

NAD Year-end Meeting
Is Ordination of Women a Threat to Our Unity?
November 4, 2013
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Emo Philips shares an apocryphal story that challenges the disunity found in the Christian community today, and I wonder sometimes if it is a story about us, too. Let me read to you his parable:

I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So I ran over and said, “Stop! Don’t do it!”

“Why shouldn’t I?” he said.

I said, “Well, there’s so much to live for!”

He said, “Like what?”

I said, “Well, are you religious or atheist?”

He said, “Religious.”

I said, “Me too!”

“Are you Christian or Buddhist?”

He said, “Christian.”

I said, “Me too!”

“Are you Catholic or Protestant?”

He said, “Protestant.”

I said, “Me too!”

“Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?”

He said, “Baptist!”

I said, “Wow! Me too!”

“Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?”

He said, “Baptist Church of God!”

I said, “Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?”

He said, “Reformed Baptist Church of God!”

I said, “Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?”

He said, “Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915!”

I said, “Die, heretic!” and pushed him off the bridge.

Do we do the same thing—pigeonhole one another down to the last conviction, and then reject each other if we’re not of the identical persuasion? Can we live with diversity? As Ellen White says, “Unity in diversity is a principle that pervades the whole creation.”¹

Throughout the history of the Christian church, wars have been fought and people have been burned at the stake over different interpretations of Scripture. We are fortunate because our church has a fundamental belief that focuses on unity.

“14. Unity in the Body of Christ:

The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. ...

This doctrine is about how we are very different yet we are one in the body of Christ. I would like to repeat what I believe is a significant consensus of our committee.

“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 opposed to the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, although each of us views one position or the other as stronger and more compelling.

A good Bible-believing Seventh-day Adventist can stand theologically faithful on either side of this issue. That means we can have unity in diversity. The committee has read reams of documents. We have listened to hours of convictions, and we have prayed earnestly. We did not come to a unanimous consensus on whether or not it is appropriate to ordain women for positions of pastor/elder in the church. However, the committee doesn't believe that differences of opinion on this issue need to result in disunity. When there is no clear “thus saith the Lord” on one side or the other, we are free to disagree without being disagreeable.

If we were children on the ball field who came to an impasse on a subject—like who really was Sally's boyfriend—we might settle it with fisticuffs. If we were leading armies on the two slopes of the valley of Elah, we might each choose a champion to see if we could defeat the other side, as with the story of David and Goliath. But we are church men and women whose love for each other, the three angels' messages, and our church prevents such an approach.

Our committee illustrates the approach of disagreement in love. This issue should not be the cause of high anxiety in our church. It need not result in voices sounding the call “heretic,” nor is it an issue for the watchmen on the walls of Zion. It does not presage the collapse of our unity. We can live without fear that our differences will pull us apart.

The world church denied women’s ordination on July 11, 1990, because “in view of the possible risk of disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the church”ⁱⁱ it was considered to be “probably best and the least disruptive for the world church at this time.”ⁱⁱⁱ So, in a desire to maintain church unity rather than for theological reasons, it was denied. Pursuing world church unity in 1990 was a well-intentioned goal, but today it is clear that the only way to maintain that unity is to not make the ordination of women a condition of unity. The nonordination of women need not become the 29th fundamental belief.

We need to remember Ellen White’s counsel: “All our workers must have room to exercise their own judgment and discretion. God has given men talents which He means that they should use. He has given them minds, and He means that they should become thinkers and do their own thinking and planning, rather than depend upon others to think for them.”^{iv}

Of course, there is concern that because we have worldwide ordination, we can’t ordain a woman in one part of the world when she would not be accepted in another part of the world. Let’s not confuse the authorization of ordination with the permission of those who are ordained to practice anywhere in the world.

In our own history in the United States, there was a time when a black pastor was ordained—that is, authorized to represent the worldwide church—but that pastor could not practice his ministry, could not use that ordination authority in a white church in the same town. They were authorized but sociologically could not use it where it was not accepted. And so it would be with the ordination of women, authorized anywhere that it is accepted. That is servant leadership as compared to a hierarchal authoritarian view of ordination.

Acts 15 gives us a perfect example of how to deal with a controversial issue that threatens unity. The issue of circumcision had much more potential to split the church. The Bible is very clear about the importance of circumcision as a mark of identity of the people of God. But then the church listened to the mission stories of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the Gentiles up in Antioch, and James summed up their decision: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”^v That should be our judgment today. We see the Holy Spirit working in the lives of women. Let’s not make it

difficult for the gifts of the Holy Spirit to be used in the lives of women by **not** laying the hands of blessing and encouragement on them.

The worldwide unity of the Church will be assured when the focus is maintained on Jesus. As Dan Jackson said on Sabbath, “There is unity in Jesus Christ; there is no other unity.” When He is our focus and we maintain our commitment to our shared mission outlined in the 28 Fundamental Beliefs, we will live in unity. Disunity will result when all are required to come to an agreement on issues over which we have developed no consensus.

We assure a schism in the church:

- When that which is conditioned by history is imposed as law,
- When that which grows from culture is made the policy for all,
- When that which is local in importance is made universal in application.

Acts 2 describes the unity we all seek, when “all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had.”^{vi} They had unity, but not the kind of unity that comes from formal assent to creedal or policy statements. Theirs was not a unity centered in formulations of systematic theology or policy books. Theirs was the unity of a dream. The future of our church will be found in the moving of the Spirit of God as the people follow a dream. Unity will not be found in absolute doctrinal or policy purity.

If we would do a policy purity study of the early Christian church, we would not find unanimity. Peter wasn’t always understanding Paul, and the Jewish Christians certainly had some different views than the Gentile Christians. But they were caught up in a vision, a dream given to them by Christ, a dream to give the good news to the world. And they were one, unified in Christ in that effort.

If we would do a doctrinal purity study of the early Seventh-day Adventist Church, you would find many different views on lots of theological subjects, but they were one with a message to give to the world. They were caught up in the excitement of a movement with vision, a remnant movement that had a dream of the return of Jesus.

The unity of Adventism was not found in the codified beliefs of the *Church Manual*. The unity of Adventism was not found in the policy book. Their unity was the unity of a dream. Brothers and sisters, it is time to dream again!

Let us not have more committees discussing policy unity. Let us not have more committees seeking to enshrine cultural social tradition into rules for our very diverse world, but rather let us spend our time discussing how to communicate to a dying world the good news that Jesus is coming back. To accomplish that task, we need everybody on deck! Men and women. Let us dream

again, receiving the Spirit of God so our young sons and daughters will prophesy, our old men will dream dreams, and our young men will see visions.^{vii} Let us live for those days today, as God pours out His Spirit on men and women alike.

Brothers and sisters, I say with James, let's "not make it difficult!"^{viii}

ⁱ Ellen G. White, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol. 5, 1956, p. 1143.

ⁱⁱ *GC Session Bulletin* No. 7 from the fifty-fifth General Conference Session, July 11, 1990, p. 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*

^{iv} White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 1923, p. 302.

^v Acts 15:19, NIV.

^{vi} Acts 2:44.

^{vii} Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17.

^{viii} Acts 15:19, NIV.