

“Look again, and look a little higher”
a presentation to the
North American Division Year-end Meetings
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Theology of Ordination
November 4, 2013

The early Advent believers had experienced the Great Disappointment.

- Why hadn't Jesus returned? Where was he?
- What was their future now?
- Their mission?

There was the temptation to become discouraged.

There was the temptation to embrace forms of fanaticism.

There was the temptation to walk away.

Then, in December 1844, a seventeen-year-old, named Ellen Harmon had her first of many visions:

While praying at the family altar, the Holy Ghost fell on me, and I seemed to be rising higher and higher, far above the dark world. I turned to look for the Advent people in the world, but could not find them - when a voice said to me, "Look again, and look a little higher." At this I raised my eyes and saw a straight and narrow path, cast up high above the world. On this path the Advent people were traveling to the City, which was at the farther end of the path. They had a bright light set up behind them at the beginning of the path, which an angel told me was the Midnight Cry. This light shone all along the path, and gave light for their feet so they might not stumble. And if they kept their eyes fixed on Jesus, who was just before them, leading them to the City, they were safe.

The voice told Ellen Harmon to:

“Look again, and look a little higher” ...and she would see the advent people...following Jesus...

- Jesus *was* with them;
- Their future was secure in him;
- Their mission was to focus *on Jesus*;

With the question of ordination in mind, how did the Advent people walk the path toward the Holy City? What was their story as they tried to live faithfully in light of what God was doing in the world...?

It's probably difficult to imagine it now, as we sit in this beautiful building with General Conference departments, international mission work, and various services to our global church.

But the Advent Movement was *not* organized. In fact, there was a distrust of organizational structures.

Many advent believers had left or been forced to leave other Christian denominations, and their new community resisted replicating the power structures of what they perceived to be “Babylon.” This meant that “ordination” either as a theological conviction or as a practice was not present in the 1840s. There were no records of church membership kept and no church officers were appointed.

Some of the advent believers had been licensed preachers or ordained ministers in other congregations, so it was natural that their previous roles were recognized. But ministry was itinerant not stationary. Those called to ministry were not running local churches, but were men and women with the gifts of preaching and teaching who were constantly on the move. The records tell us, and given the climate of the United States in the mid-19th century it is understandable, that Ellen Harmon White—a woman without education and other privileges of the elite—faced tough critics for her highly influential public role. Some of the very texts that are used now to keep women from serving in leadership were used by her critics against her.

But her first vision reminded the advent believers that Jesus was on the move, and that they were safe if they were following him. They were not to let criticism and opposition hinder their mission, but to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus...they were to “look again, and look a little higher.”

It seems that the earliest examples of regulating Adventist ministry came from the confusion caused by some itinerant ministers who claimed to be part of the community but were not.

In 1853 James White argued the need to distinguish between genuine Advent preachers and these false teachers. Beginning that year, cards were issued, with signatures from James White and Joseph Bates, indicating official approval from the movement.

At about this same time, James White suggested that it would foster church unity if its ministers experienced the “laying on of hands.” Shortly thereafter, the authority to baptize and lead out in communion was more clearly associated with the ministers who had been “set apart” in this way. The earliest Adventist records did not typically use the word “ordination,” but “setting apart” or “laying on of hands” probably due to a desire to follow the words of Scripture.

There is no evidence that this “setting apart” by the “laying on of hands” happened to a woman, but the movement defended a woman’s right to preach publicly, as it was clear that their God-given gifts should be used to share the Advent message.

In 1861, the Michigan Conference formalized the policy of granting a license to preach to qualified ministers (renewed each year), assuming that after a “testing time” the minister would be granted ordination credentials, which would then allow the minister to perform baptisms and

other ordinances. When the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists was organized in 1863, the Michigan Conference policy was adopted for the entire denomination.

Within seven years (1870) of the first issuing of ministerial licenses by the newly established church, women were also issued them, although there is no evidence that after a “testing time” they were ordained. Our history reflects a tension similar to that of the New Testament. There are the constraints of cultural norms and the new freedoms and possibilities given what God was doing in the world.

- Women should cover their heads in public – including within their house church
- And...women can prophesy!
- There was the reality of slavery in the Roman Empire
- And... the slave is your brother in Christ!

The United States would not allow women to vote for another fifty years and Ellen White would die before she could vote. Culturally women were relegated to their domestic sphere, while men engaged the public sphere outside the home. Yet, in the Advent Movement women preached publicly and they were issued ministerial licenses from the newly organized denomination.

Because the Seventh-day Adventist Church embraced the vision:

“Look again, and look a little higher”

- *We know* that Ellen White encouraged the training of ministers – women and men, and she was often present at their examination committees in order to ask them questions;
- *We know* that women and men followed the same path to ministry;
- *We know* that women served as part of husband-wife ministry teams, and frequently on their own;
- *We know* that women, as licensed ministers, traveled, held evangelistic efforts, encouraged new companies of believers;
- *We know* that women held licenses from 18 local conferences in the U.S., and outside the U.S., women held licenses in Finland, New Zealand and Britain;
- *We know* that women were paid by the local conference or by the General Conference with tithe funds;
- *And we know* that when Adventist ministry shifted from a traveling ministry to a more local church ministry, women continued to serve as licensed ministers.

Since by 1881, women ministers had been holding ministerial licenses for over a decade with successful ministries but had not been ordained (and therefore were unable to conduct baptisms and other ordinances), the following resolutions are not surprising:

- “RESOLVED, That all candidates for license and ordination should be examined with reference to their intellectual and spiritual fitness for the successful discharge of the duties which will devolve upon them as licentiates and ordained ministers.
- 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” (*Review and Herald*, December 20, 1881, page 392).

While the first resolution was adopted, as far as we know, the second was not mentioned again. Ellen White took up the cause as much as social circumstances could allow. She defended the public role of women and called for their public recognition:

The clearest is probably her July 9, 1895 statement in the *Review and Herald*:

“Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands.

Ellen White appeared to be comfortable with the idea of “setting women apart” by the “laying on of hands” whatever that particular role signified. And she was comfortable with women serving in public ministry and being paid from tithe funds.

Ellen White not only supported women as deaconesses in local congregations, she supported those who were preachers and evangelists who were to serve in “public labor” beyond local congregations.

Where were the Advent people, Ellen White wondered in her first vision...

The voice said, “Look again, and look a little higher...”

You’ll see them...they are following Jesus and if they keep their eyes fixed on him they are safe.

Throughout our history those following Jesus ...

- Preached in churches and tents packed with people... and they did it, women and men, because of what God was doing in the world;

Early in our history those following Jesus ...

- Served as Sabbath School superintendents, conference secretaries and GC treasurers... They did it, women and men together because of what God was doing in the world;

In war-time Europe women evangelists...

- Served with such success in Finland that by the 1960s church leaders requested their ordination... because of what God was doing in the world;

In more recent decades...

- Even as women had their ministerial licenses taken, receiving instead other credentials, they kept serving their church alongside men who often took similar credentials in solidarity with their female colleagues because they saw what God was doing in the world;

Today ordained women ministers in China...

- build churches and baptize converts and celebrate what God is doing in the world...

Q Should we embrace the ordination of qualified women ministers?

Given this question put before us today...

Q what does it mean to keep our eyes on Jesus?

I have no doubt that that is the desire of every heart here...

Q How does Ellen White's vision guide us today?

“Look again, and look a little higher...”

- Look again at what God is currently doing in the world...
- Look again at what God is doing through women and men who are serving the Adventist church through various ministries and missions...
- Look again at the promise of the Spirit in Joel 2, and ask if the blessing of the Spirit is upon them...

Let us now celebrate what God is doing in the world!

God is leading the Advent people toward the shining city...

Those whose eyes are fixed on Jesus are safe.

God chose a woman to give us that vital message:

“Look again, and look a little higher...”