

## Ellen White and the Ordination of Women

Sermon by Bert Haloviak, Sligo Church, Oct 15, 1988

**RUSSELL-WIGHTMAN STORY:** In 1906 the RH published the obituary of Truman Russell who died at the age of 82. It says much for the home life of Mr and Mrs Russell that 3 of their children decided to become Seventh-day Adventist ministers. Imagine the joy the family must have experienced as they saw their children entering the SDA ministry. Kit Carson Russell served as a pastor, conference president and GC religious liberty secretary for 32 years of denominational service. His obituary appears in the RH of Jan 29, 1920. His brother, Edgar Torrey Russell served the SDA church for 45 years as pastor, conference and union president and his obit appeared in the Oct 22, 1925 Review.

The third pastor to come from that family had an unusual name for a minister in the SDA church and HER obituary never appeared in the RH. Behind that fact is a sad story.

Lulu Wightman was the most successful minister in New York state for over a decade. Her ministry began when she was licensed as a minister in 1897 and continued even after she left New York state to engage in religious liberty work in Kansas and Missouri in 1908. The results from Mrs Wightman's ministry ranks her not only as the most outstanding evangelist in New York during her time, but among the most successful within the SDA church for any time period. As a licensed minister, Mrs Wightman pioneered work that established companies or churches in a number of places in New York where Adventism had never gained a foothold before.

In 1901 the NY Conference president sent this note to John Wightman, the husband of Lulu: "Enclosed find a small token of appreciation from the Conference Committee for your work in assisting your wife." Mrs Wightman was the licensed minister and the conference sent money to the husband in appreciation for his assistance to her. How is it that such a thing could occur? Mrs Wightman was one of over 20 SDA women who were licensed as ministers in the 19th century. Was there something wrong with the 19th century SDA church? After all, there is no scriptural authority for licensing women as ministers, but that is precisely what happened in the church during Ellen White's day.

**SCRIPTURAL ISSUE:** Actually the church had wrestled with the question of scriptural authority and church policy early in its history. The first question involved the name "Seventh-day Adventist." Then there was the issue of the legal organization of the church. After all, many pointed out and argued in general meetings: "Where is there in the Scriptures a body of believers called Seventh-day Adventists." Indeed, it was wrong to take any name to ourselves except "Church of God" for all the other scriptural names are already taken, they argued. Our church was

actually called the "Church of God" until 1860 when the term Seventh-day Adventist was adopted.

Others opposed regular conference meetings, constitutions or worst of all, registering church property with the state, because there was no explicit scriptural authority for doing so. The issue was not resolved without splits within the church, but James White's position, endorsed by Ellen White prevailed. Here is a short statement by James White:

If it be asked, Where are your plain texts of scripture for holding church property legally? we reply, The Bible does not furnish any; neither does it say that we should have a weekly paper, a steam printing-press, that we should publish books, build places of worship, and send out tents. Jesus says, 'Let your light so shine before men,' etc.'; but he does not give all the particulars how this shall be done. The church is left to move forward in the great work, praying for divine guidance, acting upon the most efficient plans for its accomplishment. We believe it safe to be governed by the following:

#### RULE

All means which, according to sound judgment, will advance the cause of truth, and are not forbidden by plain scripture declarations, should be employed. [JW, RH, April 26, 1860]

The church moved forward with that principle regarding church policy as distinguished from church doctrine. All our doctrines were based upon full scriptural authority, but we did elect general conference presidents without explicit scriptural authority for doing so.

**OPEN DOORS FOR WOMEN:** It was in the 1870s that the SDA church fully opened its doors to women in its ministry. A number of ministers had left the church in the 1860s, vast areas within the US were still unentered and the church needed evangelists and so it encouraged both men and women to receive training and enter the ministerial ranks. The key to ministry in the 19th century was evangelism and that was the focus of the 1870s when women were licensed as ministers. And they were ministers as the church defined ministry.

The 1871 GC session delegates voted that "means should be taken to encourage and properly instruct men and women for the work of teaching the word of God." The resolution called for a course "to instruct our devoted young men and young women, all over the land, in the principles of present truth, and the best methods of teaching them to the people."

Thus, over a century ago, the Seventh-day Adventist church encouraged its women to enter the ministry. Indeed, there was no definition of ministry within the 19th century SDA church that excluded women. The sole exclusion involved those actions reserved to ordained ministers. But women were clearly defined within the 19th century SDA definition of ministry. They belonged to ministerial associations, they held the SDA ministerial license or the "license to preach," they conducted evangelistic campaigns, they visited churches doing pastoral labor and were paid from tithe funds that Ellen White considered reserved for the official church ministry. Thus Lulu Wightman was a Seventh-day Adventist minister in the fullest sense defined by the church.

**WIGHTMAN STORY CONTINUES:** John Wightman had received only nominal salary for assisting his wife for six years, but a dilemma occurred when he was licensed as a minister in 1903. Since 1901 Mrs Wightman had been paid the salary of an ordained minister. The question of her ordination came up at the NY state conference meeting in 1901. The union president, R A Underwood, favored her ordination, but the GC president, A G Daniells, who was at that conference meeting accidentally, did not believe that a women could "properly be ordained, just now at least," and so the conference voted her the ordained salary without the ordination.

That wasn't a problem until her husband was licensed two years later. The conference then urged Mrs Wightman to lower her salary to the rate of the licensed minister, perhaps fearing that some would consider that she held more authority than her husband. Although the husband protested, her salary was lowered. Statistics of the time reveal that 60% of the new members that joined the church in NY state entered as the result of the efforts of the Wightmans. At the time, the NY Conference had 11 ministers.

The irony and perhaps the injustice continued. John Wightman was ordained in 1905, two years after he had been licensed. His wife had been New York's most effective minister for 9 years, but was not ordained.

The ministry of the Wightmans continued and embraced a variety of functions. Mrs Wightman attained state and national acclaim in religious liberty lectures before a number of state legislatures. In 1909 her husband proudly wrote this about her:

Yesterday a resolution was adopted [by the Missouri] House of Representatives inviting Mrs Wightman to address the representatives on 'The Rise of Religious Liberty in the United States.' I believe this action upon the part of the Missouri legislature is unprecedented in the history of our people. [Missouri Workers' Record, April 28, 1909]

The saddest aspect of this story occurred the next year and explains why no obituary of the Wightmans appears in the RH. In 1910 the president of the Central Union Conference, E T Russell, circulated a 16-page pamphlet against his sister and brother-in-law. They had come to oppose the church structure. The Wightmans were dropped from their church employment and the family permanently divided. But even today, the churches in Hornellsville, Gas Springs, Wallace, Silver Creek, Geneva, Angola, Gorham, Fredonia, Avoca, Rushville, Canandaigua and Penn Yan in New York state owe their establishment to a woman minister. And the churches in Avon, Lakeville, Hemlock, South Livonia and Bath were established when Mr Wightman joined his wife as a licensed minister.

The Wightman story is sad and tragic, but no more sad and tragic than a story I heard not too long ago told by a GC vice president. He talked of his daughter and of his observation of her while she was growing up and that she had a "gift of speaking the gospel" publicly. He told his audience that despite that gift he had to encourage her to pursue other lines than the ministry because of the situation in the SDA church, and he reminisced: "Ah, but that girl could speak," he said.

I took that story very personally because it was my church he was talking about. It's our church he was talking about. But the story is even more tragic because A G Daniells was absolutely wrong in 1901 when he said that a woman could not properly be ordained in the SDA church. His being wrong about SDA history is one of the purposes of the meetings concerning this subject that have been planned for today.

**1881 GENERAL CONFERENCE RESOLUTION:** The question of ordination of women came up as early as the 1881 GC session and it was an amazing resolution for its time, even though it obviously did not pass. Here is what was discussed at the General Conference of 1881: "Females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry."

Since the 1870s various tests had been applied to candidates for the ministry. They were examined concerning their doctrinal and educational qualifications, scriptural knowledge, spiritual well-being and success in ministry. All during this period women continued to be licensed by the state conferences. The 1881 resolution thus strongly implies that its framers considered that there were women who did indeed possess the necessary qualifications for ordination to the Christian ministry. They had been issued the "license to preach," and given evidence of their "call" and thus were reissued licenses year after year. The qualification of women was not the issue in 1881; the question that was debated was the "perfect propriety," the wisdom, of

ordaining women. If women had not been considered ministers, the question of their ordination could not have arisen.

Mrs White did not attend the 1881 session. Besides the recent death of her husband, there were perhaps other factors that kept her away. Her son, Willie White, then 27, was an astute observer of the session, however. He had attended GC sessions since 1870 and was active as a delegate since 1877. White reported that delegates at the 1881 session had lined up in competing "progressive" and "conservative" camps and there was "likely to [be] lively times" before the session was over. Both the state of the cause and the low esteem placed upon the ministry of Ellen White at the time militated against a dispassionate decision concerning ordaining women in 1881. After some discussion, the question was deferred and referred to the 3-man General Conference Committee, where it apparently died.

It cannot be over-emphasized that the issue in 1881 was not the question of the "call" or the qualifications based upon performance of women, but rather the propriety or the wisdom of their being ordained. That question was to be decided by Stephen Haskell, George Butler and Uriah Smith and their decision seems to have been that it was not the right time in 1881. No SDA woman was ordained to any position until after 1895 when Ellen White made her landmark statement concerning ordination. Even that statement appears to have been lost to most of SDA history. And Ellen White made that statement despite the fact that it was contrary to the past history of the church.

**ELLEN WHITE'S 1895 STATEMENT CONCERNING ORDINATION:** Here's what Ellen White said in 1895 and it is truly a landmark statement:

Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands. In some cases they will need to counsel with the [local] church officers or the [Conference] minister; but if they are devoted women, maintaining a vital connection with God, they will be a power for good in the church. This is another means of strengthening and building up the church. We need to branch out more in our methods of labor. Not a hand should be bound, not a soul discouraged, not a voice should be hushed; let every individual labor, privately or publicly, to help forward this grand work. [RH, July 9, 1895]

No matter how one interprets that statement, it is clear that Ellen White is proclaiming that it was now possible for SDA women to be ordained "with perfect propriety." The act of ordaining women had not occurred prior to that time. If we look

closely at the statement, I believe we will see that it resolves the dilemma we seem to be in today. It seems to me there are two major aspects to the question: (1) can a woman truly be a minister, as we understand ministry and (2) would we be acting against scripture to ordain a woman.

The 19th century SDA church answered the first question when it licensed women as ministers. It is apparent that many decision-makers of today have not realized that women were licensed and fully considered ministers in the 19th century. Ellen White praised such women and commented favorably on their holding those credentials.

The question of whether it is unscriptural to ordain a women poses a dilemma, however. Here's our problem, and once again it's really an historical problem. It's illustrated by the latest SDA Church Manual, 1986 edition, p 64:

Deaconesses were included in the official staff of the early Christian churches (Rom 16:1,2). Phebe was a servant--servant in this instance meaning 'deaconess'....Other references indicate that women served in the early church as deaconesses. There is no record, however, that these women were ordained; hence the practice of ordaining deaconesses is not followed by the SDA Church.

That statement is saying that women cannot be ordained as deaconesses because there is no scriptural authority for doing so. This is virtually the same statement that appeared in our first Church Manual in 1932. Attempts were made at both the 1975 and 1985 GC sessions to at least allow for the ordination of deaconesses, but they were unsuccessful. There was an action at the 1975 Spring meeting that provided for ordaining deaconesses, but, of course, a Spring meeting cannot really modify a policy outlined in the Church Manual. That can only be done at a GC session.

Those who oppose ordaining deaconesses argue that it would be just as logical from the scriptural standpoint to ordain a woman pastor as it would be to ordain a deaconess and thus they oppose ordaining deaconesses. They likewise see it as unscriptural to ordain a woman as an elder.

But Ellen White took us another path and she gave scriptural reasons for doing so. The 1986 Church Manual is over 90 years behind the Ellen White statement that women "should be set apart by prayer and laying on of hands." In the aftermath of the Ellen White statement at least three women were ordained as deaconesses in Australia in the 1890s.

Once it was recognized that a women could be ordained to something, then the ordination question was resolved, because women were already licensed as ministers and defined by Mrs White

to be appropriately involved in the most relevant ministries then embraced by the church. They were doing the vitally necessary pastoral labor, they were working along Christ's lines of ministry, they were preaching the spoken word, they were ministering in the fullest sense as defined by Mrs White.

Indeed, observed Mrs White: "We need to branch out more in our methods of labor" and we should neither "bind" nor "discourage" those who embraced this kind of ministry either as ordained layworkers (those who labored "privately") or as ordained Conference employees (those who labored "publicly"). Notice again her full statement: "Not a hand should be bound, not a soul discouraged, not a voice should be hushed; let every individual labor, privately or publicly, to help forward this grand work." The nature of the Christian Help Work ministry that her statement refers to clearly had both lay and official aspects and women clearly were eligible for ordination to it.

**ELLEN WHITE AND THE MINISTRY OF COMPASSION:**What about the background to that landmark statement of 1895. Mrs White's heart melted as she related the following experience:

One of our family came to me saying that a boy about fifteen years old was at the door with a small basket of apples and oranges, for which he asked one shilling, twenty four cents. He was told that we had a supply of this fruit; for we buy at auction. He pleaded with the girl to buy, for, said he, "We are starving." The question was asked, "Where is your father? Cannot he get work?" He said sorrowfully, "My father is dead. My mother is in poor health. . . . I am the eldest of the family, and the responsibility is upon me. Won't you buy?"

"Pastor" Ellen White saw much more than a question of poverty in this experience. She saw true ministry and she outlined it:

You cannot know how we carry the heavy burden as we see these souls tested, thrown out of employment, unable to obtain labor unless they will give up the Sabbath. We must comfort and encourage them; we must help them as they shall be brought into strait places. There are many souls as precious as gold, and every sinner saved causes rejoicing in the heavenly courts. (Ellen White to Brother Harper, July 8, 1894, H30a, 1894.)

The issue to Ellen White was true pastoral labor: working as Christ worked to present truth to the needy. A few weeks after that experience, the tender, "pastoral" Ellen White wrote this to her son:

Yesterday it all opened before me that in this very line of hospitality, I have been repeatedly shown that we

can unite the people with us, and can have twofold influence over them. This was unfolded before me in the first experience in this work, many years back, and we have ever linked our interest with humanity. [Ellen White to W. C. White, Aug 6, 1894.]

Shortly after penning her ordination statement, Mrs White again outlined her definition of ministry and here is how she derived a scriptural basis for her 1895 statement that women could be ordained:

In the fifth-eighth chapter of Isaiah, the work that the people of God are to do in Christ's lines, is clearly set forth. They are to break every yoke, they are to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to bring the poor that are cast out into their houses, to draw out their souls to the hungry, and to satisfy the afflicted soul. If they carry out the principles of the law of God in acts of mercy and love, they will represent the character of God to the world. [RH, Aug 20, 1895]

The Christian Help ministry was the major SDA approach to proclaiming its mission to Australia during the 1890s. W C White observed that Australia at that time was a country "where there is much sickness and much need of medical help" and was convinced that "the most effectual way" of working was "in the way of Christian Help work" since that class of work "will appeal to their sympathy and will thus serve as an introduction to the people." He observed that over 4000 had died of typhoid fever during 1897 and that the SDA local church members as well as denominational employees "are doing all they can in the Christian Help work." [W C White to Medical Mission Board, Dec, 1897, WCW Book 11a]

It was found that in these places of tremendous needs, women were the most effective and active ministers and this period is the one when Ellen White makes most of her famous statements concerning women in ministry.

**THE TITHE FACTOR:** The most relevant of Ellen White's statements on tithe usage also occurred during her ministry in Australia. Indeed, in 1897, she wrote:

This is the Lord's special revenue fund, for a special purpose. I have never so fully understood this matter as I now understand it. Having had questions directed here to me to answer, I have had special instruction from the Lord that the tithe is for a special purpose, consecrated to God to sustain those who minister in the sacred work, as the Lord's chosen to do His work not only in sermonizing, but in ministering. They should understand all that this

comprehends. [Letter 40, 1897, emphasis supplied.]

It seems highly significant that while Ellen White was stressing a singleness of purpose in the use of tithe funds, that she would broaden the potential recipients of those funds to include women who, until the Ellen White statements, were ineligible for receiving those funds. It is even more significant when one considers that financial exigencies had vastly narrowed the availability of those funds. As the concept of women's ministry was expanding, however, it became apparent that Ellen White considered that ministry as true gospel ministry.

The binding element regarding those who qualified as tithe recipients to Ellen White seemed to be those who were directly presenting the gospel message to those who had not heard it before or to those who were involved in pastoral-instructional functions within the church. Thus minister's wives who were instructing other women in missionary work, women who were doing house to house labor in presenting the gospel to other women, women Bible teachers who were instructing student-workers regarding doctrines and methods of evangelism, women who were teaching other women in Bible reading and home visitation techniques, women who were laboring in "word and doctrine," women medical missionaries who were instructing others in Christian Help Work, all were eligible in Ellen White's thinking to receive tithe funds. The rationale for her call at the time she was focusing upon a "carefully guard[ed] tithe fund" that would be held "sacred for one purpose" was her expanded definition of ministry.

In addressing the question of the nature of the 19th century church and the question of tithe usage, Mrs White observed that she had received "light upon this subject" even prior to her going to Australia in 1891. She then made a statement that again reduces the ordination of women to a moot point:

Injustice has been done to women who labor just as devotedly as their husbands, and who are recognized by God as being as necessary to the work of ministry as their husbands. [If ordination is defined as an official church recognition of a calling that was instituted by God, it would seem long past the time when the church should harmonize with that Divine perspective.] The method of paying men-laborers and not their wives, is a plan not after the Lord's order. . . . This arrangement . . . is liable to discourage our sisters from qualifying themselves for the work they should engage in [i.e., ministry]. . . . 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. [Ms 43a-1897, emphasis supplied.]

Mrs White would use tithe funds to pay women because she

considered that indeed, there were "women who labor in the gospel" and "whose work testifie[d] that they [were] essential to carry the truth into families." She proclaimed, "Their work is just the work that must be done" and "the cause would suffer great loss without this kind of labor." In identifying this pastoral labor Mrs White affirmed that "again and again the Lord has shown me that women teachers are just as greatly needed to do the work to which He has appointed them as are men." She counseled that "there are women who should labor in the gospel ministry" and then defined the pastoral nature of that gospel ministry:

Those women who labor to teach souls to seek for the new birth in Christ Jesus, are doing a precious work. They consecrate themselves to God, and they are just as verily laborers for God as are their husbands. They can enter families to which ministers could find no access. They can listen to the sorrows of the depressed and oppressed. They can shed rays of light into discouraged souls. They can pray with them. They can open the Scriptures, and enlighten them from a "Thus saith the Lord." [Ibid]

This kind of ministry was what Mrs White defined as "true ministry" and observed that it was the "accompaniment of the Holy Spirit of God that prepares workers, both men and women, to become pastors of the flock of God." [RH, Jan 15, 1901.]

**WHY WOMEN ARE INHERENTLY VITAL TO THE GOSPEL MINISTRY:**

Without mentioning the word women or addressing the issues of ordination or gospel ministry, Mrs White in the next two statements informs us why women are vital to the current ministry of the SDA church as "pastors of the flock of God." A mere reflection on the statements provides proof of the premise:

[1] It is the glory of the gospel that it is founded upon the principle of restoring in the fallen race the divine image by a constant manifestation of benevolence. [Ellen White, "The Needs of the Cause in Australasia: An Appeal," June 11, 1903]

[2] The completeness of Christian character is attained when the impulse to help and bless others springs constantly from within. [Ellen White, "He That Loveth Not His Brother Abideth in Death," Aug 2, 1899.]

**CONCLUSION:** We can see that Ellen White considered women as ministers during her time and that she favored the act of ordaining women. Women were "pastors of the flock of God" during the time when "pastoring" was a newly-emerging vital ministerial concept. And "men and women" who acted as the "Lord's helping hand" and who were working as Christ did in combining a pastoral-evangelistic ministry to the "oppressed, rescuing those ready to

perish" would be considered "priests of the Lord" and "ministers of our God," according to Ellen White's analysis of Isaiah 61:6. [Jan 17, 1901, B7-1901.] Obviously Ellen White did not believe that because there were no women who served in the Old Testament priesthood, women were forever prohibited from the organized ministry.

The 19th century SDA church, largely because of the influence of Ellen White, was remarkably innovative as it grasped opportunities to exhibit a dynamic and versatile definition of ministry. Ellen White consistently defined ministry by those relevant functions its ministers performed. And it is obvious that women were allowed to perform all those relevant functions, excepting those which the church defined as belonging solely to the ordained minister.

When the church seemed to founder on the question of whether or not women could be ordained, Ellen White, in 1895, resolved that issue. She went further as she described why the early Christian church ordained Paul and Barnabas. The principle she expressed has obvious relevance to the question of women and ordination to ministry: "In order that their work should be above challenge, He instructed the church by revelation to set them apart publicly to the work of the ministry. Their ordination was a public recognition of their divine appointment to bear to the Gentiles the glad tidings of the gospel." [AA, 161]

Truly, Ellen White has fulfilled her mission to the church by pointing out the scriptural principles concerning ordination. Here, she applies scriptural principles to ministry as defined during the time she saw the Australian experience as a model for the church. She defines true ministry from Isaiah 58 and Isaiah 61:

If men and women would act as the Lord's helping hand, doing deeds of love and kindness, uplifting the oppressed, rescuing those ready to perish, the glory of the Lord would be their rearguard....Of those who act as his helping hand the Lord says, "Ye shall be named priests of the Lord; men shall call you the ministers of our God. [Ellen White, Jan 17, 1901, B7-1901.]

As Mrs White reflected upon the post-1888 focus upon justification by faith, she clearly perceived its implications concerning the nature of ministry:

We must look more to the presentation of God's love and mercy to move the hearts of the people. We must have a sense of both the justice and mercy of God. Those who can blend together the law of God and the mercy of God can reach any heart. For years I have seen that there is a broken link which has kept us from reaching hearts; this link is supplied by presenting the love and mercy of God. [Ellen White, Statement to

General Conference Committee and Conference Presidents,  
March 3, 1891, GCC Minutes.]

Nine days after that statement Mrs White addressed the ministers at the 1891 GC session and conveyed the sentiments of that address to her diary. The statement transcends all arguments concerning the ordination question. Ellen White is not here espousing a cause for she penned the following to her diary as her understanding of the nature of ministry:

The Lord has given Christ to the world for ministry. Merely to preach the Word is not ministry. The Lord desires His ministering servants to occupy a place worthy of the highest consideration. In the mind of God, the ministry of men AND WOMEN existed before the world was created. [The premise that God had a preconceived concept of ministry for both men and women before He created the world destroys ideas of subordination and offers very telling evidence about Ellen White's concept of the role of women in ministry.] He determined that His ministers should have a perfect exemplification of Himself and His purposes. No human career could do this work; so God gave Christ in humanity to work out His ideal of what humanity may become through entire obedience to His will and way. God's character was revealed in the life of His Son. Christ not only held a theory of genuine ministry, but in His humanity He wrought out an illustration of the ministry that God approves. Perfection has marked out every feature of true ministry. Christ, the Son of the living God, did not live unto Himself, but unto God. [Ellen White, Diary entry March 12, 1891, Ms 23-1891, emphasis supplied. Ellen White's original diary entry did not contain the wording that included women within God's original concept of ministry, but the 1903 version did. Most likely Ellen White's experience in Australia brought her to include that significant phrase in her later editing.]

The history of the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist church in the 19th century illustrates that women were indeed serving as "priests" and "ministers" of the Lord. We must recognize that heritage.