

## **A New Path?**

by Many Hands

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There is a short article circulating by a godly woman who has a beautiful witness for Christ. She is part of the TOSC committee. She admits that many churches have studied women's ordination only to break into separate churches. She says the Seventh-day Adventist Church need not take such a path.

### **Does she correctly describe the Acts 15 pattern?**

What is her position? It is that we can solve this matter according to the Acts 15 pattern. As she tells it, the Jerusalem Council was convened over whether new converts should be required to be circumcised. According to her, others had earlier opposed the inclusion of Greeks in ministry. Actually, the question at that earlier point had been whether or not Gentiles could be saved (Acts 11:1-18). The teaching truly in dispute in Acts 15 was whether Gentiles need be circumcised as a requirement for salvation (Acts 15:1).

The solution (reached solely by male spiritual leaders--apostles and elders. Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23) was that, no, circumcision was not a requirement for salvation for Gentiles. There is nothing in Acts 15 concerning inclusion or exclusion of Greeks because that was not the question. Paul, Barnabas and others were appointed to go to Jerusalem to the apostles and

elders concerning "this question" (15:2 ESV)---whether Gentiles need be circumcised. "This decision was then to be universally accepted by the different churches throughout the country" (1).

The question about whether the Gentiles could be part of God's kingdom had been settled by the New Testament Church in its "early days" (15:7 ESV). So then, what role did the reports and testimonies of Paul and Barnabas serve (15:4, 12)? To demonstrate that God was already decidedly at work among the Gentile converts without adding circumcision or other accretions to the mix. In their Council meeting James cites Amos to remind assembled apostles and elders that even the ancient prophets agree on the inclusion of the Gentiles.

Another point of interest is that circumcision first appears in the history of God's people long after the Fall, at Genesis 17. The Jerusalem Council is not debating any kind of change to the Maker of males and females' pre-Fall creation order; the Council is debating a post-Fall addition which, after the crucifixion of Christ, the New Testament says has become "nothing" (1 Corinthians 7:19).

Here is a remarkable difference between that case and this one. What the church is sorting out today has to do with explicitly pre-fall ("very good," Genesis 1:31) role-differentiation. Our part is to accept God's order, not to imagine we can legislate against it in His name.

Perhaps the key point of interest here is that while the author of the article portrays the decision at Jerusalem as concluding with a determination "that each area could decide what best promoted the mission for their field"---this is not even remotely what happened. There were then no distinct separately administrated fields. The church was one church, all of one piece, from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, to the farthest reaches.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, a clear, united decision was reached by the main deliberative body of the Church. Nor did they decide that circumcision would be required in Jerusalem but not in Athens, or, that circumcision was to be decided differently by different units. The decision was made on behalf of the whole Church, and the authority with which

the Jerusalem Council acted was to be respected everywhere. The Gentiles would not be required to be circumcised. Nor was any affirmation offered for the continued practice of circumcision among Jewish believers.

In the end, the apostles and elders at Jerusalem sent forth an authoritative letter. "The four servants of God were sent to Antioch with the epistle and message that was to put an end to all controversy; for it was the voice of the highest authority upon the earth" (2). Paul did later ask Timothy to be circumcised, not for salvation but reasons of expediency. He would be laboring to win converts to the Way among prejudiced Jewish persons. It only made sense to eliminate this distracting point of contention.

Unfortunately then, our author presses the Acts 15 text to make it a model for allowing today's 13 Divisions of the Church to each determine independently what is to be practiced in that portion of the field in terms of women's ordination. But there is no example from the Jerusalem Council from which to generate such a pattern. What's more, it would be impossible for the Church to engage in a practice which is out of harmony with the Scriptures God has given to guide it, and in so doing "promote the mission of the church."

### **Alien Agenda**

The author is urgent to have "all hands on deck" that the church might successfully complete its mission. But all hands are already on deck---without ordination. The New Testament Church is represented as the 'bride of Christ,' submitting to her Head, Christ. But if she is found negating the council of her Groom, disagreeing with His created order, she is not under His headship. Then she is not yet without spot and blameless (Ephesians 5:27), not ready for her wedding with Him. Then she is delaying the wedding.

The recognition that ordination gives for congregational leadership is appropriate---for congregational leaders. Women have served Jesus since the beginning of His people and continue to build the kingdom, but never until relatively recently have some women *en masse* sought to overturn their Creator's order.

Women's ordination is a part of an alien agenda to overturn the teachings of the Church. Rosemary Ruether understands:

The more one becomes a feminist the more difficult it becomes to go to church. . . . Conversion from sexism means both freeing oneself from the ideologies and roles of patriarchy and also struggling to liberate social structures from these patterns (3).

Feminist-turned-lesbian Virginia R. Mollencott cites Pamela Darling on the “profound connections between sexism and heterosexism”:

Both the ordination of women and homosexuals fundamentally challenge the [hetero]patriarchal order of world and church, undermining male privilege by presenting alternatives to the traditional male/female dominance/submission model for all relationships, domestic and political. Ordaining women, gay men, and lesbians violates traditional images of the sacred, crossing the boundary fixed by defining heterosexual males as the norm for ordained ministry and hence the standard for all Christian living (4).

The point of interest for the reader of the above is the recognition by Mollencott and Darling that ordaining women and homosexuals is a fundamental reversal of order. It is true that in the above quotation this order has first been portrayed in exaggerated fashion. Still, statements like those above demonstrate a perspective. Christianity is being radically changed. The church is a “social structure,” and as such, targeted for “liberation.”

Strangely absent from the “A New Path” article is mention of the required changes in hermeneutics embraced by the North American Division in its recent Report favoring women's ordination (5). Yet this is no surprise, for feminists and lesbians do not hesitate to state in print the necessity they see of making such a change. Mollencott's pen again:

As long as the text itself itself is thought to provide its own interpretation or to constrain or direct its own meaning, the ethical and political responsibility of interpreters can be---and have been---blamed on the text rather than the interpreter (6).

Mollencott proceeds after the above quotation to describe her making “the Law of Love” (7) her “central interpretive principle” (8). You see, once we leave behind the concept that the meaning is in the text, transferring the location of meaning to the reader, a radical shift has already been effected. A Church that deaffixes itself from the text of Scripture is anchorless and ready to be blown wherever the winds and whims of a world under the sway of a fallen prince deign blow it (Ephesians 2:2; 1 John 5:19).

Some are very intent to partition-off the question of women's ordination from its apparent entailments. Several other churches before us have taken the road of “inclusiveness,” proceeded to ordain women, and today support homosexual practice of church members, the blessing of same-sex “unions,” and the ordination of homosexual clergy. No wonder then that some Adventist advocates of women's ordination insist that these ideas be evaluated on their own merits, by which is meant that we must not connect the question of women's ordination with the acceptance of homosexual practice. These issues, they insist, be partitioned off from each other.

That partition is artificial.

Such a position is intellectually irresponsible when advocates of LGBTQ Theology(9) themselves admit theirs to be a particular strand of Liberation Theology (10). These themselves make the connection; yet if we do, we are told we are illegitimately inculcating fear. No wonder some have sensed that, for some advocates of women's ordination, the question actually is how tightly eyes can be closed to outcomes that have been demonstrated in real time. The feminist theological strand does indeed have embedded connections to Liberation and LGBTQ theologies.

Yes, we are concerned for the Scripture teachings on homosexuality, Creation, and Sabbath, because in all three cases the attempt is made to domesticate Bible teachings to fit contemporary views. The author of “A New Path” states that women's ordination is not presently held by the Church to be an integral doctrine. That may be. Yet the evidence of the past half century shows its absense to be a dangerous doctrinal gap.

It is understandable that Adventists were not among the first to embrace the Feminist approach. But it would indicate remarkable gullibility were we to join in the parade after seeing how it has developed in other places (11). Church after church, each embracing the same basics of this theological engine, has placed females in male roles intended distinctly for congregational leadership, only to arrive swiftly at the place where today they embrace homosexual-sin practicing clergy. Yet not all pro-women's ordination advocates are decided feminists. Only some are aware of or have processed the connections above described.

### **Pivotal question strangely avoided**

It is fascinating that the author marks the division of many other churches which have voted on women's ordination, and calls for the Adventist Church to follow a different path---but designates the central question as one of policy and tradition. We regularly hear that this is not a question of doctrine, which is interesting in light of the fact that the world church has set into operation a committee of more than 100 members investigating women's ordination---a great proportion whose very calling by the church is to study issues of doctrine. The author somehow overlooks one primary, elephant-in-the-middle-of-the-room fact: churches which have divided into separate bodies over women's ordination have done so precisely over the *hermeneutics* involved. They have divided exactly over the question of how the acceptance of women's ordination impacts biblical interpretation.

This is no small matter. Indeed, since the farthest to the bottom we can go is to our presuppositions, we need to go there. Presuppositions inform our hermeneutics, hermeneutics determine our approach to Scripture, and at last the Scripture, with our hermeneutics and the degree of our subordination to Scriptural authority, determines the way we interpret it. Far from a mere policy issue, the question is over how we approach the Bible itself.

The author's approach is emblematic of the whole question of women's ordination advocacy. Starkly put, it fails to take the Scriptures or developments in history seriously. The

future is painted as a happy-ending and crowned with a rainbow---all oblivious to the hermeneutical issues at stake and actual outcomes when other churches have embraced the underlying theology the Seventh-day Adventist Church is now being asked, if not coerced, to embrace.

The author is, however, correct that there need be no division of the church over this question. The 2015 GC session can reach a decision and then all members of the church, all its divisions, unions, conferences, and units, can abide by it whatever that is. Still, one senses that for some advocates of women's ordination, they will only choose not to be divided if they receive from the world church the affirmative answer they require.

Is the desired future suggested by the author "A new path"? Or, is it a path previously taken by several other Christian bodies now in decline? Two different approaches to the Bible are now advanced in our midst, two different sets of presuppositions, two different declared hermeneutics, and two different approaches to interconnectivity and interresponsibility within the church. Are we at risk of dividing or have we already gone our separate ways?

## ENDNOTES

1. Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 190).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
3. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, pp. 193, 194, 201.
4. Virginia Ramey Mollencott, op. cit. Pamela Darling in *Sensuous Spirituality*, p. 182, brackets Mollencott.
5. North American Division Theology of Ordination Study Committee Report, "Hermeneutics and the Ordination of Women," pp. 22-31 cf. "New NAD WO hermeneutic, pt. 1," <http://ordinationtruth.com/2014/01/17/new-nad-wo-hermeneutic-pt-1/>; "New NAD WO hermeneutic, pt. 2," <http://ordinationtruth.com/2014/01/18/new-nad-wo-hermeneutic-pt-2/>; "NAD's PBHC hermeneutic: a closer look," <http://ordinationtruth.com/2014/01/20/nads-pbhc-hermeneutic-a-closer-look/>.
6. *Ibid.*, op. cit. Dale Martin, p. 197.
7. *Ibid.*, Mollencott's capitalization.
8. *Ibid.*
9. "LGBTQ Theology" stands for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans-gender, queer theology.
10. <http://ordinationtruth.com/featured/kir1-fwo-pt5/>
11. <http://ordinationtruth.com/2013/12/21/wo-homosexuality-and-lutheranism/>