

A Theology of Ordination: An Integration of Bible and Ellen G. White's Writings

Introduction to a theology of ordination

A theology of ordination should begin with investigating what is God's testimony about ordination in the Scriptures. In this study, insights into the Old and New Testament history from the writings of Ellen G. White will be referred to whenever they shed light on the biblical passages and their relevance for today. In addition, the study has tried to investigate how ordination is connected to the truth as it is in Jesus, the Head of the church. Ordination and its authority will also be related to Jesus' model of leadership in the church.

The biblical examples of appointment, consecration, or ordination¹ in this paper have been selected for their relevancy to the ordination issue in today's context. Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible references are from the New Kings James Version.

Ordination in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament we focus on instances of special appointment: the setting apart of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood; the tribe of Levi becomes the tribe to assist the priesthood; the seventy elders are chosen to assist Moses; and Joshua becomes Moses' successor. Although in these settings the Bible does not mention the term "ordination," these appointments to a special position have been referred to in the literature as ordination. The appointment of prophets, kings, and judges will not be discussed because they do not contribute to a deeper understanding of the ordination to the leadership offices of the local church in the New Testament.

Aaron and his sons

Shortly after the exodus from Egypt, God selected the family of Aaron and his sons to lead out in the religious services of the sanctuary. They were sanctified, or set apart, and consecrated to occupy the office of priest through a special ceremony during which Moses was to anoint them with oil (Ex. 29:1-37; Lev. 8).

¹ The concept of "ordination" is expressed by various Greek and Hebrew words signifying the idea of "appointment," "consecration," or "installation."

The tribe of Levi

Because of its loyalty to God in crisis, the tribe of Levi was set apart to assist the priests in the services of the sanctuary (Ex 32:26; Num. 8:5-26). The Levites took the leadership place of the first-born male of each family who was especially consecrated and privileged by God (Num. 8:14-18). During the setting apart of the tribe of Levi, as part of the ceremony, the “sons of Israel” laid their hands on the Levites (Num. 8:10, NAS).²

The seventy elders

Next Moses chose seventy men from among the elders of the people to assist him with his leadership responsibilities (Num. 11:16, 17, 24-30). Moses was very careful in selecting these elders. Commenting on the qualifications of these seventy elders and their relevancy for today, Ellen White said that Moses “was careful to select, as his helpers, men possessing dignity, sound judgment, and experience.”³

The installation ceremony of these elders to this special office Ellen White called “ordination.” She noted that “at the time of their ordination” Moses listed some of the qualifications that are needed in “a man to be a wise ruler in the church.” These are found in Dt. 1:16, 17: “‘Hear the causes between your brethren,’ said Moses, ‘and judge righteously between every man and his brother, and the stranger that is with him. Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God's.’”⁴ Impartiality was an important character quality for leaders.

During this ordination a unique spiritual transaction took place when the Lord promised to Moses: “I will take of the Spirit that is upon you and will put the same upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone” (Num. 11:17).

God did not directly choose these elders, but Moses did (Num. 11:16). Elders held positions as heads of families or tribes and fulfilled influential roles having representative and judicial functions. The many references to elders in the Old Testament show the importance of this office in ancient Israel.

Joshua the successor of Moses

God appointed Joshua as Moses’ successor (Num. 27:15-23). A special ceremony took place for the inauguration of Joshua. God instructed Moses to lay his hands on Joshua’s head, and Joshua became “full of the spirit of wisdom” (Dt. 34:9).

² See also *Young’s Literal Translation*.

³ Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 94.

⁴ *Ibid*.

These instances of setting apart, appointing, or ordaining individuals and the tribe of Levi to a specific function or office with the laying on of hands have been seen as examples that influenced the ordination ceremonies in the New Testament.

Ordination in the New Testament

In the New Testament the setting apart or ordination of individuals is seen in the appointment of the twelve apostles, the seven deacons, Paul and Barnabas, Timothy, and the elders and deacons. Here was the origin of the New Testament practice of ordination in the establishment of the early Christian church. The New Testament writers used various Greek words for appointment to the various offices. Some Bible translations have translated some of these words with “ordination,” while others used different words, but the idea of installation to a specific office remains in the text. However, we should keep in mind that some theologians draw conclusions from the texts that are not present in the text, or perhaps their interpretations are influenced by practices among the post-apostolic Christians.

Jesus institutes ordination in the New Testament

Ordination of the twelve apostles

The first major step in the organization of the New Testament church was Jesus’ ordination of the twelve apostles. His appointment or ordination of the twelve apostles as the foundation of the New Testament church mirrors the establishment of the Old Testament church and its foundation in the twelve patriarchs, the sons of Jacob. Jesus showed the importance He attributed to the apostles’ ordination by praying all night for them prior to this momentous event. After that, Jesus set apart the twelve apostles from the larger group of disciples. This formed the nucleus leadership structure of the newly formed church of the Christian Era. Ellen White wrote, “It was at the ordination of the Twelve that the first step was taken in the organization of the church that after Christ’s departure was to carry on His work on the earth. Of this ordination the record says, ‘He goeth up into a mountain, and calleth unto Him whom He would: and they came unto Him. And He ordained twelve, that they should be with Him, and that He might send them forth to preach.’ Mark 3:13, 14.”⁵ On this occasion “Christ appointed them as His representatives, and gave them their ordination charge, their commission.”⁶

⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁶ Ellen G. White, “The Regions Beyond,” *Pacific Union Recorder*, Dec. 4, 1902.

This ordination took place some time after their original call by Jesus (Mk 1:16-20; John 1:35-51) and was a further development of their discipleship. Later Jesus explained that it was He who chose them for their specific function of leading out in the establishment of the New Testament church (John 15:16). Here it becomes clear that God's call comes first, then, after the individual responds, there follows the appointment to a specific position or office. The apostles were selected, appointed to, or ordained for a specific work of preaching, casting out demons, and healing (Matt 10:1, 7, 8).

As Jesus often laid His hands on people for healing and blessings, it would be natural to assume that He did so during the ordination of the Twelve. The Bible records a similar practice used in the setting apart of the Levites and Joshua (Num. 8:10; 27:18). Ellen White confirmed this practice by Jesus, stating that He "gathered the little band close about Him, and kneeling in the midst of them, and laying His hands upon their heads, He offered a prayer dedicating them to His sacred work. Thus the Lord's disciples were ordained to the gospel ministry."⁷

After His resurrection, Jesus further bestowed the Holy Spirit on these same apostles who were to act on His behalf (John 20:21-23). Ellen White commented that by this action Jesus "was committing to them a most sacred trust, and He desired to impress them with the fact that without the Holy Spirit this work could not be accomplished."⁸ This means that "only those who are thus taught of God, those who possess the inward working of the Spirit, and in whose life the Christ-life is manifested, are to stand as representative men, to minister in behalf of the church."⁹

The first step in the organization of the New Testament church had a very simple leadership structure. Jesus was the true Shepherd and stood as Head of the church; the twelve apostles were His representative leaders of the fledging Christian church.

Ordination of the seventy disciples

The ordination of the twelve apostles by Jesus was followed by His ordination of the seventy disciples. "Some months after the twelve had been appointed,"¹⁰ Jesus selected seventy disciples and sent them out, commanding them to preach the gospel and heal the sick (Luke 10:1). Describing their work, Ellen White noted, "The seventy were to go forth to do a work similar to that which was being done by the twelve. They were all endowed with supernatural endowments as the seal of their heavenly calling. They were ordained to proclaim that which Jesus at the beginning of his ministry had bidden them to keep secret . . . the Messiahship of Jesus."¹¹ Endowed with these special gifts, their missionary journey led to supernatural results. As Jesus ordained the twelve, so He sent out the seventy after He had or-

⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 296.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 805.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, "The Sending Out of the Seventy," *The Signs of the Times*, Dec. 10, 1894.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

dained them. The ordination of the seventy disciples reflects the ordination of the seventy elders of ancient Israel (Num 11:16-25).

Ordination of the seven

The second major step in the development of the New Testament church took place with the ordination of the seven deacons in the Jerusalem church. After Christ's ascension, the church in Jerusalem expanded rapidly, but not without problems. When complaints arose from the Greek-speaking believers against the Jewish believers about an alleged neglect of their widows in the daily food distribution, the apostles realized that they were not able to take care of this business without interrupting their ministry of prayer and the Word of God. Until this time all the organizational responsibilities had rested on the apostles. Now, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the apostles saw the need of improving the efficiency of the church's organization. They called the believers together and declared that it was not good that they should leave "the word of God and serve tables." They instructed the believers to "seek seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business, but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." This pleased the "whole multitude," and they chose the seven men and brought them "before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them." The result of this ordination by the apostles was the strong growth of the church (Acts 6:1-7).

Although this chapter does not explicitly name the office to which the seven were appointed, throughout the history of the Christian church these seven men have been called "deacons" because they were ordained to "serve tables" instead of "the ministry of the word." Ellen White endorsed this view and made the following observations on this delegation of responsibilities. "The apostles must now take an important step in the perfecting of gospel order in the church by laying upon others some of the burdens thus far borne by themselves."¹² She pointed out that this organizational development was guided "by the Holy Spirit" who led the apostles to call for a meeting of believers "to outline a plan for the better organization of all the working forces of the church."¹³ Now the apostles, as the "spiritual leaders having the oversight of the church," must be relieved from the work of "distributing to the poor and from similar burdens, so that they might be free to carry forward the work of preaching the gospel."¹⁴

¹² Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 88, 89.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The apostles asked the believers to select seven persons to take care of this business. They followed this counsel, and “by prayer and the laying on of hands, seven chosen men were solemnly set apart for their duties as deacons.” This development in organization, she stated, was “in the order of God.”¹⁵

Commenting on the extent of the work of these deacons, Ellen White wrote that they were responsible “to take the oversight of specific lines of work.” This meant that “these officers gave careful consideration to individual needs as well as to the general financial interests of the church, and by their prudent management and their godly example they were an important aid to their fellow officers in binding together the various interests of the church into a united whole.”¹⁶ This passage reveals Ellen White’s belief that deacons are the overseers of the business affairs of the church, while the apostles or elders exercise the general and spiritual oversight of the church.

About their extensive ministry, she added that although these deacons were “ordained for the special work of looking after the needs of the poor,” they were not prevented from “teaching the faith,” which was a work in which the apostles as spiritual leaders were involved. These deacons were “fully qualified to instruct others in the truth,”¹⁷ yet the office for which they were ordained was to “serve tables” (Acts 6:7), which meant taking care of the business and physical matters of the local church.

The ordination of the deacons is similar to the ordination of the Levites (Num. 8:9, 10). In both events the congregation was involved, and those ordained were to serve in behalf of the congregation.

When the Jerusalem church appointed the seven deacons, the twelve apostles functioned as the overseers or elders of the church. After the Jews began persecuting the church and the apostles began to proclaim the gospel in other regions, newly-appointed leaders, the elders, filled the vacancy in the leadership office of the church. That explains why when Barnabas and Saul brought famine relief to Palestine, they gave it to the elders to distribute to the believers in the region of Judea (Acts 11:29, 30).

The Jerusalem model of church organization

The organizational structure of the local church in Jerusalem was a model of simplicity and effectiveness in the development of the church. Ellen White wrote, “The organization of the church at Jerusalem was to serve as a model for the organization of churches in every other place where messengers of truth should win converts to the gospel.”¹⁸

She described the two classes of church offices of the local church as follows: The first class consisted of overseers, presbyters, or as we would say, elders. “Those to whom was given the responsibility of the general oversight of the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 90.

¹⁸ Ibid., 91.

church were not to lord it over God's heritage, but, as wise shepherds, were to 'feed the flock of God, . . . being examples to the flock' (1 Peter 5:2, 3).” Here she mentioned the qualifications Peter listed for a church elder. The second group of officers she listed was the deacons. She said deacons “were to be ‘men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.’”¹⁹ From Ellen White’s perspective, the organizational structure of the Jerusalem church that needed to be followed in the newly formed congregations consisted of two levels of officers: elders and deacons. Ordained leaders were to set apart to these offices persons who met the biblical qualifications.

Ordination of Barnabas and Paul

The ordination of Barnabas and Paul took place in the church of Antioch, Syria. Here, as certain prophets and teachers ministered and fasted, the Holy Spirit spoke to them, “Now separate to me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” After “having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:2, 3). These men were now “being sent out by the Holy Spirit” as missionaries (Acts 13:4).

Ellen White provides additional insights about their ordination. In that ordination ceremony “these apostles were solemnly dedicated to God by fasting and prayer and the laying on of hands.” By this ordination, the apostles “were authorized by the church, not only to teach the truth, but to perform the rite of baptism and to organize churches, being invested with full ecclesiastical authority.”²⁰

Regarding the significance of this ordination, Ellen White commented that it was “a public recognition of their divine appointment to bear to the Gentiles the glad tidings of the gospel.”²¹ Paul and Barnabas “had already received their commission from God Himself,” and the ceremony did not add “new grace or virtual qualification. It was an acknowledged form of designation to an appointed office and recognition of one's authority in that office. By it the seal of the church was set upon the work of God.”²² When “the ministers of the church of believers” put their hands on Paul and Barnabas, they, “by that action, asked God to bestow His blessing upon the chosen apostles in their devotion to the specific work to which they had been appointed.”²³ In the narrative, “there is no record indicating that any virtue was imparted by the mere act of laying on of hands. There is only the simple record of their ordination and of the bearing that it had on their future work.”²⁴

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 161.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 161, 162.

²³ Ibid., 162.

²⁴ Ibid.

Ordination of Timothy

In Paul's letters to Timothy are two references to his ordination. During the ordination ceremony Paul and the "presbytery," the council of elders, laid their hands on Timothy and he received a spiritual gift. Paul wrote, "Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery" (1 Tim. 4:14). In Paul's last letter he reminded Timothy to use this gift: "I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Tim. 1:6). With this ordination Timothy received a gift that he needed in executing his mission. From Timothy's involvement in Paul's mission it is clear that Timothy was not a local elder but functioned more as an itinerant elder or minister, representing the Christian church to the newly established churches throughout the Roman Empire.

Ordination of elders

During their travels in Asia Minor, when Paul and Barnabas organized groups of believers into churches and "appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (Acts 14:23). Here we observe the organizational model of the Jerusalem church being established in the "mission field." Later, when Paul observed disorderly behavior in some of the churches, he sent letters to his associates, Timothy and Titus, with strict guidelines about the proper qualifications for elders and deacons, with the goal to restore order in the churches (1 Tim. 3:1-14; Titus 1:5-9). These qualifications were adopted by most of the Christian churches throughout the history of Christianity.

These ordinations to the office of an elder should be done with great care. Paul instructed Timothy, "Do not lay hands on anyone hastily" (1 Tim. 5:22). Most interpreters see this as a reference to local church elders, because the immediate context indicates that this counsel pertains to the ordination of elders. Paul requested Timothy to remain in Ephesus to solve a disorderly situation in the local church, giving Timothy important rules regarding proper qualifications for church leaders. Only after carefully examining a person's qualifications for some time is it safe to ordain an elder. This counsel was a warning against prematurely ordaining church leaders.

Commenting on the timeliness of 1 Timothy 5:22, Ellen White wrote, "In the days of the apostles, the ministers of God did not dare to rely upon their own judgment in selecting or accepting men to take the solemn and sacred position of mouthpiece for God. They chose the men whom their judgment accepted, and then placed them before the Lord to see if He would accept them to go forth as His representatives. No less than this should be done now."²⁵ Elsewhere she related her personal experience: "In many places we meet men who have been hurried into responsible positions as elders of the church when they are not qualified for such a position. They have not proper government over themselves.

²⁵ Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, 438.

Their influence is not good. The church is in trouble continually in consequence of the defective character of the leader. Hands have been laid too suddenly upon these men.”²⁶ She warned the church to be very careful in appointing or ordaining elders, since they fill “the solemn and sacred position of mouthpiece for God.”²⁷

The New Testament refers to those in charge of the local church as “elders” and “overseers.” These words are used interchangeably. In 1 Tim 3:1 Paul uses the word “overseer.” In Titus 1:5-7 the terms “elder” and “overseer” are used for the same office. The term “elder” refers to an older person of experience; the term “overseer” refers to the function of the elder to oversee, rule, or govern the local church.

In the New Testament there is no office of “pastor.” In Ephesians 4:8, 11, 12 “pastor” is spoken of as a gift of ministry. Paul wrote that after Christ’s ascension, “when He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.’ . . . He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors [or shepherds] and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” This spiritual gift can be seen in Paul’s commission to the elders of church in Ephesus. “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd [pastor] the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). The apostle Peter, who considered himself also an elder, referred to this gift in a similar way, stating, “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder, . . . ‘Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:1-3). Among the tasks of elders is the responsibility to shepherd, nurture, and protect church members. Unless one of their gifts is that of shepherding, they don’t qualify for this office. However, this gift is not confined to the office of an elder or minister. The gift of shepherding or pastoring can be manifested by persons who work in other callings, professions, or ministries that are benefited by aspects of caring.

It has been suggested that although there is no evidence in the New Testament about ordination of pastors to a church office, *if an elder was a pastor*, then at some point in the apostolic church the pastor was ordained. However, as there is no evidence in the New Testament that an elder is called a pastor, these assumptions about the ordination of a pastor in the New Testament are speculation.

The bestowal of the gifts of the Holy Spirit

The third major step in the development of church organization took place during the widespread bestowal of the gifts of the Holy Spirit on the church (e.g. 1 Cor. 12:4-12, 28). It was not until this simple God-ordained organizational

²⁶ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 4:406, 407.

²⁷ Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, 438.

structure of elders and deacons in the local church in Jerusalem was in place that the church was ready for further perfection by the widespread bestowal of the gifts of the Spirit. Ellen White described this event as follows:

Later in the history of the early church, when in various parts of the world many groups of believers had been formed into churches, the organization of the church was further perfected, so that order and harmonious action might be maintained. Every member was exhorted to act well his part. Each was to make a wise use of the talents entrusted to him. Some were endowed by the Holy Spirit with special gifts—‘first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.’ 1 Corinthians 12:28. But all these classes of workers were to labor in harmony.²⁸

Here we observe the divine wisdom in the development of church organization in the New Testament church. First, God guided His fledgling church in developing a local church model of leadership structure consisting of elders and deacons. Next He bestowed upon the local church the outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It now became the responsibility of the elders to integrate fully the church members with their newly received spiritual gifts and talents into the effective operation of the church, so that they could build and bless the church and in unity proclaim the gospel message. Commenting on the elders’ involvement in this important work, Ellen White counseled, “They [elders] may plan wisely, and educate the individual members of the church to act their part in trading with their Lord's talents. By a right use of their talents they may increase their efficiency in the cause of God. The church may be visited only occasionally by a minister, and yet be a growing church; for Jesus is our minister.”²⁹

Ordination and the laying on of hands

The evidence of the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White reveals that for the church to fulfill its divine mission to evangelize the world and prepare a people for Christ’s return, God has provided each local congregation with a leadership structure similar to the New Testament model that consists of elders and deacons. The church chose these individuals because of their talents, gifts, and specific lifestyle characteristics, and because they fulfilled Scriptural qualifications. Not everyone is fit for these offices, but only those who fulfill the requirements.

This leadership structure serves to preserve proper order in the local church. The Holy Spirit has given believers one or more gifts to be used in blessing the church and reaching the world with the last message of mercy. To have these gifts operate in a harmonious and orderly manner, elders and deacons of the local churches are responsible to place church members with their gifts for proper service in the Lord’s army so that the church can accomplish its mission with the greatest success.³⁰

²⁸ Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 91, 92.

²⁹ Ellen G. White, “The Church Must Be Quickened,” *Review and Herald*, Jan 17, 1893.

³⁰ Ellen G. White, “God’s Means for Diffusing Light,” *Review and Herald*, March 24, 1891.

The ordination service

The church should choose gifted individuals who fulfill the biblical qualifications for the office of elder or deacon. This should be done very carefully with much prayer and fasting under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The ceremony that appoints these persons to these offices is called “ordination” and is accompanied by the laying on of hands by ordained ministers or elders (2 Tim. 1:6; 1 Tim. 4:14). Although ordination of persons to the biblical leadership office of elder or deacon is accompanied with the laying on of hands, *not every instance of the laying on of hands is equated with ordination*. Here the practice in the early days of the Adventist church is helpful. Ellen White instructed the church that missionary physicians should be set apart for their work as is the minister of the gospel. “The work of the true medical missionary is largely a spiritual work. It includes prayer and the laying on of hands; he therefore should be as sacredly set apart for his work as is the minister of the gospel. Those who are selected to act the part of missionary physicians, are to be set apart as such. This will strengthen them against the temptation to withdraw from the sanitarium work to engage in private practice.”³¹

Some have concluded from this counsel that physicians who work as missionaries should be ordained to be ministers. However, Ellen White did not use the term “ordination” but speaks a setting apart of this physician for a particular work. She gave two reasons why missionary physicians who do the work of the true medical missionary should be set apart. The first reason is because part of the true medical missionaries’ work “includes prayer and the laying on of hands,” they should be sacredly set apart for their work. The second reason was that the setting apart “will strengthen them against the temptation to withdraw from the sanitarium work to engage in private practice.”³² These reasons are quite different from those relating to the leadership roles associated with the work of elders and ministers that involve baptizing new believers, the general oversight of a church and keeping order, organizing and raising up churches, etc. On the contrary, this laying on of hands sets missionary physicians apart for involvement in true medical missionary work, healing patients and leading them to accept the Lord Jesus Christ, and assures the physicians of their need to be closely connected with the church instead of going into private practice.

Another of Ellen White counsels involves some women who should be set aside for a specific part-time work.

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 church officers or the 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.³³

³¹ Ellen G. White, Manuscript 5, 1908 in *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: *Review and Herald*, 1946), 546.

³² *Ibid.*, 546.

³³ Ellen G. White, “The Duty of the Minister and the People,” *Review and Herald*, July 9, 1895.

In this passage some have seen counsel that women should be ordained to the ministry. However, as in the case of missionary physicians, Ellen White did not use the word “ordination” but spoke about setting these women apart for a particular work or ministry. Here are some observations. These women are part-time workers who are appointed “to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor.” This appointment does not make them church officers or ministers because, as White suggests, “in some cases they will need to counsel with the church officers or the minister.” The church leaders are advised to set them apart to this specific work “by prayer and laying on of hands.” The purpose of this ceremony is that “this is another means of strengthening and building up the church.”³⁴ Again this ceremony is not ordination to one of the New Testament offices, but the laying on of hands sets them apart for a specific ministry that will strengthen the church.

These instances make it clear that the laying on of hands can be used to appoint church members to specific tasks or ministries, affirming the unique abilities, talents, or gifts God gave them, but should not be equated with ordination to a specific biblical office of leadership. This understanding of ordination is fully supported by the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White.

Ordination and authority

As we have seen above, ordination functioned throughout history as a means to set aside and appoint individuals to a specific biblical position of leadership. Serving in such a role, they are responsible to promote God’s mission, protect the believers from false teachings, and preserve order and harmony in the church. What kind of authority is associated with the ordination to these offices of leadership?

The authority of the twelve apostles and seventy disciples. Jesus appointed the twelve apostles and the seventy disciples. These ordinations gave them the authority to lead out in the first evangelistic mission to prepare the way for the acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah during the latter part of His ministry. During this mission they had authority to preach, heal the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons, and had power over the enemy (Matt. 10:7, 8; Luke 10:9, 17, 19). After Jesus’ ascension, the apostles led out in the establishment of new churches and ordained their leadership.

The authority of deacons. After Christ’s ascension, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the apostles set apart deacons in the Jerusalem church. Through this ordination to this newly established position of deacon, the church gave deacons authority and oversight over the secular business of the church, to solve the problem of the unfair treatment of the widows in the daily food distribution. As a result of the apostles’ delegating some of their responsibilities to deacons, the church prospered greatly. Here we see both God and the church working together in the selection and ordination of deacons to preserve order and harmony among the early believers.

³⁴ Ibid.

The authority of Paul and Barnabas. We find a similar cooperation between God and the local church in the ordination of Paul and Barnabas. God had already abundantly blessed Paul and Barnabas in their evangelistic work, yet they had never been formally ordained to the ministry. Now God was to send them on a dangerous mission to preach the gospel to the Gentile world steeped in idol worship. The ordinations of Paul and Barnabas were performed under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit in cooperation with the church, accompanied by fasting, prayer, and laying on of hands by the leaders of the church in Antioch (Acts 13:3, 4). This ordination service sent these workers out on their apostolic mission with the authority to preach the gospel in areas where the gospel was previously unknown. Ellen White explained the bestowal of authority as follows: “They were authorized by the church, not only to teach the truth, but to perform the rite of baptism and to organize churches, being invested with full ecclesiastical authority.”³⁵ This ordination “was a public recognition of their divine appointment to bear to the Gentiles the glad tidings of the gospel.”³⁶

Now Paul and Barnabas had the authority to organize congregations by ordaining elders in the newly established churches. The apostles appointed several elders in these churches (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim 5:17). This shows the wisdom of the apostles in appointing a team of elders to be responsible for the well being of a local church, and not putting one elder/bishop in charge of a church as is the case with the episcopal leadership model. That model developed during the second century, when everything began to center around one person, the bishop, and nothing could be done without his approval.

There are church organizations that teach that the laying on of hands gives one who is ordained special grace, virtue, holiness, and power. The Bible does not say anything about a special bestowal of power. The act of laying on of hands “was an acknowledged form of designation to an appointed office and a recognition of one's authority in that office. By it the seal of the church was set upon the work of God.”³⁷ In the setting apart of Paul and Barnabas there is no indication “that any virtue was imparted by the mere act of laying on of hands. There is only the simple record of their ordination and of the bearing that it had on their future work.”³⁸ The laying on of hands by the ministers of the church signified a request for a special blessing. Ellen White emphasized that the “ministers” in Antioch, by the act of the laying on of hands, “asked God to bestow His blessing upon the chosen apostles in their devotion to the specific work to which they had been appointed.”³⁹

The authority of Timothy. At his ordination Timothy received a gift that was necessary for his work in the ministry. The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, encouraging him to use his authority to appoint leaders in the churches who would meet God’s standards of leadership and who had proven to be successful leaders in their homes. In the context of

³⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 161.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

the perils of the last days, Paul gave Timothy the authority to “preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2). In this ministry, Timothy’s authority was solidly vested in Paul’s endorsement of his ministry and in the Scriptures, because “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16, 17).

The authority of ministers. The ordination of Timothy and Titus can be compared to the ordination of ministers who serve churches today, because their ministry was not confined to one church. Ministers who function as teachers of the word and doctrine have a special place in God’s church on earth. Ellen White states that they receive their authority from Christ: From “Christ’s ascension to the present day, men ordained of God, deriving their authority from Him, have become teachers of the faith. . . . Thus the position of those who labor in word and doctrine becomes very important.”⁴⁰ They receive the authority for their ministry from earlier teachers of the faith. She explained, “He has ordained that there should be a succession of men who derive authority from the first teachers of the faith for the continual preaching of Christ and Him crucified. The Great Teacher has delegated power to His servants.”⁴¹ This ordination has nothing to do with episcopal apostolic succession through the direct succession of the laying on of hands ceremonies. Ellen White simply meant that the authority of God’s servants is derived from God and the first teachers of the faith and is associated with faithfulness to the Word of God and His truth. True apostolic succession is a succession based on spiritual relationships, a life actuated by the apostles’ spirit and faith and their fidelity to the truth of Scripture. She explained,

Descent from Abraham was proved, not by name and lineage, but by likeness of character. So the apostolic succession rests not upon the transmission of ecclesiastical authority, but upon spiritual relationship. A life actuated by the apostles’ spirit, the belief and teaching of the truth they taught, this is the true evidence of apostolic succession. This is what constitutes men the successors of the first teachers of the gospel.⁴²

The authority of elders. The ordination to the office of elder or overseer gives persons who fulfill the biblical qualifications the authority to oversee and lead a local church and to ensure that order and harmony prevail. This authority is based on the apostolic counsels to Timothy while he was in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3-7) and to Titus while he was in Crete (Titus 1:10-16). These men were responsible for appointing elders with the proper biblical qualifications to restore harmony and order in churches where gospel disorder had arisen.

The authority of elders is based on the Scriptures and the ordination of that individual by the church. Ellen White gave insight into the authority and subsequent responsibilities of elders as overseers and rulers of the local church:

⁴⁰ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 4:393.

⁴¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 4:529.

⁴² Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 467.

First, elders have authority as under-shepherds with respect to the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4). They have been given the charge in 1 Pet. 5:2, 3: “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.” This means they are not “to drive the sheep” but to nurture, oversee, and be examples to the congregation. Ellen White cautioned elders to “act wisely in feeding the flock of God; for its prosperity much depends upon the quality of this food.”⁴³ In occupying “the position of under shepherds,” elders “are to exercise a watchful diligence over the Lord’s flock. This is not to be a lording, dictatorial vigilance. They are to encourage and strengthen.”⁴⁴

Second, elders have the authority and responsibility to educate or train members so they will use their talents and spiritual gifts. Ellen White wrote that elders “may plan wisely, and educate the individual members of the church to act their part in trading with their Lord’s talents. By a right use of their talents they may increase their efficiency in the cause of God. The church may be visited only occasionally by a minister, and yet be a growing church; for Jesus is our minister.”⁴⁵

Third, elders have the authority to make sure all members are proper stewards, paying tithes and offerings and visiting those who fail in their obligation to support the church financially. She warned, “it is the neglect of these plainly revealed duties that brings darkness upon the church. Let the elders and officers of the church follow the direction of the Sacred Word, and urge upon their members the necessity of faithfulness in the payment of pledges, tithes, and offerings.”⁴⁶ She saw this as such an important matter that she urged elders to visit members to accomplish this goal: “Elders of churches, do your duty. Labor from home to home, that the flock of God shall not be remiss in this great matter, which involves such a blessing or such a curse.”⁴⁷

Fourth, elders have the authority and duty to deal with erring members. Elders must look after weak and backsliding members to try to help them. However, when open sin appears in the church, elders have the scriptural authority to take care of it. Ellen White wrote, “Sin should be rebuked. Whatever opposition and trial might come to the elder of the church because of his faithfulness, he should not swerve from true principles.” Impartiality in this matter is of the highest order. She adds, “Sins should not, because of unsanctified preferences and sympathy, be lightly regarded in one man which would be condemned in another. This matter is one of great importance.” If the elder fails to act “God will hold him responsible for his brother’s unfaithfulness in office, and for the harm which will result to the church. He must keep himself pure by refusing to mingle with any unholy influence.”⁴⁸

⁴³ Ellen G. White, Ms 59, 1900, in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7:942.

⁴⁴ Ellen G. White, Ms 43, 1907, in *Manuscript Releases*, 5:451.

⁴⁵ Ellen G. White, “The Church Must Be Quickened,” *Review and Herald*, Jan. 17, 1893.

⁴⁶ Ellen G. White, “The Duty of Paying Tithe and Offerings,” *Review and Herald*, Dec. 17, 1889.

⁴⁷ Ellen G. White, *Testimony to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, 306; *Special Testimonies*, Series A, Number 7, 21.

⁴⁸ Ellen G. White to Elder Daniels and the Fresno Church, *Pamphlet* 28, 17; see also *Manuscript Releases*, 5:447, 448.

Fifth, elders need to use their authority given in God’s Word to uphold the standards of the church and respect its decisions. Ellen White lamented the lack of vitality in Adventist churches. The reason for this lack was that “the standard of the gospel ministry is lowered unto the dust.” The decline of these standards she attributed to “the elders of our churches and the ministers” who “have not all been as branches of the Living Vine, drawing nourishment from Christ; they are not rich in spiritual knowledge and heavenly wisdom, but are dry and Christless. . . . The churches would do far better without such elders and ministers.”⁴⁹ These leaders should respect and support the decisions of the church. She wrote, “Elders, local and traveling [ministers], are appointed by the church and by the Lord to oversee the church, to reprove, exhort, and rebuke the unruly and to comfort the feebleminded.” When the church has made a decision, the members should abide by it. All need to keep in mind that “there is no higher tribunal upon earth than the church of God. And if the members of the church will not submit to the decision of the church, and will not be counseled and advised by it, they cannot be helped.”⁵⁰

In the days of the Adventist pioneers, when they followed Jesus’ model of leadership in New Testament, the authority of the elders in the above areas became firmly established, and the church experienced its greatest growth. However, during the first half of the twentieth century, the leadership structure of the local church gradually began to change. The authority of the local elder was gradually taken over by a resident minister or “settled pastor,” a leadership model used by most non-Adventist churches. Ellen White voiced strong opposition to this trend, but without lasting effects.⁵¹ Nearly twenty years after her death, with the introduction of the first official Church Manual in 1932, the “settled pastor” leadership model became institutionalized. Now local elders were no longer in charge of the church but had become assistants to the pastor who had been given in charge of the operations of the local church.⁵² In addition, a church board made up of elders and non-ordained lay members (as a result making department heads ex-officio board members) replaced the authority of the board of elders. This means that the authority of the elders as overseers was greatly diminished.⁵³ If the Adventist church claims to follow the biblical standard for ordaining elders, it must restore the authority of elders in the local church, so strongly endorsed by Ellen G. White.

⁴⁹Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies*, Series A, Number 1b, 24, 25.

⁵⁰ Ellen G. White, Letter 5, 1863, in *Manuscript Releases*, 5:296.

⁵¹ Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, 419; “The Necessity of Connection with Christ,” *Review and Herald*, May 7, 1889; “Go Ye Into All the World,” *Review and Herald*, June 11, 1895; *Evangelism*, 383; *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:30, 7:18; “An Appeal to Our Ministers. Talk to Ministers,” *General Conference Bulletin*, April 16, 1901; “The Work in Greater New York,” *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, January 8, 1902; “The Workers Needed,” *Review and Herald*, June 30, 1904.

⁵² For the situation today, see *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, rev. ed. (Hagerstown, Md: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2010), 49, 137.

⁵³ P. Gerard Damsteegt, “Have Adventists Abandoned the Biblical Model of Leadership of the Local Church?” in *Here We Stand: Evaluating New Trends in the Church*, ed. S. Koranteng-Pipim (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Adventists Affirm, 2005), 643-691.

Toward a Theology of Ordination

Study of the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White reveals that ordination from God's perspective is a setting apart to a sacred office of leadership in the church. Individuals who qualify for the office of elder will need to meet the highest spiritual and leadership qualifications. Jesus was the one who instituted this service when He established the New Testament church. It is important to keep in mind that God calls certain individuals who meet the Scriptural qualifications. The local church's leaders can ordain such persons to the office of elder after a careful examination to see if that person meets the biblical qualifications for that office.

A biblical theology of ordination centers on the concept that Christ, the Son of God, is the Head of the church at large. It is He who calls the individual to serve in the sacred office of leadership in the local church in compliance with the Scriptural qualifications. Christ does not call novices or persons without successful proven leadership in their homes to lead the larger congregational church. When the person meets the biblical qualifications, the previously ordained elders and the minister of the local church set the person apart through an ordination service, with a similar simplicity to that revealed in the New Testament. This service is performed by the church and is for the benefit of the church. After this service the person who has been ordained functions as a representative of the local church and the world church. The ministry and responsibility of the local elder is confined to the local church.

Following the practice in the New Testament, those who participate in laying hands on the one to be ordained are ordained ministers and also the elders of the local church. Those who lead out in this service represent the church, not themselves. The nature of the ordination service does not have a sacramental significance, as in some churches. Seventh-day Adventists consider the ordination service as a solemn and important event that sets apart and inducts that person into a sacred biblical leadership position. It confirms God's call of the individual and puts the church's seal of approval on the candidate. Now the candidate is officially invested by the church with full authority to be a spiritual leader in the local church, authority which includes the privilege of preaching, teaching, nurturing the faith of believers, opposing false teachers and teachings, reproofing and disciplining, and preserving harmony in the church.

When a local elder has served successfully for some time and received additional ministerial training, the church at large may call the elder to serve in a wider capacity, giving him responsibilities beyond the local church that include overseeing several churches. Before this assignment to larger responsibilities, ordained ministers will again evaluate the candidate's lifestyle and experience in the light of Bible qualifications. Upon a successful evaluation and clear evidence of the Holy Spirit in his ministry, life, and family, he will again be set apart through ordination, but now for a wider ministry. Upon completion of this ordination service he will be invested with full ecclesiastical authority that includes, besides the work of a local elder, the authority to be responsible in the training and oversight of several churches, baptizing new

believers, and the planting and organizing of new churches. In addition to a local geographical region, this ordination allows the minister to serve the worldwide community of Seventh-day Adventists.

The ordination service has set a person apart both for leadership and service. In this we see the purpose of Christ's ministry. Christ is the Head of the church, which means He is the One who leads the church with firmness and determination to victory in the great controversy with Satan. Yet, in revealing God's character, Jesus demonstrated that God's view of leadership involves service and not a desire for greatness and rulership (Luke 22:25-27). Jesus' model of leadership is not what is common in the world, but that which characterizes the kingdom of God. As Son of God, He came to serve by giving His life for many; so we are to reveal His love by serving Him with self-sacrificing lives for the salvation of others (John 3:16). Paul indicates that each member receives a gift from the Holy Spirit for the good of the church (1 Cor. 12:7) and for its unity (1 Cor. 12:12-27). The gift received is not for boasting but "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12-13).

Leaders need to remember that the authority they bear and exercise is delegated authority. Those who exercise this authority do so on behalf of the church, and they are accountable for its proper use for the church they serve.

Finally, there ought to be a harmonious cooperation between the ordained leadership and the congregation. Paul writes that elders who lead well should be appreciated: "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in word and doctrine" (1 Tim. 5:17). Members need to "recognize those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" (1 Thess. 5:13). Church members are instructed to submit to "everyone who helps in the work and labors" in behalf of the church (1 Cor 16:16). The submission to its leaders is based on their care for the salvation of the members: "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account" (Heb. 13:17).

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