

Will the Real Ministers Please Stand Up?

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The question of Women's Ordination is not a new one. It has lingered for years. In the discussion, I've sensed that those with differing positions may be talking past each other. Luminaries such as Randy Roberts, pastor of the Loma Linda University church, convincingly and correctly point to the great service women have given in God's work throughout history. They argue that from Bible times until now, the gospel has needed these contributions. They suggest, yea insist, that women should be "ordained" so that they can carry on "ministry."

In contrast, those holding that pastors and elders should be males are saying that at the front of the issue is headship responsibility. That is, with reference to the church, there is an issue about the divinely-ordered arrangement for ecclesiastical authority. Facts such as that through all history, God in Scripture clearly directs that the male would be priest, husband head of the wife even as Christ is head of the church, that Christ chose men as disciples, and the counsel the elders be "the husband of one wife," is understood to mean that a pastor should also be male.

Some arguing against the Bible's male "headship" concept hold that the Biblical narrative is culturally conditioned, representing a period of male-dominated societal structure no longer viable or valid in our emancipated age. Meanwhile, those favoring male headship see such thinking as a violation of Biblical guidelines and a departure from Heaven's plan for Christ's bride.

We may have reached this impasse, in part, because we've held some misdirected, albeit well-intentioned, semantic and procedural positions. Without meaning to, we have set the church up for this stalemate. We have made the "laying on of hands" in an "ordination" service the gateway into headship responsibilities.

I do not see this as the primary emphasis in the New Testament. The "doctrine" of "laying on of hands" is considered by the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 6:2) to be so elementary to Christian thinking as to be understood and used by followers of Christ from the time of their early experience with the Gospel. The approximately 15 references to laying on hands in the New Testament relate almost entirely to receiving the Holy Spirit for the work of healing and/or encouraging/enabling personal Gospel work--the most fundamental meaning of "ministry."

Paul's counsel to Timothy not to neglect his gift for the presbytery which came by laying on hands, along with the counsel not to lay hands suddenly on any man, are close to our use today in "ordaining" pastors, yet only a minority among the references in the New Testament to the "laying on hands."

It seems likely, though not recorded in Scripture, that when Christ "breathed on them," He also laid his hands on them. But, in general, for Christ and the disciples, laying on of hands especially emphasized blessing, healing and receiving the Holy Spirit for "ministry." In

Adventism we have tended to use “ministry” and laying on hands to refer to setting someone aside for “pastoral” work, with the implication of bestowal of ecclesiastical authority.

Thus, our plan of “laying on hands” or “ordination” opened the door for misunderstanding the Savior’s plan for His people’s Gospel work. In a degree we have confused the term “ministry”--which should be every church member’s passion and activity--with headship responsibilities. In other words, our tendency to refer to this headship work in the same sense as more general “ministry” has obscured the plan for every member to be a minister. A different moniker, or at least a clarification in terms, is needed to avoid the confusion between headship responsibilities and ministry.

Christ’s life and work is the greatest example of “ministry.” He came to this earth to minister to the people. His interest in them, His kindness toward them, His teaching, His touch, His healing, His remonstrances, His longing for their salvation, His opening of the Scriptures for them, His weeping for them, His prayer for them--are all aspects of ministry.

We long to have “the tongue of the learned that I might know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary.” We want to be effective ministers to the people. Thus, we should be laying hands on every member for ministry. On women and men--on everyone in whom the church senses a calling and who themselves sense a calling, and who long to be ministering to people all around them.

Suppose that a church member feels called to minister to children and takes advantage of every opportunity to take training. The church could confirm that calling by “ordaining” them to that ministry. Or, let’s say a physician senses a calling to do gospel medical missionary work. Again, the church could choose to confirm that by “laying on hands.”

But let’s carry this even further, beyond these kinds of “ministries” to the opportunity of ministering to people we have contact with every day. This is what we saw in Christ’s work.

This kind of person-to-person connection was His principle activity. So, as church members, under the precious influence of the Holy Spirit, begin to see the wonderful privilege of connecting and “ministering” to people in their daily walk, and express their desire to be effective in this work, let us lay hands on them. Let us ask God to fill them more and more with His presence and bless them in this work.

What about women? Could it even be that, naturally endowed with a sense of connection to others because they, as mothers or potential mothers, have a more finely tuned ability to nurture, they in some ways have a greater potential for ministry than males? Ellen White speaks eloquently of this work.* Every child of God should be a minister as Jesus was. Then let us lay hands on both men and women and do everything we can to support the work of this kind of “ministry” which--please note--is not pastoring in the other sense. A pastor, as every member, certainly must be a minister but he has a separate work and responsibility, that of leading and exercising ecclesiastical authority.

While Christ certainly gave His disciples ecclesiastical authority, this was not necessarily denoted by the laying on of hands. Beyond “ministry,” a pastor’s work certainly carries an array of particular tasks and responsibilities which relate to his special work of leading and guiding the functions and organization of the church.

The *Church Manual*, in part, clarifies many headship responsibilities and the authority a pastor is given in this work. For example, he selects the chair for the church board. He is the baptizer. To the Conference president/pastor alone, is given the authority to allow someone else to baptize. We have called these responsibilities, which many believe are to be reserved for male leaders, “ministry.” Strictly speaking, they are acts or decisions which the church has given to men, pastors if you will, who carry the authority to make them.

Thus every member should be ministering. Let us lay hands on men and women for ministry. Let us encourage, teach, urge every member to be ministering and to be a minister. Let us not confuse this wonderful work with the administrative responsibilities of the pastor who is to make decisions for the church and lead in its work.

And what of the question of “elders” in the local church? Let us recognize that they carry pastoral-like headship responsibilities. They are, in a very real sense, associate pastors. Staying in line with the Biblical guidance, this work should be given to men in the same way full pastoral responsibilities are granted.

What, then, shall we say to the women who have or are currently studying to prepare themselves to be “pastors?” After all, some Adventist leaders and educators have encouraged them to take this training in preparation for a life work and source of remuneration. The momentum which has developed in this direction will make changing course challenging and perhaps painful for some--but there is a wonderful work for these females in our churches aside from headship responsibilities (as has been noted above and in the list of statements appended to the end of this article).

“Changing course” could begin with an acknowledgement of the error of working against world church policy voted in two recent General Conference Sessions. Then we must recognize that there are positions in our schools or churches where able female ministers of the Gospel can make invaluable contributions.

Should we pay these “ministers,” either male or female for their work in the church? This is certainly a possibility. This was done in some cases in the past where many of our churches had “Bible workers” who were almost always females. They were a wonderful influence for good and effective “ministers” in our churches. Unfortunately, their positions slowly disappeared--largely, it seems, because of funding challenges.

This can be changed. Let the many women who wish to have employment “in ministry” be given positions such as these. Should they also be “preachers?” Ellen White certainly opens this possibility although it is in language which suggests their preaching would be needed when a male was unavailable.

In general, however, we should have a greater and greater class of trained “church workers” who do the work of ministry as volunteers. Currently we add associate pastors where we feel the “pastoral” load is heavy and judge that his work in “caring” for all the pastoral duties should be expanded if there are funds available. It has become common for our larger churches to have a growing list of “associate pastors.” While I think it would be much better for unpaid members to do this work, if these associate pastors are to hold headship responsibilities, they should be males if we are to follow the biblical model and teaching.

If women are to be hired, there needs to be a term that makes clear they are not “pastors” (who, by nature of their responsibilities, carry ecclesiastical authority) but “ministers” and ideally ministry trainer/equippers since every member is to be a minister and these paid ministers, would themselves be minister modelers, equippers of members for ministry.

Would women perhaps be hired to do a special work with women, children or families in the church? This would be a wonderful calling and ministry in the church. Better yet would it be if all of us “regular” members became more active ministers where the “workload” of ministry is so widely carried.

Then the largest churches may actually need the fewest paid pastors or ministry trainers. The more “ministers” we hire, the more loudly (and unwisely) we shout that this work does not belong to the laity! In fact, the largest churches could function without

associate hired pastors at all--it's the smaller ones, just getting off the ground, where we could be paying, hiring, pastors! Amazing. Imagine a laity at work!

We can make a course-correction. The plan of hiring associate pastors, to a degree, has unintentionally limited the ministry of members. Because, until recently, women have been "left out" of this hiring, it has brought discontent and conflict. Our time and money takes us away from ministry while we talk past each other concerning what the roles of men and women in the church should be. There are even entire Unions clamoring for ordination without regard to gender, in opposition to the world church. Surely the enemy is successfully at work.

This can change. Instead of drifting farther away from Christ's plan, we can have a part in answering His prayer, "That they all may be one."

*The Gospel Visitor

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List of Statements of Special Interest from the Writings of Ellen G. White

There are those who have some experience who should, with every effort they make in dying churches as well as in new places, select young men or men of mature age to assist in the work. Thus they will be obtaining knowledge by interesting themselves in personal effort, and scores of helpers will be fitting for usefulness as Bible readers, as canvassers, and as visitors in the families (Letter 34, 1886).

There are many lines in which the youth can find opportunity for helpful effort. Companies should be organized and thoroughly educated to work as nurses, gospel visitors, and Bible readers, as canvassers, ministers, and medical missionary evangelists (*Counsels to Teachers*, p. 546).

Women may accomplish a good work for God if they will first learn the precious, all-important lesson of meekness in the school of Christ. They will be able to benefit humanity by presenting to them the all-sufficiency of Jesus. . . .

Many who are entrusted with some humble line of work to do for the Master, soon become dissatisfied, and think that they should be teachers and leaders. They want to leave their humble ministering, which is just as important in its place as the larger responsibilities. Those who are set to do visiting, soon come to think that anyone can do that work, that anyone can speak words of sympathy and encouragement, and lead men in a humble, quiet way to a correct understanding of the Scriptures. But it is a work which demands much grace, much patience, and an ever-increasing stock of wisdom. . . .

No work done for the Master must be considered inferior and of little account. . . . If it is done cheerfully, humbly, and in the meekness of Christ, it will result in the glory of God (Letter 88, 1895).

Women can be the instruments of righteousness, rendering holy service. It was Mary that first preached a risen Jesus. . . . If there were twenty women where now there is one, who would make this holy mission their cherished work, we should see many more converted to the

truth. The refining, softening influence of Christian women is needed in the great work of preaching the truth (*Review and Herald*, January 2, 1879).

There are women who should labor in the gospel ministry. In many respects they would do more good than the ministers who neglect to visit the flock of God (Manuscript 43a, 1898).

There should be selected for the work wise, consecrated men who can do a good work in reaching souls. Women also should be chosen who can present the truth in a clear, intelligent, straightforward manner. We need among us laborers who see the need of a deep work of grace to be done in hearts; and such should be encouraged to engage in earnest missionary effort. There has long been the need for more of this class of workers. We must pray most earnestly, "Lord, help us to help one another." Self must be buried with Christ, and we must be baptized with the Holy Spirit of God. Then will be revealed in speech, in spirit, and in our manner of labor the fact that the Spirit of God is guiding.

We need as workers men and women who understand the reasons of our faith and who realize the work to be done in communicating truth, and who will refuse to speak any words that will weaken the confidence of any soul in the Word of God or destroy the fellowship that should exist between those of like faith (Letter 54, 1909).

Every week tells its story; one soul or two souls receive the truth, and the wonderful change in their features and in their character is so marked by their neighbor that the conviction of the very life of their neighbors is leading others to the truth; and they are now searching the Scriptures diligently. . . .

Sister R and Sister W are doing just as efficient work as the ministers; and some meetings when the ministers are all called away, Sister W takes the Bible and addresses the congregation (Letter 169, 1900).

We believe fully in church organization, but in nothing that is to prescribe the precise way in which we must work; for all minds are not reached by the same methods. . . .

Each person has his own lamp to keep burning. . . . Very much more light shines from one such lamp onto the path of the wanderer, than would be given by a whole torchlight procession got up for parade and show. Oh, what a work may be done if we will not stretch ourselves beyond our measure!

Teach this, my sister. You have many ways opened before you. Address the crowd whenever you can; hold every jot of influence you can by any association that can be made the means of introducing the leaven to the meal. Every man and every woman has a work to do for the Master. Personal consecration and sanctification to God will accomplish, through the most simple methods, more than the most imposing display (*Review and Herald*, May 9, 1899).

Our camp meetings are to be conducted in such a way that they shall be schools for the education of workers. We need to have a better understanding of the division of labor, and educate all how to carry each part of the work successfully. . . . Let short discourses be given, and then let Bible classes be held. Let the speaker be sure to rivet the truth upon minds. Intelligent women, if truly converted, can act a part in this work of holding Bible classes. There is a wide field of service for women as well as for men (Letter 84, 1910).

God calls for laborers; but He wants those who are willing to submit their wills to His, and who will teach the truth as it is in Jesus. One worker who has been trained and educated for the work, who is controlled by the Spirit of Christ, will accomplish far more than ten laborers who go out deficient in knowledge and weak in the faith. One who works in harmony with the counsel of God, and in unity with the brethren, will be more efficient to do good than ten will be who do not realize the necessity of depending upon God and of acting in harmony with the general plan of the work (*Review and Herald*, May 29, 1888).

In every school that God has established there will be, as never before, demand for Bible instruction. Our students are to be educated to become Bible workers, and the Bible teachers can do a most wonderful work if they will themselves learn from the great Teacher.

God's Word is true philosophy, true science. Human opinions and sensational preaching amount to very little. Those who are imbued with the Word of God can teach it in the same simple way in which Christ taught it. Too much depends on the opening of the Scriptures to those in darkness for us to use one word that cannot be readily understood. . . .

There is need of workers who will come close to unbelievers, not waiting for unbelievers to come close to them, workers who will search for the lost sheep, who will do personal labor, and who will give clear, definite instruction.

It should be the aim of our schools to provide the best instruction and training for Bible workers. Our conferences should see that the schools are provided with teachers who are

thorough Bible teachers and who have a deep Christian experience. The best ministerial talent should be brought into schools (Manuscript 139, 1898).

The Lord designs that the school should also be a place where a training may be gained in women's work--cooking, housework, dressmaking, bookkeeping, correct reading, and pronunciation. They are to be qualified to take any post that may be offered--superintendents, Sabbath school teachers, Bible workers. They must be prepared to teach day schools for children (Letter 3, 1898).

There must be with our sisters engaged in the work in every mission, a depth of experience, gained from those who have had an experience, and who understand the manners and ways of working. The missionary operations are constantly embarrassed for the want of workers of the right class of minds, and the devotion and piety that will correctly represent our faith (*Christian Education*, pp. 45, 46).