On defending Marriage and the Sabbath

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“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15 KJV).

Marriage is under attack, and no, it may not be what you think. Rather than discuss so-called “marriage” between homosexuals, which certainly is an attack on the biblical institution of marriage, let us evaluate the current debate within the Seventh-day Adventist Church regarding the ordination of women (WO) to headship positions once reserved only for men.

How does WO relate to marriage? “Every family is a church, over which the parents preside” (CG 549). When God created Adam and Eve and gifted them with the institution of marriage, He formed the first family. And in the first family God also created the first church. Therefore, any questions regarding authority in the church devolve into questions regarding authority in marriage.

Currently, there exists within the Seventh-day Adventist Church a three-way division regarding the question of ordaining women to pastoral headship roles. The basic arguments of each group are summarized as follows:
1. The creation order of Adam and Eve, as well as differences in physical and reproductive attributes between men and women, provides a clear basis for differences in the roles that men and women hold within the family. Biblical male headship was established when God created Marriage. It was affirmed first through the Mosaic laws and practices regarding men in priestly roles and again later through Jesus’ earthly ministry. In keeping with God’s example, only men should be ordained to headship positions within the church.

2. The Bible was written in a different time and culture, far removed from our daily experience. It must be interpreted through a culturally-conditioned approach in order to be relevant today. By taking its ancient cultural principles and mapping them out to a trajectory applicable today, we can align church practices with how modern society views the equality of men and women. The Bible’s principles, when applied to modern culture, allows for the ordination of women to headship positions.

3. Although God originally set apart men both as heads of families, as priests, and as church leaders, this ideal cannot always be met today. Israel once asked for a king, a less-than-ideal style of leadership which God permitted. There exists with the church, a growing, vocal number clamoring for WO who have caused a debate threatening church unity. For the sake of preserving unity within the church, we should permit the ordination women to headship positions.

In the near future, another, far greater crisis will enter the church. At that time, the other God-given institution received in Eden---the Sabbath---will be under attack. Even now, there are already many in the world clamoring for unifying in Sunday worship. And as last day events progress, the call for Sunday worship will grow ever
stronger. One day soon, “to secure popularity and patronage, legislators will yield to the demand for a Sunday law” (5T 451).

As the Sabbath has become the special point of controversy throughout Christendom, and religious and secular authorities have combined to enforce the observance of the Sunday, the persistent refusal of a small minority to yield to the popular demand will make them objects of universal execration. It will be urged that the few who stand in opposition to an institution of the church and a law of the state ought not to be tolerated; that it is better for them to suffer than for whole nations to be thrown into confusion and lawlessness. . . a decree will finally be issued against those who hallow the Sabbath of the fourth commandment, denouncing them as deserving of the severest punishment and giving the people liberty, after a certain time, to put them to death (GC 615).

Imagine if, today, the church faced a debate revolving not around WO, but around our day of worship. If the three main positions regarding WO were applied to the coming Sabbath crisis, the various options might appear as follows. (Please note that this exercise is performed not to explain how proponents of any option currently believe regarding the Sabbath/Sunday question, but rather to render more clearly the principal argument behind each position.)

1. God created the Sabbath as the capstone of the week of creation. He reminded humanity of the holiness of the Sabbath through the Fourth Commandment and even kept the Sabbath Himself during His earthly ministry. Even decades after His death, at the fall of Jerusalem, He expected His disciples to continue keeping the Sabbath (Matthew 24:20). Therefore, we should continue to follow that which God established and worship on the Lord’s Day, the seventh-day Sabbath.

2. The Bible was written in a different time and culture, far removed from our daily experience. It must be interpreted through a culturally-conditioned approach in order to be relevant to us today. We must take its ancient cultural principles and
map them out to a trajectory applicable to modern society. Although modern culture has changed its day of worship, the principle of the Sabbath, when applied to modern culture, can be kept even when worshipping on Sunday.

3. Although God originally set aside the Sabbath as a sacred day of rest, His ideal cannot always be met today. God once permitted a less-than-ideal practice when Israel asked for a king. Threatened with death, there is a growing, vocal number clamoring for changing our day of worship. For the sake of preserving church unity, we should support worship on Sunday even though it is not God’s ideal day of worship.

The principle behind WO’s option #2 leads to nothing more than a blatant disregard for the Fourth Commandment. “Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4 NIV). And even option #3, while acknowledging the truth, still promotes the practice of that which is not truth. “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (James 4:17). Only one line of reasoning preserves the observance of the Fourth Commandment and keeps God’s Sabbath holy.

“He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much” (Luke 16:10). Our faithfulness in defending the first institution of Creation, marriage, prepares us to stand true to God in upholding the second institution of Creation, the Sabbath. We must beware the methods used to defend our beliefs, lest we open ourselves to still greater errors in the days to come. So long as our feet remain planted solely on the Word of God, we shall stand firm in the truth. We shall “stand for the right, though the heavens fall” (ED 57).

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