

IS ORDINATION OF WOMEN A THREAT TO OUR UNITY?

*in necessary things unity;
in uncertain things freedom;
in everything compassion¹*

For more than 50 years, members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church have intensely debated, without consensus, the advisability of ordaining women to the gospel ministry. Sound, cogent reasoning has been presented in defense of both sides of the question. Since neither the Bible nor the Spirit of Prophecy provides a definitive, unequivocal word on the issue, it is the study committee's consensus that our differences should not create a rift in the Church. We believe the Scriptures can be interpreted to support a position either for or opposed to women's ordination, and for that reason the issues should not be a cause for disunity in the Church.

UNITY DEFINED

Some may be concerned that the unity of the church is compromised if some regions of the world practice the ordination of women while others do not. We believe that unity in Christian fellowship may be identified by oneness with God and with each other, as Jesus said in His prayer in John 17. However, "denominational unity"—agreement about the clear doctrines unequivocally manifest in Scripture—is secure, because for the Seventh-day Adventist denomination the unifying doctrines are the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. These doctrines are officially adopted as scripturally straightforward.

Other issues not unequivocally outlined in Scripture, such as ordination, are subject to varying interpretations and therefore cannot be considered non-negotiable. The unity that is important for the church is outlined in the fourteenth Fundamental Belief:

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. . . .

Unity is important to the church, but this unity is not uniformity, as the fourteenth doctrinal statement itself notes the many differences that "must not be divisive among us." We celebrate different gifts, varieties of expression of worship, different languages, and a diversity of evangelistic techniques, but we hold in common the foundational beliefs that make us Seventh-day Adventists.

The *Church Manual* is another means by which the Church manifests unity as it implements certain policies in a similar way from church to church. However, the *Church Manual* and the *Minister's Manual* contain policies that are not all based on

a “Thus saith the Lord” in Scripture, but rather reflect changing circumstances and needs. Church officers are added in some areas of the world and not in others, and descriptions of responsibilities vary depending on local needs and culture. A modern-day example that helps illustrate unity without uniformity is the McDonald’s restaurant chain. McDonalds requires certain things to be the same whether the store is in China, Mexico, or the United States. It does allow, however, for some differences in the food to accommodate regional taste differences.

UNITY REMAINS

Over the years, changes in policies on ordination have not led to disunity. Consider that different branches of the church have already voted at least four policies relative to women in leadership that are not followed in all parts of the world.

1. The ordination of deaconesses was voted at the 2010 General Conference Session.²
2. Authorization of females as elders was voted at the Spring Meeting in 1975.³
3. Ordination of female elders was voted at Annual Council in 1984.⁴
4. Authorization of females to serve as commissioned ministers was voted in 1989.⁵

These policies, though controversial in some areas, have not resulted in the breaking apart of the Church. While these particular policies have not been followed everywhere around the world (in fact, not even everywhere in the North American

Division), they have not shattered the unity of the church, because unity is based on something far deeper than making certain that everyone everywhere follows the same policies.

Sometimes churches in the same towns hold different views. One church ordains women deacons or elders, and the other church in the same town does not. We have women pastors in some parts of the world, and there are other parts of the world that don’t have women pastors. These churches are not in disunity because they hold different perspectives on this issue. Differences in opinion about ordaining women does not constitute disunity, because the 28 Fundamental Beliefs are not compromised.

The North American Division believes strongly in the importance of the unity of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church. Our church is the only Protestant church that has not broken into national churches on different continents. We are together as a worldwide church communicating the unique message of Adventism to the world. That message is summarized in the 28 Fundamental Beliefs, and the ordination or non-ordination of women need not be enshrined as a part of the Adventist message to the world.

A fundamental question related to the ordination of women and maintaining church unity is whether or not ordination must be universally applicable around the world. Would granting that authority in only some divisions or unions bring the worldwide Church into disunity?

It is important to make a distinction between granting ecclesiastical authority to lead a church and the social/community acceptance of that authority. It is the position of the committee that the church could grant ordination and worldwide authority to represent the church while not at the same time empowering every person given that authority to practice it in locations where it is not culturally accepted. To illustrate: during the years of apartheid in South Africa, black and white ministers were ordained and had the authority to represent the Adventist Church, but that authority did not authorize them to practice ministry or to use that authority among groups where the social-cultural conditions mitigated against it.

The worldwide church is held together in unity by our focus on Jesus and our shared mission outlined in the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Disunity will come to the church when the majority seeks to impose convictions on the minority in areas that are not defined by the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Ordination should be a policy determined at the division level; it cannot become Fundamental Belief No. 29, because there is no consensus on the issue in the Church. The worldwide unity of the Church will be assured when the focus is maintained on Jesus and our shared mission outlined in the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Disunity will result when all are required to come to an agreement on issues over which we have developed no consensus.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLE FOR MANAGING DISAGREEMENT

In light of the reality that the church has not come to a consensus on the theology that would authorize ordination of women, it is appropriate to look at how the early church handled issues that had the potential to cause disunity in the early church. In that regard, Acts 15 is very instructive. Paul and

Barnabas are confronted in Antioch with those who believed “Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved” (verse 1, NLT). It was the biblical conviction of these early Jewish Christians that all who were to be identified as the people of God must be circumcised.

This was a major conflict. As the King James Version puts it, “therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them” (verse 2, KJV). This conflict in Antioch went to the very core identity and belief of the first Christians.

So the Jerusalem Conference was convened. Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem to share with the church leadership the mission stories from Antioch about how the Gentiles were believing in the gospel and were manifesting the power of the Holy Spirit even though they were not circumcised.⁶

There were those Jews in Jerusalem, however, who were convinced that what they thought to be the clear commands of the Bible should be followed. Genesis 17:10–11⁷ provides clear instruction to Abraham that in order to keep the covenant, each male “must be circumcised.” They were committed to a hermeneutic that required following the biblical mandate for circumcision. I imagine they eloquently defended the faith based on their theology, the Scripture, and their hermeneutic; they probably also recited the story of Moses, who was nearly killed by an angel because he had not circumcised his own son (Exodus 4:24–26).

These Jews appealed to that meeting of church leaders to not abandon the faith as handed down to them by Father Abraham. They wanted unity—a unity based on the Jewish traditions. Would the early church break into disunity? Acts 15:6 says, “The apostles and elders met to consider this question” (NIV).

The question was, *What shall we require of all?* What is the common denominator that we all need

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to agree on? What are our Fundamental Beliefs? The discussion revolved around circumcision, but the real question was about what all must agree on to live in unity. Peter spoke up, and he argued for a spiritual basis for unity.⁸

SPIRITUAL BASIS FOR UNITY

This first argument of Peter is simple: God demonstrated his acceptance of these Gentiles when he poured out His Holy Spirit on them (verse 8).

As a church founded through the leading of the Spirit of Prophecy, we must continue to be open to the leading of that same Spirit. Around the world as women have exercised their gifts in ministry, they have demonstrated the outpouring of the Spirit. They are leading growing churches in the United States, China, India, and Mexico. We are seeing the leading of the Spirit.

The second argument that Peter makes is where he said, “He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith” (verse 9, NIV).

God made no distinctions, God made no difference. Man drew lines where God did not. Man makes distinctions where God does not. We isolate where God unifies. We build walls, and God came to break down the “dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14, NIV, cf. NLT).

As Paul would later say, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28, NIV).

The third argument that Peter makes is as follows: “Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?” (Acts 15:10, NIV).

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. We will break into national separatist churches when we elevate debatable issues to binding policies required to maintain unity. When we elevate church policies on ordination to the status of a twenty-ninth Fundamental Belief, we assure disunity.

The fourth argument Peter uses gives us the principle of unity: “No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (verse 11, NIV).

TIME FOR RESOLUTION

After Peter’s speech, the time had come for a decision. What would they do? Gentiles were flooding into the church. Would they set up circumcision clinics in Antioch? Would they establish a new fundamental belief? James had listened to Peter’s appeal, and now he shares what seemed to be the consensus of the group: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (verse 19, NIV).

The consensus was: Don’t make it difficult! In those few words, James sums up the gospel. Don’t

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make it difficult. Let's not make it difficult for women who have been called by the Holy Spirit. Let's not make it difficult for grace to prevail in the church. Let's not make an issue out of our differences on this issue. Let's live in unity and not seek uniformity.

So today, with no crystal clear "Thus saith the Lord" about the ordination of women and with no "thus saith the Lord" from Ellen White, the issue should be left up to local considerations.

How did Paul handle circumcision after the Jerusalem Conference? Note his experience in Acts 16:2-3 (NLT): "Timothy was well thought of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium, so Paul wanted him to join them on their journey. In deference to the Jews of the area, he arranged for Timothy to be circumcised before they left, for everyone knew that his father was a Greek."

Paul adapted to the local sensitivities because he didn't want to offend, and he understood that circumcision was not prohibited, nor was it mandated, but should be left to the local situation. Paul related to the eating of meat offered to idols in a similar fashion, where he encouraged consideration of the sensitivities of others.⁹

Uniform consensus on the subject of ordination is not intrinsic to and essential to participate in receiving the Good News, nor is it part and parcel of being identified as a Seventh-day Adventist. Actually, *ordination* is not used in the Bible to initiate people to a church office.¹⁰

Similar to the situation described in Acts 15, today we would say that some places in the world church have mission stories of how women are spreading the good news and sharing its blessing. Their leaders are coming to the General Conference and saying what Paul and Barnabas said in the Jerusalem Conference.

We might bring Paul's comment into our time by rephrasing it as follows: God knows people's hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts the ministry of women by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to men. He made no distinction between men and women when it comes to sharing the gospel.

Instead of quoting Amos 9:11-12, as James did, we might quote Joel 2:28 (NLT):

*Then, after doing all those things,
I will pour out my Spirit upon all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
Your old men will dream dreams,
and your young men will see visions.*

JESUS DESTROYED THE DIVIDING WALL

Paul also appeals for unity in his letter to the Ephesians. The Christians in Ephesus were famously divided along several lines.¹¹ Paul told them, in effect, that at the cross Jesus destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, and in so doing he made them one (Ephesians 2:14). And he provides a list of realities that were to be the basis of their unity. The list is strikingly short: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:3-6, NIV).

Paul lists seven foundations for unity: *one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism,*

one God and Father of all. Surprisingly short, isn't it? It's also surprising what is missing from the list. He says as much by what he leaves out as by what he includes.

He does not say that there must be unanimity of thought regarding circumcision. He did not say that there must be unanimity about how to approach the issue of food offered to idols. He did not even say that there must be unanimity over the issue of how to handle the Jewish festival days, though he has much to say elsewhere about all three issues.

Rather, he provides us with a list that is Trinitarian: *one Father, one Lord, one Spirit.* His list includes how we receive salvation and live the Christian life: *one faith.* It includes how we come into the church: *one baptism.* It includes the context in which we live the Christian life and grow mature as believers: *one body.* And it includes the ultimate destiny toward which the church is heading: *one hope.* Simple. Succinct. Non-negotiable. But it allows for differences in conviction about many other facets of our life and practice.

We make a mistake when we confuse two terms: *unity* and *uniformity.* Unity means that our hearts are bonded together even when our function, our

gifts, or our thoughts and perspectives are different. *Uniformity* means that we must all walk in lockstep fashion, thinking, believing, behaving, and voting in precisely the same manner while all seeking to participate in the same practices at the same time.

The danger that the church faces is one that the Jews faced with the development of the Talmud. As organizations mature, there is a natural desire to codify in ever more specific detail doctrinal issues. Our church founders expressed concern that church organization would go beyond the clear word of God in the development of a creed.¹²

We must avoid the temptation to continue to more narrowly define the truth so as to exclude those who have a different perspective.

*He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!*¹⁴

The circle we draw must not be so ill defined as to essentially include everyone; on the other hand, let us not narrow the circle beyond what the clear word of God and Spirit of Prophecy require. ■



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- 1 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_necessariis_unitas,_in_dubis_libertas,_in_omnibus_caritas
- 2 Church Manual, 54-55.
- 3 General Conference Committee, April 3, 1975, Spring Meeting.
- 4 General Conference Committee, Oct. 14, 1984, Annual Council.
- 5 General Conference Committee, Oct. 5, 1989, Annual Council.
- 6 “When they [Paul and Barnabas] came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses’” (Acts 15:4-5, NIV).
- 7 “This is the covenant that you and your descendants must keep: Each male among you must be circumcised. You must cut off the flesh of your foreskin as a sign of the covenant between me and you” (Genesis 17:10-11, NLT).
- 8 “After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: ‘Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us’” (Acts 15:7-8, NIV).
- 9 “Don’t tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, all foods are acceptable, but it is wrong to eat something if it makes another person stumble” (Romans 14:20, NLT). See also 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, NLT.
- 10 John Brunt, “Ordination in the New Testament” presentation at the Adventist Society for Religious Studies, November 2012, Chicago.
- 11 Much of the following is from Randy Roberts, used by permission.
- 12 Ellen G. White wrote: “Oh, how Christ longed to open to Israel the precious treasures of the truth! But such was their spiritual blindness that it was impossible to reveal to them the truths relating to His kingdom. They clung to their creed and their useless ceremonies when the truth of Heaven awaited their acceptance” (The Desire of Ages, 241-242).
- 12 Charles Edwin Markham, “Outwitted.”