanimous agreement with respect to the following statement:

We believe that an individual, as a Seventh-day Adventist in thorough commitment to the full authority of Scripture, may build a defensible case in favor of or in opposition to the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, although each of us views one position or the other as stronger and more compelling.

As a culmination of our study, the committee submits the following recommendation for North American Division action:

RECOMMENDATION 1

In harmony with our biblical study, we recommend that ordination to gospel ministry, as an affirmation of the call of God, be conferred by the church on men and women.

Because the Bible does not directly address the ordination of women, and because the principle-based evidence is neither complete nor irrefutable,

it can be expected that differing conclusions may be drawn by equally sincere and competent students of God’s Word. We believe the interpretive approach adopted by the Seventh-day Adventist Church as explained in the “Methods of Bible Study” document may allow Bible-believing members to have differences of opinion on this issue. In light of this, we submit this additional recommendation:

RECOMMENDATION 2

The committee humbly recommends that the North American Division support the authorization of each division to consider, through prayer and under the direction of the Holy Spirit, its most appropriate approach to the ordination of women to gospel ministry.

What follows in this report is a summary of the key points of our study, including evidences from Scripture and the writings of Ellen White, which we regard as overwhelmingly supportive of ordaining women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In-depth analysis of the major themes, as well as a minority report, are provided with this report.

HISTORY

Our earliest founders were reluctant to organize, not wanting to repeat the mistakes of other churches of the time in what seemed like exalting human authority. However, in the interest of curbing the threat of confusion caused by false, “unauthorized” teachers, and in response to visions of Ellen White in the early 1850s and diligent Bible study, steps were taken to organize. Preachers were “set apart,” generally by the laying on of hands, as the official indication of approval.

Throughout Adventist Church history, the role of women has not been formally clarified. Early discussions about some of the controversial texts in the Bible arose in relationship to Ellen White’s influential public role, which was unusual for a female at the time. Women have served as licensed preachers, evangelists, conference secretaries, General Conference treasurers, and in many other positions. As early as 1881, a resolution recommending the ordination of women to ministry was presented at the General Conference Session, but after being forwarded to the General Conference Executive Committee, no action was taken. One-hundred-thirty years later, after numerous resolutions,

studies, meetings, recommendations, and votes, a request at the 2010 General Conference Session led to the present worldwide study of the theology of ordination.

Prior to this time, General Conference Session rulings have consistently maintained that women not be ordained to pastoral office, partly out of concern that the global church would not yet be ready for it. Recent actions by North American unions to ordain women pastors lend urgency to the need for resolution.

HERMENEUTICS

An understanding of the influence of hermeneutics is helpful for recognizing differences in the ways individuals discern the meaning of Scripture. Hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, considers all the factors that influence worldview. Biblical hermeneutics refers specifically to the principles and practice of interpreting Scripture.

Early in our study process, the committee unanimously acknowledged as a guide the principles outlined in the “Methods of Bible Study” document, which was voted and published by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1986 to provide parameters

The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen.

1 Selected Messages, 21.2

for the study of Scripture.

The model below helps illustrate the range of approaches compatible with the “Methods of Bible Study” document. The “no inspiration” side of the continuum represents the idea that the Bible is not divinely inspired and should be regarded as any other literary work. The “biblical inerrancy” side represents the idea that God dictated the precise words of Scripture. The traditional Adventist approach to interpreting Scripture reveals a centrist path of “thought inspiration.”

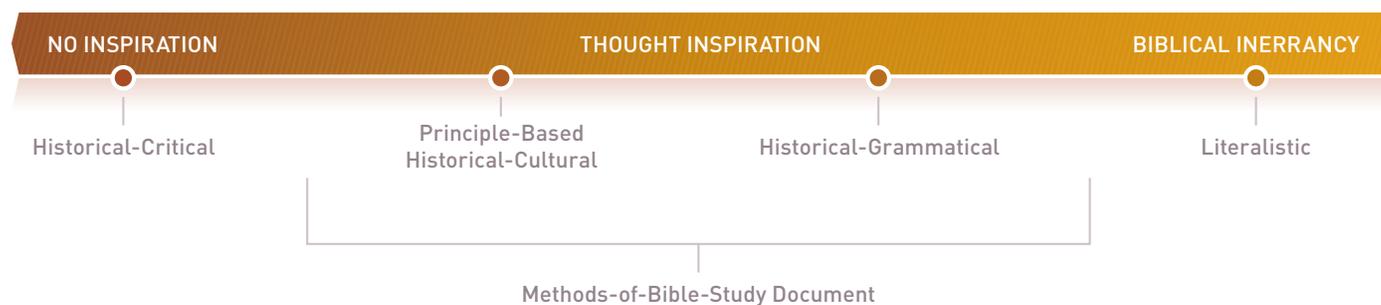
Since the various hermeneutical approaches can lead to differing interpretations, it follows that approaches designated by more distant points on the continuum—even those within the central portion representing traditional Seventh-day Adventist guidelines—may draw conflicting conclusions about issues for which there is not a clear, unequivocal biblical mandate.

HEADSHIP

The decades-old debate about the role of women in Seventh-day Adventist Church leadership is complex and sensitive. Those who disagree with ordaining women to the offices of elder and pastor are usually in harmonious agreement concerning most facets of the discussion—that women, too, are created in God’s image; that they are created of worth equal to men; that they bring equally valuable gifts to the church; and that they also bring exclusively female contributions to the mission of the body of Christ.

The agreement breaks down around passages in Scripture that have been associated with the concept of headship. Generally, those who would stop short of ordaining women to the offices of pastor or elder take issue with appointing women to headship roles, maintaining that a plain reading of Scripture does not allow women to exercise spiritual authority over men. Others believe that biblical headship does not apply to church leadership roles but is limited in application to the husband’s role as servant-leader in the home. Still others contend that headship is not even a biblical concept, but rather a relatively modern term, and that the original Greek word for *head* (*kephalē*), denotes *source*,

A continuum of hermeneutical approaches



not *leader*. These argue that hierarchical position is not the point, and that correct interpretation of these challenging passages is dependent on understanding the context in which they were written.

The majority of the committee does not view the issue of headship as a barrier to ordaining women to pastoral ministry.

UNITY

Some may be concerned that the unity of the worldwide Church is compromised if members in some regions practice the ordination of women while others do not. In its supreme sense, unity is characterized by oneness with God and with each other, as Jesus said in His prayer in John 17. However, unity must be differentiated from uniformity, which implies invariability.

In deference to the unity Jesus identified, our doctrines comprise the common ground upon which our Church denomination is organized. For the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the 28 Fundamental Beliefs are the common doctrines. They are officially adopted and are considered scripturally clear. Other issues not unequivocally outlined in Scripture are subject to varying interpretations. Because a scripturally based, reasonable

case may be made in favor of or opposed to the ordination of women to pastoral ministry, a worldwide mandate is neither practical nor necessary.

In recent years, the General Conference has established policies recognizing women in leadership roles: the ordination of deaconesses and elders and the commissioning of pastors. Although these policies are not practiced in all regions of the world, the Church has remained a single, worldwide organization. It is the conclusion of the study committee that differences in opinion and practice on this issue do not constitute disunity in Christ nor in the Church.

Since the first resolution recommending the ordination of women in 1881, members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church have intensely debated, without consensus, the advisability of ordaining women to the gospel ministry. In 1973 the General Conference made its first formal appointment of a committee to study the role of women in the Church. Forty years later, it is the recommendation of this North American Division Theology of Ordination Study Committee that ordination to gospel ministry, as an affirmation of the call of God, be conferred by the Seventh-day Adventist Church on men and women. ■

Submitted by the
North American Division
Theology of Ordination Study Committee
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