

San Antonio: the Adventist Hermeneutic Confirmed

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Two hermeneutical lines were seen in the run up to the 60th General Conference session held in San Antonio, Texas July 2-11, 2015. Those advocating that persons ordained to the gospel ministry be appointed only according to biblical qualifications (TOSC 1), agreed that those favoring women's ordination (TOSC 2 and 3) generally were employing a hermeneutic different than the longstanding Historical-grammatical method used by Seventh-day Adventists. TOSC scholars and participants including Daniel Bediako, Steven Bohr, Laurel and Gerard Damsteegt, Jerry Moon, Gerhard Pfandl, Paul Ratsara, Edwin Reynolds, Ingo Sorke, and Clinton Wahlen agreed this was the case. In their joint document, "Evaluation of Egalitarian Papers," they wrote "The hermeneutics used by egalitarians goes beyond the grammatical-historical method" (p. 22). Indeed, in their summary of the TOSC 2 position, they state:

In order to accommodate the push for women as elders in the church, every biblical argument that in the past had been used against women's ordination to pastoral leadership has been explained away or reinterpreted by seeking a deeper meaning in the text, by an appeal to other supposedly contradictory texts (e.g., 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 speaks against 1 Corinthians 11:5), or by a reinterpretation of the meaning of biblical words. Some of the arguments are based on imaginative or creative reasoning and assumptions which are not supported by Scripture. At times, questionable information from non-biblical sources and hypothetical situations are brought into play in order to reinterpret or set aside the plain meaning of the text. We believe that what is simple and clear to the common reader of the Bible has been mystified and relativized (p. 23).

When the delegates came at last to San Antonio, the motion considered on July 8 included the following important clause in its preamble, repeatedly read to the assembled delegates: "After your prayerful study on ordination from the Bible, the writings of Ellen G White, and the reports of the study commissions. . ." The delegates were to weigh the issues in the light of Bible study and the study processes shared by TOSC 1, 2, and 3. Inescapably then, the vote was a referendum on the hermeneutical methods weighed during the TOSC process.

If someone still isn't clear about this, the words of Raafat A. Kamal should settle it. Kamal is president of the Trans-European Division. After the vote, he wrote on July 10 that at San

Antonio, "the gap between textual and narrative approaches to biblical interpretation was not bridged among us" ("Dear Colleagues, Women in Ministry" letter). According to Kamal, the world church heard the case for the modification in hermeneutics.

They rejected it.

The TOSC position 1 was that the Bible opposes the ordination of women to the pastoral ministry. It was the only negative position. TOSC positions 2 and 3 both favored the ordination of women and thus the vote permitting each division executive committee to decide independently of the others to make provision for the ordination of women. At the center of the question of women's ordination is the issue of systems of biblical interpretation. So what happened on July 8?

San Antonio can only be seen as an affirmation of the hermeneutics of TOSC position 1.

In fair and open process the church engaged in study of these questions, and did so at length. It gathered its scholars, lay people and leaders. Finally, it sent for delegates from all 13 divisions and brought them together from across the globe. A decision was made. The new hermeneutics employed by those favoring the ordination of women is repudiated. Had the church approved the ordination of women the opposite would have been true; the outcome would have been understood as meaning the church had approved the new hermeneutics offered in support.

The church has now resolved a truly baseline question. There is a benefit for the whole church. United in our hermeneutics we can be united in mission. Many a denomination has been shattered, shipwrecked and pulled to pieces via the tensions of hermeneutical pluralism. The Seventh-day Adventist Church chose in San Antonio not to take the same dissipating course.

Nor is there any sign it will. The church also voted at San Antonio to clarify its fundamental beliefs language, expressing the plain meaning of Scripture even more clearly than before. Language was made clearer that marriage is between not just partners, but one man and one woman. Adventist teaching concerning creation was also clarified, insisting even more firmly in a recent literal creation in six literal days. None of these wording adjustments favor vagueness or complex theological parsing, but sustain better than ever before a "plain reading" of Scripture.

There were clearly two different hermeneutics operating under the dome. Earlier in the session the president of the Belgium conference had asked for accommodation in the discussion of fundamental beliefs for homosexual persons who were "cohabiting." In the July 8 floor discussion the Pacific Union president asked for accommodation favoring women's ordination because the church had given accommodation before to Africans on polygamy (he is mistaken about this, but this was his argument). After Doug Batchelor connected the homosexuality issue, another delegate immediately called on the chair to forbid such mention.

But does anyone doubt that the “No” vote on women's ordination saved the church from arduous debate over recognizing homosexual “marriage”? Here is seen the inevitable endpoint to the alternative hermeneutic. One viewpoint leads to the strong presentation of the third angel's message. The other makes the support of politically-correct views of social justice the goal of the church. The first builds the church; the second kills it.

Different hermeneutical approaches lead to different outcomes in interpretation. Through the issue of women's ordination the church has had a front row seat to see how hermeneutical pluralism works itself out. Distinct, mutually exclusive approaches to the interpretation of Scripture in the church mean different views concerning her mission.

Those voting “No” in San Antonio were not approving different hermeneutics but confirming the longstanding Adventist hermeneutic. They were indicating to the world church that the interpretations and systems of interpretation proposed by those advocating the ordination of women had been considered and found wanting.

With the clarifying vote at San Antonio, we can anticipate a stronger and more unified vision for the church. The remnant church has grown not less but more united in support of the longstanding Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutic. We may give praise to God, for there are remarkable days ahead! When the dust has settled we will see many precious members joined together in renewed proclamation of the three angel messages that are the inevitable outcome of a plain reading of the Scriptures.

What then of all the rattling and laboring by those who want us to think nothing happened and that unions will be permitted to go on ordaining women? The policies of the church remain as before. Units including Columbia Union, Pacific Union, Southeastern California Conference, and Netherlands Union of Churches have acted in insubordination. Their action was illegitimate when it happened and they will now come into line with the rest of the church. Watch and see. They will be helped to come. And most importantly, the church collectively has reconfirmed its hermeneutic. After San Antonio the church is way ahead of where it was before San Antonio.

The Adventist hermeneutic is confirmed.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Larry Kirkpatrick serves as a pastor to the Deer Park and Chewelah churches in the Upper Columbia Conference in the North Pacific Union.