

Women in SDA Ministry

A Look into the History of Our Church

In our last sermon we laid out a biblical foundation to expand our understanding of the role of Biblical women in all forms of ministry. If you missed this presentation it is strongly urged that you read the materials that sermon was based upon. You can speak with Carol for a printed copy or an emailed copy of the materials. The sermon notes and the sermon audio are on our church's new website—prescottaz.adventistchurch.org. This Sabbath we will be doing a fly-through of how women have served throughout our denominational history in pastoral roles, and how our pioneers and General Conference sessions have voted and defended the practice. We will be referencing several articles authored by our pioneers which appeared in our denominational publications from the 1850s through the 1890s. We will be citing several statements from Ellen White on the role of women in pastoral ministry. We will be reviewing the decisions of General Conference Sessions spanning from the 1880s to the present. Then we will seek to chart a course forward. I hope it will become evident by this sermon's end that I am not attempting to persuade my congregation to take any particular side. Rather, this presentation is just reporting the facts of our denominational history. I am not attempting to persuade you that the decisions and positions of these men and women were right, but I am attempting to instruct my congregation of what has been written, and what decisions have been made as a result in our history. We have a lot of ground to cover so let's get started.

From Our Early Pioneers

It is noteworthy to state that on May 21, 1863 the SDA church was officially founded.

As early as 1857 our pioneers were writing on the subject of women in ministry in our mainstream publications. This continues for 40 years, articles written by 7 different authors, presenting a harmonious biblical interpretation.

Take for example Elder Hewitt's article in the Review and Herald where he responds to a public criticism leveled against the practice of Adventist women preaching in the pulpit. In this article to defend this practice, Hewitt is providing a biblical interpretation to the verses in 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 which say,

Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak...for it is shameful for women to speak in church.

The first thing elder Hewitt does in his article is establish his hermeneutic, that is, his rules of interpretation. "No one should found a theory on one single isolated passage," but rather "find all the important texts that bear on any one subject, and compare them together until they come to a satisfactory understanding of what the inspired penman means."

He then directs his readers to 1 Corinthians 11 for another of Paul's perspectives on women speaking in church. Here in verse 5 women are appropriately praying and prophesying (i.e. speaking) in church. He then further defines "prophesy" as "speaking edification and exhortation and comfort to the church" (1 Cor. 14:3). He believes "all may prophesy", but their words must harmonize with former prophets (1 Cor. 14:31, 32).

In conclusion Hewitt cites several references in the Bible where women were prophesying at church, without any limitations on the practice (Acts 21:8, 9; 2:17, 18). He further asserts based on his understanding of Acts 2:21 that this practice should continue until the end of time. He understands 1 Cor. 14:35 was addressing women who "were too forward in [church] meeting in asking questions", not just "women speaking in church" (see 1 Cor. 14:35).

Hewitt's article was followed by a second on the subject by B. F. Robbins in 1859. His article entitled "To the Female Disciples in the Third Angel's Message" was also published in *The Review and Herald*. This beautiful and eloquent article was written to encourage the women in the work who were being criticized for their efforts—because they were women. He effectively uses Joel 2:28-31 to justify these women's preaching. There are allusions to Galatian 3:28 (There is neither male nor female, for all are one), the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the waiting disciples—male and female—at Pentecost, and the role of the faithful Marys in the early cause of the gospel of Christ. He speaks, interestingly, of the opposition to the practice of women preachers as coming from the "sectarian churches" outside of the Adventist movement who have misinterpreted the scriptures concerning women's roles at church. In every way Robbins attempts to loose the tongue of these anointed women who were becoming discouraged by the opposition which sought to "crush out their usefulness". He exhorts, "Seek unweariedly the endowments of the promise of the Father, the power from on high, which is alike the privilege of both the servants and handmaidens of God." "Open your lips for Jesus, and in testimony everywhere of the truth and faithfulness of our covenant-keeping God." I found this article to be very encouraging to me.

Next we will examine an article that James White reprinted in *the Review and Herald*. The original author of this article was J. A. Mowatt from Ireland. James White reprints it for his readers in America. Elder White offers his full endorsement of this article in his opening paragraph. What Mowatt was addressing was a position taken in another article which appeared in the same paper which made a biblical case against women speaking in public. Mowatt sets out in his article to "prove that Paul taught the very opposite".

The writer who opposes the practice is called "An Admirer" throughout Mowatt's article. The Admirer quotes 1 Cor. 14:34, 35 in his article to show that women should not speak at church, so Mowatt starts his counter-argument there. He takes his reader to 1 Cor. 11:4, 5. Mowatt reasons in 1 Cor. 11 Paul is concerned with how a woman dresses when prophesying, not whether or not a woman is prophesying.

Mowatt then cites Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17 to show female prophets should be expected until the end of time, and asks what is “prophesying”? He offers 1 Cor. 14:3 as an answer to that question. Mowatt then takes his reader to to the whole of 1 Cor. 14 to get the context of what was happening in Corinth to warrant such an admonition. He reasons “if in Chapter 11 Paul authorizes female preaching, then he cannot in chapter 14 forbid it.” Mowatt offers an insight into the type of meeting described in 1 Cor. 14 - not a religious service for worship, but a church business meeting to discuss, even debate, important matters, where you have multiple speakers, etc.

Mowatt alludes to the role of Phoebe as a deaconess (Romans 16:1, 2) and how Paul called upon the Christians in Rome “to assist sister Phoebe ‘in whatever business she hath need of you.’” He also cites such illustrious examples of female leaders as Deborah, Huldah, Miriam, Anna, and the women who labored with Paul in the gospel. He cites the heroic acts of Mary who declared to the disciples the risen Lord. He concludes, in light of all these noble exemplars,

“I rather think the Lord of the vineyard will require some more satisfactory excuse of even female timidity and backwardness in his service than the one given by ‘An Admirer’ before they will be justified in ceasing to labor in His cause.”

This was the interpretation James White fully endorsed as the editor of the *Review and Herald*.

In 1878 J. H. Waggoner wrote an article in *the Signs of the Times* endorsing the Adventist practice of female preachers. In his article he too deals with the passage in 1 Cor. 14:34, 35 and offers the broader context of 1 Cor. 11:5 and the entirety of chapter 14 to show that “Woman may pray, prophesy, exhort, and comfort the church...”, that Paul “certainly did not prohibit that which he plainly permitted.” He states forcefully that “To construe his language into a prohibition is to bring him in conflict with known and acknowledged facts.” He then cites several examples of female leaders in the whole Bible and eloquently elaborates on their being especially suited to their calling—Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Anna, Philip’s four daughters, etc. Elder Waggoner cites Joel 2:28-31 as being fulfilled by the women of his day who spoke in the pulpit the message of the gospel. He concludes, “If this is not proof that Paul did not intend to forbid women taking part in public worship, then we must confess that we are slow to comprehend proof.”

Then in 1879 two articles appeared in *the Review and Herald* to support the Adventist practice of female preachers—one by J. N. Andrews and another by James White. These follow the logic of former articles and they set up their hermeneutic—letting scriptures to interpret scriptures and taking all the Lord has said on the subject before drawing premature conclusions. Both authors cite several examples of women laboring in the cause of Christ both in the OT and the NT which seem to contradict the prohibition against women speaking in church. The words of James White serve to summarize the views of these men in regards to Paul’s council in 1 Cor. 14:34, 35.

“Certainly he does not mean that women would take no part in those religious services where he would have both men and women take part in prayer and in prophesying, or teaching the word of God to the people. The only view that would harmonize all that the apostle has said of the position and work of Christian women, is that he is giving directions relative to meetings of the church to consider the secular matters.”

What led Elder White to this conclusion was his rules of interpretation (hermeneutics): (1) to take every passage of the Book of God as meaning what it says, word for word; and (2) in order to arrive at the truth of God on this subject, a position must be found that will harmonize all the texts. The second half of his article White elaborates on all the brilliant examples and accomplishments of female leaders in the Bible.

The last article written by our pioneers on the subject I will cite this morning was penned by G. C. Tenney. This is perhaps the finest theological work on the subject of all the examples I have cited thus far. He starts his article with a citation of the two passages which have been in question (1 Cor. 14:34, 35 and 1 Timothy 2:12) seemingly forbidding women to speak or teach at church. He calls this conclusion “immature”.

It is manifestly illogical and unfair to give to any passage of Scripture an unqualified radical meaning that is at variance with the main tenor of the Bible, and directly in conflict with its plain teachings.

He states further,

Those who were brought up to believe it to be a shame for women to speak in meeting, look no farther than these texts, and give them a sweeping application. Critics of the Bible, critics of womankind, as well as women who are looking for an excuse for idleness, seize these passages in the same manner.

He argues that it has been the work of the forces of darkness that have served to discredit and limit the work of women in the cause of Christ. But "the work of the Bible has been to elevate her." Tenney offers a fresh understanding of the passage in 1 Cor. 14:34, 35 prohibiting women to “speak” in church. Tenny explains:

There are three Greek words from which "to speak" is translated, *ei-pon*, *le-go*, and *la-le-o* they may be used interchangeably, though to the latter is given by Donnegan the following definitions: "To talk; to speak; to prate; to prattle; to babble; to chatter;" etc.; and this is the word used in 1 Cor. 14:34... which shows that the apostle was rebuking garrulity rather than prohibiting Christians from witnessing for the cause of Christ.

Tenny, like the authors before, lists a host of fine examples of female leaders in the Bible. He concludes his article:

It does not comport with reason that the apostle had such women as these in mind when he penned the words in 1 Cor. 14:34, and in 1 Tim. 2:11, 12. Women who labor acceptably in the gospel are included among those of whom the Saviour says, "Whosoever shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven."

We understand "Whosoever" to mean men *and* women.

From the Writings of Ellen White

We now turn our attentions to the writings of Ellen White. It may come as a surprise to some that Ellen White, through her pen and means, supported women in pastoral ministry. The early Adventist Church believed her writings to be inspired and authoritative. I happen to believe this as well. There are two articles dedicated to the subject of women in ministry. One is entitled *Women as Workers in the Cause of God*. (*Manuscript Release*, No. 330). The other is an article from the *Review & Herald*, July 9, 1895. These both deserve a thorough reading. Excerpts from the first are provided below. The second article will not be cited here, but reading it would be good.

The ministers are paid for their work, and this is well. And if the Lord gives the wife, as well as the husband, the burden of labor, and if she devotes her time and her strength to visiting from family to family, opening the Scriptures to them, although the hands of ordination have not been laid upon her, she is accomplishing a work that is in the line of ministry. p. 323.

The method of paying men laborers and not their wives is a plan not after the Lord's order. Injustice is thus done. A mistake is made. The Lord does not favor this plan. This arrangement, if carried out in our conferences, is liable to discourage our sisters from qualifying themselves for the work they should engage in. p. 323.

The Lord has put His spirit upon them both. If the husband should die, and leave his wife, she is fitted to continue her work in the cause of God, and receive wages for the labor she performs. p. 323.

Seventh-day Adventists are not in any way to belittle woman's work. If a woman puts her housework in the hands of a faithful, prudent helper, and leaves her children in good care, while she engages in the work, the conference should have wisdom to understand the justice of her receiving wages. p. 324.

This question is not for men to settle. The Lord has settled it. You are to do your duty to the women who labor in the gospel, whose work testifies that they are essential to carry the truth into families. Their work is just the work that must be done. In many respects a woman can impart knowledge to her sisters that a man cannot. The cause would suffer great loss without this kind of labor. p. 325.

There are women who should labor in the gospel ministry. p. 325.

The way is open for consecrated women. But the enemy would be pleased to have the women whom God could use to help hundreds, binding up their time and strength on one helpless little mortal, that requires constant care and attention. p. 325.

This is the grand and noble work that the minister and his wife may qualify themselves to do as faithful shepherds and guardians of the flock. p. 327

When news that the leaders of the church refused to pay female gospel workers wages for their work, Ellen White wrote,

I will, in the name of the Lord, protest. I will feel it my duty to create a fund from my tithe money to pay these women who are accomplishing just as essential work as the ministers are doing..., (*Daughters of God*, 106; *Pastoral Ministry* 77; *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 5, 29.)

We can take *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 322 (first published in 1901) as another very clear example.

It is the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit of God that prepares workers, both men and women, to become pastors to the flock of God.

This agrees with our observation in the Bible earlier that the gifts and fitting of the Holy Spirit, and *not* gender, determine who should be a minister.

In 1879, she addressed a troubling situation in South Lancaster, Massachusetts, and stated, “It is not always men who are best adapted to the successful management of a church. If faithful women have more deep piety and true devotion than men, they could indeed by their prayers and their labors do more than men who are unconsecrated in heart and in life.” (“Ellen G. White to Brother Johnson,” Letter 33, 1879, 19 Manuscript Release, 56.) Apparently Ellen White believed and testified that the management of a church—the work of a pastor—can be carried out just as well by a woman as by a man.

From *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 12, p. 164 (first published in 1890),

“Every soul is precious in God’s sight, and I am wondering what can be done for the destitute fields where the flock of God is without a shepherd...”

In this letter, Ellen White first recognized the desperate need for more pastors in the unworked fields of America. Then a couple lines later, she states from where this need could be filled - women, supported by the self-denial of the members of the church.

“We need so much just now these fruits of self-denial, to support women missionaries in the field.” *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 12, p. 164.

She calls the financial support of sending female pastors into the gospel field a “need”.

Ten years earlier in 1880, she invited young people to engage in literature evangelism because it could serve as a good education for “men and women to do pastoral labor.” (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, 390.)

In the *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 229 she states, “Young men and young women who should be engaged in the ministry, in Bible work, and in the canvassing work, should not be bound down to mechanical employment.”

And then in 1899 Ellen White makes an allusion to 1 Timothy 5:17-18, a passage interpreted by some as referring to male-only elders, but she applies it to the role of both men and women in the gospel ministry. The statement is found in *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 1, p. 263. First the Scripture, then her statement.

Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer is worthy of his wages.” 1 Timothy 5:17, 18.

Now Ellen White...

Women, as well as men, are needed in the work that must be done. Those women who give themselves to the service of the Lord, who labor for the salvation of others by doing house-to-house work, which is as taxing as, and more taxing than standing before a congregation, should receive payment for their labor. **If a man is worthy of his hire, so also is a woman.**

Make no mistake in neglecting to correct the error of giving ministers less than they should receive. When you see persons in necessity who have been placed in positions of trust, let God move upon your heart to set things right. **The tithe should go to those who labor in word and doctrine, be they men or women.**

Ellen White correctly applies the passage in 1 Timothy 5 to male *and* female pastors. She asserts men and women who labor in the word and doctrine as pastors should be paid by the tithe. This statement is strengthened all the more when one becomes aware of what she wrote about the exclusive use of the tithe...that it is for pastors *only*.

Counsels on Stewardship, p. 102 (this statement was first published in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9 in 1909).

A very plain, definite message has been given to me for our people. I am bidden to tell them that they are making a mistake in applying the tithe to various objects which, though good in themselves, are not the object to which the Lord has said that the tithe should be applied. Those

who make this use of the tithe are departing from the Lord's arrangement. God will judge for these things.

One reasons that the tithe may be applied to school purposes. Still others reason that canvassers and colporteurs should be supported from the tithe. But a great mistake is made when the tithe is drawn from the object for which it is to be used—the support of the ministers.

A similar statement on the exclusive use of the tithe may be found in *Special Testimonies for Ministers and Workers*, no. 10, p. 18 (first published in 1897).

What we observe in Ellen White's writings is that instead of forbidden the practice of women in pastoral ministry, she strongly promoted it, called our leaders to fund it, and throughout her ministry as a messenger of the Lord added her influence to expand it.

The Practice of Commissioning Female Pastors Throughout SDA History 1850s-1860s

We have referenced articles in our denominational publications defending the practice of female preachers since the 1850s. These women, though they held ministerial credentials, and worked as evangelists, and Bible workers, did not yet serve as pastors, neither were they ordained.

1870s-1880s

More articles are written defending the practice of female preachers. Those with ministerial licenses served as pastors, evangelists, bible workers, missionaries, etc.

In 1880 Ellen White encourages male and female members and leaders of the church to engage pastoral ministry.

In 1881 the first proposal was made before the general conference to consider ordaining—and not just commissioning—female pastors. This matter was referred to the GC Committee until further study could be done. The practice of hiring and commissioning female pastors had been decided prior to this. The matter of ordination was never taken up again in General Conference Committee or GC Session until 1973 and 1975, respectively.

1890s-1900s

Ellen White calls for more female pastors (in some articles she calls them “missionaries”), and to pay them from the tithe. These “missionaries” expanded the work in areas of the U.S. which had not yet been reached with the 3 angels' messages. In the SDA Yearbook you see a huge uptick during these decades in the number of women working as “missionaries”. Their responsibilities included, preaching, evangelizing, visitation, medical missionary work, circulating tracts and literature, and training and appointing local leaders to church offices. They were not authorized to perform the ordinance of baptism. If it weren't for these women, however, the SDA church would not have expanded as rapidly in membership or in numbers of churches and conferences as it did.

1910s-1920s

The church grows very rapidly with Local Conferences and Union Conferences taking on the responsibilities of local ministry, and the General Conference with its various “divisions” focused more on global issues. Men were “commissioned”, “licensed”, and “ordained” to the gospel ministry, and women were “commissioned” and “licensed” to the gospel ministry.

One researcher cites that the number of women who were licensed ministers in the SDA church by the time Ellen White died in 1915 was 28 (source: Cindy Tutsch, *Questions and Answers about Women’s Ordination*).

1970s-1980s

In 1973 the first serious proposal was made to the General Conference to ordain women to the gospel ministry. Theological reasons from the Bible and Ellen White were presented to the General Conference for the first time in our denominational history. Under question was *not* whether to have female pastors, but whether to ordain them—and not just commission and license them—for their work. Among the items approved was #7, which reads,

That in areas receptive to such action, there be continued recognition of the appropriateness of appointing women to pastoral-evangelistic work, and that the appropriate missionary credentials/licenses be granted them. [Source: General Conference Committee Minutes, October 18, 1973, 1819 (<http://www.adventistarchives.org/docs/GCC/GCC1973-10b/index.djvu>)]

The practice of hiring female pastors, and licensing them was to “continue”, implying it had already been in place prior. The minutes of this meeting were *very* instructional. (Source: General Conference Minutes, 1973 Annual Council.)

At the 1975 General Conference the continued role of women in pastoral ministry was affirmed, but ordination was withheld on the basis the practice might cause division in the world church.

In 1985 the GC in full session voted not to ordain women to the gospel ministry *until* further research could be done by our denominational scholars and theologians. (source: <https://www.adventistarchives.org/gc-session-actions>). In other words the GC was asking for more info.

Throughout the 80s (and 90s) the General Conference established several study commissions with representation from around the world, whose members authored many books, articles, dissertations, etc. on the subjects of women in ministry, and women’s ordination. The vast majority of these works were in favor of the practice.

1990s and 2000s

In 1990 the General Conference voted to approve that commissioned women ministers could perform virtually all the functions of ordained ministers, including establishing new

congregations, marrying, and baptizing. One exception would be that the offices of conference, union, division and GC president are reserved for an ordained minister—i.e. a man. But the decision was voted that a female pastor's ordination cannot be approved "at this time", for fear of the division it could cause in the world church. Commissioned ministers must continue to receive approval from their local Conference to preach anywhere other than their assigned district. (Source: <https://www.adventistarchives.org/gc-session-actions>)

On July 5, 1995 the General Conference *voted down* a proposal which read "The General Conference vests in each division the right to authorize the ordination of individuals within its territory in harmony with established policies." (source: <https://www.adventistarchives.org/gc-session-actions>)

2010s

In 2010 the General Conference delegates voted to ordain qualified women to the offices of deacon and elder. This decision was based largely on a statement of Ellen White found in the *Review and Herald*, July 9, 1895, p. 271.

Also in 2010 it was voted to establish a study commission to study out the theology of ordination to the gospel ministry and report back to the General Conference its findings. This commission became known as the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC). (source: <https://www.adventistarchives.org/gc-session-actions>)

The TOSC reported back to the General Conference semi-annually in Spring and Autumn Sessions over the next several years and offered three different theological positions: (1) opposed to women in pastor ministry—and calling for the church to undo previous decisions to allow for it; (2) in favor of women in pastoral ministry and ordaining them; and (3) since we cannot agree as a world church on the matter, to allow each division to choose a course of action suitable for their areas. Each position was read and accompanied by theological and biblical reasons. Our reading their final report would be very instructional. (<https://www.adventistarchives.org/final-tosc>)

In 2015, the third position (letting each Division determine the role of women in the gospel ministry and whether or not to ordain them) was brought to the floor of the General Conference in full session. It was *voted down*. The other two positions (removing women from pastoral ministry, and ordaining women to their ministry) were not brought to the floor, and were not voted.

Today nearly 2 percent of women in the North American Division are licensed ministers. This number is growing. This practice is in accordance with policies voted in full General Conference sessions over 155 years. Of concern, a tiny fraction of our female pastors are being ordained, and this without authorization from the General Conference.

From this handling of SDA history, I have several conclusions to make. (1) Women have served in the role of pastors since our earliest history. (2) Their work was affirmed by our pioneers, Ellen White, and officially voted statements throughout our denominational history. (3) While the church has not approved the ordination of women, they have always affirmed their role as pastors—until 2015, that is, when the first ever report was given to the General Conference delegates, calling for the church to undo previous GC decisions to have female elders and pastors. This position was not voted. (4) Ellen White spoke very directly on the subject of women in pastoral ministry. She called for its expansion, called for their work to be funded by the tithe, funded it herself, and did all she could to secure its place in the SDA church. (5) In harmony with this history, the voted policies of the GC, and our recent vote in business session here at the Prescott SDA Church, a female candidate is being considered for a position as Youth Pastor here at the Prescott SDA Church. It will be up to this body to extend the invitation to work here or not Pray that the Lord will either close doors that no man can open, or open doors that no man can close.

As we move forward together ever closer to God, and ever closer to the close of this earth's history, may it be with a clear sense that God has called us all in the SDA church to do our part to finish what others have started. While our theology on this subject might divide us, may our mission to serve God and the people of this planet unite us together still. Dear Brother, Dear Sister you have a call from God—fulfill your ministry. What you believe about this subject will likely impact you personally as you accomplish the work the Lord has given you to do. But how we answer this question of who may pastor may also impact whether we let another accomplish their ministry; someone the HS has particularly gifted to do the work of a pastor. Let us tread very softly here.

I do not present this material this morning to silence the opposition, but to give us something to talk about; calmly, peaceably, respectfully, and fully-informed. I invite everyone here to study this out, and plan to attend a meeting together in a month's time where we can have such a conversation in the Spirit of Christ. I am praying that through this conversation our rift, our schism, our division may be mended. It may be we have two opinions still, but let us be one church. I am asking this meeting to be moderated by someone other than myself, someone who is capable of leading a respectful discussion, and calling us to prayer if things should heat up. My prayers are with us all.