

Chapter 1: “Women’s Ordination: Why Not!?”

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The Context of the Current Debate

The issue of the ordination of women to ministry has been the cause of fierce debate within many Christian communions. For instance, the Anglican Church has struggled to come to terms with the issue, accepting female ordinands in some regions, but not in others. While Roman Catholicism officially holds to the view that it is inappropriate to ordain women to the priesthood, many within that faith communion would accept female priests. The US-based Southern Baptist Convention allowed ordination of women for a period, and then reversed its decision, thereby creating a continuing chaotic situation.

Within Seventh-day Adventism, the debate over the ordination of women has raged fiercely over several decades. At the 1990 General Conference Session in Indianapolis, the world Church voted against the ordination of women to the gospel ministry. Again, at the 1995 General Conference Session in Utrecht, Netherlands, the Church voted down the possibility of ordaining women in regions of the Church that were amenable to the concept. At the same time the Church has allowed women to be ordained as elders¹ and as deacons.² In addition to the female elders ministering in local churches in multiple countries, there are now many female pastors employed in full-time ministry, many of whom have been “commissioned” while a few have been ordained within regions (or union conferences) that have gone ahead without General Conference approval. In 2015 the issue is again on the General Conference Session agenda for vote; again from the perspective of whether it would be permissible to ordain women in areas of

1 The General Conference Annual Council voted in favour of the ordination of female elders in 1975, and re-affirmed that action at the 1984 Annual Council. See <http://www.nadwm.org/article/159/resources/official-statements-by-the-seventh-day-adventist-church-pertaining-to-women/seventh-day-adventist-church-s-position-on-women-elders-deaconesses> (accessed 14 June 2015).

2 At the 2010 Atlanta General Conference Session.

the world church that wish to do so. The urgency of the issue is underlined by the fact that hundreds of women are undertaking theological training within the church's universities, colleges, and seminaries.

In addition to my pastoral and theological education, my own background and experience have had an influence in the formation of my views regarding ordination, and, in particular, ordination of women. My early spirituality was nurtured in a small country church in Western Australia, and while my layperson father was the regular preacher, there were several outstanding women who were on the preaching roster. Then, when I left my home-state in 1966 to begin nurse training at what is now Sydney Adventist Hospital, I found myself in a female-dominated profession and realised that I was comfortable with women "having authority" over men! However, probably the largest paradigm shift in my thinking came when my wife and I were appointed to work for the Adventist Church in Papua New Guinea. Almost overnight, I came to realise in practical terms that the Bible that I had always considered (and still consider) a divine book was also a human book³ that could be best interpreted and understood within its own historical context/s and then intentionally applied into our own particular life situations and contexts.⁴

Of course, there are other factors that have impacted my view of the issue. Not least among these is the fact that I've spent many years training pastors for ministry—both women and men—and I have seen the way that the Spirit of God has called and gifted many outstanding women for ministry and has nurtured them as they have engaged courageously in ministry, sometimes amid what I can only describe as unchristian opposition.

In this chapter I propose first to outline the major arguments against the ordination of women to ministry—that is, Ordination: Why NOT! Then I shall outline what I see as the significant arguments in favour of women's

3 Ellen White's comment (written in 1886) continues to be instructive in this regard: "The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers" (*Selected Messages from the Writings of Ellen G. White*, book 1 [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958], 21).

4 Details of this paradigm shift can be found in Ray C. W. Roennfeldt, "How Melanesia Shaped My Hermeneutics," in B. D. Oliver, A. S. Currie, and D. E. Robertson, eds, *Avondale and the South Pacific: 100 Years of Mission* (Cororanbong, NSW: Avondale Academic Press, 1997), 93–105.

ordination—that is, Ordination: WHY Not? In both cases I do not plan to provide a rebuttal (on the one hand) or fully-fledged support (on the other hand). Rather, I wish the arguments to speak for themselves and readers are encouraged to come to their own conclusions. I shall conclude the chapter with a discussion that outlines a practical, hermeneutical resolution.

Women's Ordination: Why NOT!

What are the major arguments mounted against women's ordination? First and foremost, women's ordination is so clearly against a "plain" reading of Scripture that one really needs no further proof. In his first Epistle to Timothy, Paul argues that "a woman should learn in quietness and full submission" (1 Tim. 2:11).⁵ Although this passage says nothing explicitly about the ordination of women to ministry (or even ordination *per se*), when read at face value it would appear to reserve a couple of the major pastoral functions to men—those of teaching and preaching. After all, Paul goes on to say: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent" (vs. 12).⁶ Paul's reasons for this injunction are based transparently in Scripture—in fact in the Genesis narratives of creation and the fall. Women must maintain silent in the worship arena⁷ because "Adam was formed first, then Eve" and "it was the woman [Eve] who was deceived and became a sinner" (vss. 13–14).

Paul's instruction to the Corinthian believers in regard to propriety in worship is also cited as biblical evidence against the ordination of women. Again, while in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 Paul does not expressly refer to the ordination of women to gospel ministry, it is argued that the "headship" of man over woman would prohibit ordination to women. The critical verses in this passage appear to be verses 3 and 7–9. Paul explains that "the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" (vs. 3). Furthermore, "A man...is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of man. For, man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman,

5 All biblical references cited are from the *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973, 1978).

6 A similar statement can be found in 1 Cor 14:34–35.

7 That Paul is speaking in a worship setting is clear from the early verses of 1 Tim. 2 (e.g., see vs. 1).

but woman for man”⁸(vss. 7–9).⁹ Some have argued from these passages that the “headship principle” in the church (i.e. men having priority over women) is in some way analogous and reflective of an eternal subordination within the Trinity.¹⁰

While the foregoing argument against the ordination of women is found in some explicit statements of Scripture, the second argument is based on Scripture’s silence. Briefly put, the Bible contains no positive command or even a hint of admonition to ordain women to ministry and if the church is to base its doctrine and practice on the Word of God, it must resist the impulse to incorporate ideas or practices that are not biblical.¹¹

8 For a discussion for male headship from the contra- position, see Edwin Reynolds, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Headship in First Corinthians,” available among the papers presented at the General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee (2013–2014) at www.adventistarchives.org/gc-tosc (accessed 16 June 2015).

9 I should be noted here that Paul’s purpose in 1 Cor. 11 does not appear to be the forbidding of women to speak in a worship setting (cf., vss. 4 and 5). In fact, the discussion seems to be centred on the covering of the head, cutting or shaving of the hair, or wearing of long hair (see especially vss. 4–7 and 13–16).

10 See, for instance, the discussion in Michael P. Jensen, *Sydney Anglicanism: An Apology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012). For a convenient entry into the discussion from an Anglican perspective, see Kevin Giles’ “Response to ‘Sydney Anglicanism: An Apology,’” available at: https://www.cbe.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=126:response-to-sydney-anglicanism-an-apology&catid=34:book-review&Itemid=99 (accessed 29 May 2015). A more complete (and scholarly) version of Giles’ arguments can be found in Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), especially pp. 141–268. For an Adventist perspective that approaches this subordinationist standpoint, see John W. Peters, “Restoration of the Image of God: Headship and Submission,” available among the papers presented at the General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee (2013–2014) at www.adventistarchives.org/gc-tosc (accessed 16 June 2015).

11 This perspective is sometimes termed “primitivism” which means that contemporary Christian communities will look particularly to the earliest Christian period (ie. to “primitive” Christianity) for their models of practice. Adventism has its roots firmly planted in “primitivism” with its emphasis on Sabbath, believers’ baptism, tithing, foot-washing, etc. It should be observed that while the New Testament contains no clear injunction to ordain women to ministry, neither does it contain any specific instruction to ordain men. A recent example of the call to Christian “primitivism,” although it does not deal with the women’s

An important plank in the platform for the contra-ordination case is the fact that both the Aaronic priests of Old Testament times and the twelve disciples (or apostles) appointed by Jesus in New Testament times were exclusively male. While strong analogies might be constructed between the priests and apostles and their contemporary counterparts in Christian ministry, again it should be recognised that this is an argument from the silence of Scripture, for Scripture itself does not make those explicit connections.¹²

In Exodus 28 and 29 the ceremony of consecration or “ordination” of Aaron and his sons is described (Exod 28:1–3; 29:1–46). This ceremony is complex, to say the least. It involved sacrifices and offerings, cleansing with water, dressing in sacred garments, and anointing with oil—a ritual that is summed up by the words: “In this way you shall ordain Aaron and his sons” (29:9). On the other hand, Jesus’ appointment of the twelve, “whom he also designated apostles” appears to be simple in the extreme. Jesus merely called his disciples together and the “chose twelve of them”; indicating that he chose the twelve from a larger group (Luke 6:12–16). Again, when Jesus sent them out on their first missionary journey “He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness” (Matt 10:1).¹³

Third, women obviously cannot meet one of the key qualifications for ministry as outlined by Paul in his First Epistle to Timothy. While church “leaders”¹⁴—and one might assume that pastors are included among such leaders—are to be “temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money” (1 Tim. 3:2–3), the first (and maybe primary) characteristic addressed by Paul is: “the overseer must be above reproach, the

ordination issue, is Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity?: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2012). Ellen G. White appears also to point to a need to return to a “primitive godliness as has not been witnessed since apostolic times” (White, *The Great Controversy* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1888, 1950], 464).

12 See, for example, “Answers to Questions about Women’s Ordination: Some Fundamental Questions,” available on the *Adventists Affirm* website: www.adventistsaffirm.org/article/25/women-s-ordination-faqs/1-answers-to-questions-about-women-s-ordination (accessed 16 June 2015). Note that *Adventists Affirm* claims to be “A Publication Affirming Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs.”

13 Note that Matthew’s account the most comprehensive of this incident (cf. Mark 6:7–13 and Luke 9:1–6).

14 Referred to variously in English translations as bishops, overseers, elders, and leaders.

husband of but one wife” (vs. 2). Proponents of the contra-position take this statement at face-value; that is the pastor/leader must be male, and married to one wife.¹⁵ And it goes without saying that a woman cannot possibly fulfil this qualification.¹⁶

Fourth, a common concern among those who oppose the ordination of women is the fear of the “slippery slope.” The push for the equality of women with men in ministry is seen as part of the feminist phenomenon, and the question is asked: what will be the next challenge to biblical authority by cultural forces? There is an expectation that if the church gives way on its attitude to women in ministry, it will be a “short step” to the acceptance of practising homosexual persons into church membership, and even to their possible ordination as pastors.¹⁷ The danger of the “slippery slope” has always been a genuine concern for evangelical Christians. How are they to be closely connected with their surrounding culture/s without losing their distinctiveness as followers of Jesus Christ?¹⁸

Women’s Ordination: WHY Not?

I have described what I see as the key arguments *against* the ordination of women; and now I shall turn to the case *for* equality in ministry for women and men in the Adventist communion. While it may appear to be a strange place to start, the first point I wish to make is that the New Testament actually knows nothing about ordination to pastoral ministry for either men or women! The best that can be said is that as an ordained pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, I have been set aside by my Church twice as an elder; once as an elder by my local church, and then as an “elder” by the institutional church (ie. by a local conference or local mission, after receiving approval by the union mission or conference). However, there is no explicit directive in the New Testament to ordain pastors by the laying on of

15 Of course, the “husband of one wife” injunction should also disqualify male pastors who are not married as well.

16 For a forthright presentation of this perspective, see Clinton and Gina Wahlen, *Women’s Ordination: Does it Matter?* (Silver Spring, MD: Bright Shores Publishing, 2015) 39–48.

17 A succinct portrayal of the “slippery Slope” argument may be found in C. Raymond Holmes, “Women in Ministry: What Should we do Now?” (p. 8) available among the papers presented at the General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee (2013–2014) at www.adventistarchives.org/gc-tosc (accessed 16 June 2015).

18 See John 17:15–16 and Jesus’ discussion regarding salt and light (Matt 5:13–16).

hands or by the vote of a church committee. At the same time, there is no command not to do so.¹⁹

Theologically, I do not see a problem with this, unless one begins from a position of extreme primitivism; that is, that every organisational detail of church polity must find a warrant in Scripture. In fact, the apostolic church seems to have been quite flexible in regard to its leadership structures. Perhaps it can be articulated best as Spirit-led as the church faced new challenges. For example, consider the choosing of the seven deacons to a role of practical ministry in the Jerusalem church, described in Acts 6. Their setting-apart is outlined in this way: "They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them" (vs. 6). It should be observed that this was done without a direct command from Jesus or even a prophetic instruction, although prophetic utterances were held in high esteem in the earliest church.²⁰

Second, it seems to me that Scripture is clear in its presentation of women and men having equality in both creation and salvation. For instance humankind—both male and female—is created in the "image of God" (Gen 1:26–27; 5:1–2). While there have been many and various explanations as to what the image of God means, probably the simplest (and maybe the most obvious) is that humans are to act as God's representatives in the earthly sphere.²¹ It may then be argued that there is something about the maleness and femaleness of humankind that is revelatory of God himself. Although there are obvious differences between the Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 accounts of creation, they are probably best seen as complementary. In Genesis chapter 2 God is revealed as creating Eve from a rib of the first created Adam (Gen 2:21–24). The focus of this creation narrative is on the oneness of the created pair, not on an inherent inequality between man and woman (Gen

19 Certainly this is implied by the tentative nature of the wording of the "Consensus Statement on a Seventh-day Adventist Theology of Ordination": "While most elders and deacons ministered in local settings, some elders were itinerant and supervised greater territory with multiple congregations, which *may* reflect the ministry of individuals such as Timothy and Titus (1 Tim 1:3–4; Titus 1:5)." This consensus statement is available among the papers of the General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee (2013–2014) at www.adventistarchives.org/gc-tosc (accessed 16 June 2015); emphasis mine.

20 For instance, Acts 2:17–21 and 11:27–28.

21 A handy discussion of the "Image of God" can be found in Edward M. Curtis, "'Image of God (OT),' in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), III:389–91.

2:23–24).²² In fact, it is ironic that when the narratives of Genesis 1 and 2 are viewed at the metanarrative level, one could make a stronger argument for the superiority of women than for the inferiority of women. For example, light is created on day 1 while the sun, moon and stars are created on day 4. Again, the waters are separated and sky is formed on day 2 while fish and birds fill the sea and sky on day 5 (and so on). God “forms” on days 1 through 3, and then “fills” on days 4 through 6 in creative moments that move from the simple to the complex.²³ This creative movement reaches its climax on day 6 with the creation of land animals followed by the crowning act of creation—the divine stooping to form the human pair, first Adam, and then Eve.

There is no ontological inequality apparent between the genders at the time of their creation. In fact, it is not until the fall of humankind into sin as described in Genesis chapter 3 that one finds any evidence of inequality. There, in the context of the “curses” that are pronounced on the serpent, the man, the woman, and the ground, God says “he [Adam] will rule over you [Eve]” (Gen 3:16). It should be recognised that the subordination of the woman to the man is a result of sin. It does not find its origin in God’s creative activity. It was not meant to be! If this is the case, might not one argue that the implementation of salvation would at the very least begin to repair the damage done by the entrance of sin into the world with the full restoration (or re-creation) to occur at the eschaton? The New Testament makes the case that the Christian community reverses all human separation and inequality in Jesus Christ: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:29). If there is to be equality between men and women in the salvation provided ultimately through Jesus Christ (the primary issue), surely there should be equality in the proclamation of the gospel of salvation (the secondary issue).

Third, the New Testament affirms the ministry of women. While those who make a case against the ordination of women represent their case as based solely on Scripture (i.e. the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*), the totality of the witness of Scripture cannot be ignored (i.e. the twin Reformation principle of *tota Scriptura*). Jesus’ interactions with women can only be described as revolutionary when viewed in the context of his day.

22 Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1890, 1958), 46.

23 See Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 12–15.

For example, in conversation with the woman of Samaria, Jesus first reveals who he really is: "I, the one speaking to you—I am he" (John 4:26); and the woman becomes such an effective missionary to her own town (vss. 28–30) that "many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (vs. 39). What of the disciples' role in this story? They are "surprised" to find Jesus talking to a woman!

Along with affirmation of women by Jesus, Paul—the one who apparently speaks against the ministry of women—also affirms the ministry of women. Romans chapter 16 conveys Paul's greetings to a number of Christian believers, mentioned among whom are Priscilla and Aquila, "my co-workers in Christ Jesus" (vs. 3), and Mary, "who worked very hard for you" (vs. 6). Then Paul greets Andronicus [a man] and Junia [a woman] as "my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me." "They," says Paul, "are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was" (vs. 7).²⁴ It is difficult to see why women, who could carry the role of apostle in earliest Christian times, should not be ordained to the ministry of the Word in the twenty-first century.

This "other side" of Paul should send us back to look at the historical and literary context of chapters 2 and 3 of 1 Timothy and chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians. For instance, the wider context of 1 Timothy should prompt us to ask whether at least some of the details of Paul's advice to the church at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3) through Timothy must be read contextually and culturally. Paul's counsel in regard to elders extends through to chapters 5 and 6 in which he addresses specific issues pertaining to widows, elders, and slaves. Paul's advice to slaves is that they should "consider their masters worthy of full respect," and if their owners happen to be fellow-believers, "they should serve them even better because their masters are dear to them as fellow-believers." (1 Tim. 6:1–4). In considering the context of 1 Corinthians 11, one does not even have to go beyond the chapter to find mention of cultural norms in worship- settings such as head coverings (for women) and the "disgrace" of long hair (for men). Paul concludes his discussion with a series of questions: "Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a

24 For a discussion of the merits of the arguments regarding Junia/Junias see James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 38 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988). Dunn remarks: "The assumption that it [the name] must be male is a striking indictment of male presumption regarding the character and structure of earliest Christianity" (p. 894).

woman has long hair, it is her glory?" (1 Cor. 11:13–14). Almost certainly, the answers to Paul's questions that would be given by many contemporary Christians would be different from those that he would have expected in his own day.

We have to conclude that it is legitimate—even essential—to ask ourselves, what was going on in Ephesus and Corinth that prompted Paul's specific admonition to those churches? The point is that conservative Christians believe that while the Scriptures are divinely inspired, they do not come down to us from heaven through a stainless-steel conduit untouched by the cultures, conditions, and contexts of the time of their writing.²⁵ If we are to take the Bible seriously, we must continually re-read and re-apply its truths to new contexts.

Fourth, the gifts of ministry or the gifts of the Spirit are not gender-specific. Paul, in listing the spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, gives no indication that some belong exclusively to men, and not to women. In fact, the very opposite seems to be the case: "All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines" (vs. 11).²⁶ The list of spiritual gifts in Ephesians 4 includes "the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, [and] the pastors and teachers" (vs. 11). A number of passages in the New Testament indicate that female prophets were not uncommon in the early church period.²⁷ This is particularly significant in light of Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 12–14 for the pre-eminence of the prophetic gift over the gift of tongues in the communal worship setting.²⁸ If the prophetic gift is available (at the will of the Spirit) to both men and women, why would some of the other spiritual gifts belong exclusively to men?

25 I do not attempt here to re-construct the societal or ecclesial situations in Corinth or Ephesus during the 1st Christian century. Suffice it to say that there is enough evidence within the writings themselves to indicate quite conclusively that cultural and historical factors should be taken account of as believers strive to understand them in a postmodern age. For an examination of 1 Tim. 2:8–15 that takes account of the historical context, see Carl Cosaert, "Paul, Woman and the Ephesian Church: An Examination of 1 Timothy 2:8–15," available among the papers presented at the General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee (2013–2014) at www.adventistarchives.org/gc-tosc (accessed 16 June 2015).

26 Compare Rom 12:3–8 where Paul infers that all "members" of the body of Christ "have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us" (vs. 6).

27 See, for instance, Acts 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:5; and Acts 2:17. In fact, in the latter passage, prophesying by men and women is seen as a direct fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel 2:28.

28 Note particularly 1 Cor. 14:22–25.

A Way Forward?

Although not always acknowledged by the participants, it is apparent that those on both side of the debate about women's ordination in Adventism take Scripture very seriously. A reasonable biblical case can be made for both positions. So where does that leave us? It seems to me that either we have to come to the conclusion that Scripture—and perhaps Paul in particular—contradicts itself, or, alternatively, that we are asking questions of the Bible that its writers never intended to answer specifically. Where are conservative believers to turn if Scripture does not appear to supply unambiguous answers to our questions?

Perhaps we need to examine again what the Reformation *sola Scriptura* principle really meant and means. In actuality, Luther's own personal practice is indicative of a wider perspective than "the Bible alone." He appears to have operated within a circle of authority that included the tradition of early Christianity (with Augustine remaining his favourite theologian) along with the insights and experience of his Wittenberg colleagues, all viewed within the context of Scripture remaining the centrepiece of his interpretive framework.²⁹

This approach is best summed up in what has been termed the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience.³⁰ Within that particular circle of authority, while the Bible is seen as the ultimate or primary authority, human reason may lead us to ask such questions as: "Does it make sense to exclude more than fifty percent of Christian believers from the possibility of serving the church in pastoral ministry?" and "What do we make of the fact that the biblical evidence is ambiguous?" At the very least such questions should propel us back to the Bible and to ask whether we have understood it completely or correctly.

Again, it is legitimate for us to ask questions that relate to Christian and Adventist history (or tradition) such as: "What are the origins of the contemporary ordination rituals and practices?" and "What happened in the journey from early Adventism, which saw many women involved in the ministry of the church, to modern Adventism, which often disallows the full participa-

29 Egil Grisliis, "Martin Luther—Cause or Cure of the Problem of Authority," *Consensus: A Canadian Lutheran Journal of Theology* 14 (1988): 37.

30 A fuller description and analysis of the origins and features of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral can be found in Robert K. McIver and Ray Roennfeldt, "Text and Interpretation: Christian Understandings of Authoritative Texts in the Light of Social Change," *Islam and Christian – Muslim Relations* 20/3 (2009): 268–271.

tion of women in pastoral ministry?” Again, such questions should send us back to Scripture in order to ascertain whether we have read our own cultural biases into its words.

Equally relevant are the questions that arise from our experience as Christian believers: “What are we to make of the fact that the church, far from being weakened, has been blessed and strengthened by the ministry of many outstanding female elders and pastors?” and “How are we to respond to the strong affirmation of a divine calling on the lives of the many women who are undertaking ministry studies in our colleges and seminaries?” Perhaps it is time that the Christian community took seriously the evidence from experience, returning to Scripture with a mind open to hearing anew the voice of the Spirit.

Do we have the analogy of Scripture on our side as we undertake this task? Perhaps the earliest church council (recorded in Acts 15) provides a possible resolution. The most significant question at this council related to the way in which Gentiles might be incorporated into the church. Would it be necessary for them to become Jews first, requiring circumcision, and only then Christians? It is obvious that the debate was robust³¹ with “the believers who belonged to the Pharisee party” arguing for circumcision (vs. 5), the Apostle Peter referencing his experience with Cornelius (vss. 7–11)³², and Barnabas and Paul telling of the “signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them” (vs. 12). Finally, “James spoke up” (vs. 13), summarised the discussion, cited the “words of the prophets” (vss. 16–18) and concluded: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (vs. 19). While from the perspective of a literal reading the weight of Scriptural evidence clearly favoured the “Pharisee” party, it is very clear that a broader approach was evident in the council’s conclusion: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” (vs. 28). Certainly we can detect all of the elements of what has become known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in creative play and counterplay in the council’s discussions—Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience—and a decision was made that allowed the church to avoid stagnation and disunity.

31 See vs. 7.

32 See Acts 10 and 11.

Finally

A reasonable biblical case can be made by both sides of the debate. I have attempted to portray the strengths of each without examining their respective deficits in any great depth. It seems to me that a fresh methodology is needed. It is somewhat ironic, given Seventh-day Adventism's roots in Methodism, that the Wesleyan Quadrilateral might provide a means to obtain a resolution as we take account of the questions raised by contemporary believers, acknowledge our history, and affirm the evidence of God's call in the lives of women to pastoral ministry, while at the same time valuing Scripture as the ultimate authoritative Word.³³

And a final irony: how is it that Seventh-day Adventists (of all people) are still debating this issue when a woman, Ellen G. White, was one of the denomination's principal founders?

33 For the Christian believer, Scripture itself is authoritative because it reveals Jesus Christ (see John 5:39-40; 2 Tim 3:15-17; and cf. Heb 1:1-3).