

MRS. WHITE'S MESSAGES ON
WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

By
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A recently published book carries the title, "What Ellen White Has Meant to Me." All of its twenty nine contributors are men. One might comment that it is good that the men of the church are paying tribute to the most prominent woman of the church. But limiting the authorship to men does raise some interesting questions. Is it a way of setting a dynamic woman apart from all other women of the church? Does it indicate that she is not woman but symbol? Is it that she cares nothing for women in her messages to the church? Or are men paying no heed to what she says about women?

It is our practice in the Seventh-day Adventist church to try to direct and justify our religious behavior by reference to the Bible and to the writings of Ellen G. White. On questions of organization and practice, as distinct from doctrine, we are more likely to rely on Mrs. White, as closer to and more familiar with modern church problems. Because Mrs. White was a woman as well as a pioneer in the Advent movement, we might expect that she should have something to say about women in the church.

But in interpreting what Mrs. White has said, we should proceed with some caution, asking ourselves, What is the context of the message? To whom was it written? Some of the messages are specific to individuals

or to designated groups. Some messages are to the church in general. Why was it written? Was it an enunciation of general principles? Or was it advice on a particular, possibly limited problem?

We should also ask about the cultural context and what point in history a message was written. It is my hypothesis, not yet fully documented, that the messages of 1840 show certain characteristics that are not found in the messages of 1910. This does not mean that they are contradictory, but that they reflect a different cultural context, for society changed a great deal between 1840 and 1910. We might note in passing that society has changed even more between 1910 and 1973. We also need to remember that a person grows intellectually and spiritually through the years. While a prophet's messages may be consistent over his lifetime, yet they will show the maturing that comes from experience.

Although Mrs. White pointed out the importance of reaching toward ideals, she was definitely a practical person. We should compare one message with another and ask, To what situation was she addressing this point? How does the situation differ as compared to other messages?

Too often, it seems, we use both the Bible and the writings of Mrs. White to "prove a point." Or we use a passage as a hammer to enforce conformity to some position. As we consider what Mrs. White has said to, for, and about women in the church, I hope that we can instead remember that she did not use the words this way herself, or recommend that others do it. She saw herself as a messenger to the church, not its dictator. And while she acknowledged herself as the messenger, she did not claim to be the only messenger, nor did she expect to make all the decisions for the church. She expected others to think, study, and act for themselves.

MESSAGES CONCERNING WOMEN

To look in the index to the writings of Mrs. White we would conclude that she had written a great number of messages concerning women. But when we actually start checking the references, we find that many are duplicates, the result of producing compilations on various topics of interest to particular groups. There are several messages, but hardly an undue proportion of the total. One might even expect more, since Mrs. White was a woman.

Messages to women

Many of the messages are directed to women. Some are specific, written to particular individuals, and some are to the women of the church in general. From an examination of the content of these messages, I feel that we can classify most of them into three types: suggestions on behavior or deportment, advice on the homemaker role, and calls to wider Christian service.

The theme of the messages on deportment is that the Seventh-day Adventist woman should be a model of Christian modesty, that she should reflect credit on the church by exhibiting the Christian virtues. (Cf. Welfare Ministry, 157). Most of these messages state principles; some apply the principles to specific cases where there is danger of wrong conduct. The principles still hold for the women of the church, though some of the applications might need updating in terms of current social expectations and customs.

The theme of the messages on homemaking is that motherhood is the highest sphere of women and therefore deserves their dedicated and edu-

cated attention. (Cf. Welfare Ministry, 158). Many of the messages are practical advice on better homemaking skills and family relations. The principles given are still valid; most of the specific advice can be translated from horse-and-buggy to motorcar or jet plane. In any event, both principles and advice were hardly original either then or now. But one interesting thing about the messages on homemaking is that although Mrs. White elevated this position even above the work of men, she did not consider it the only role open to women. In fact, she points out that it is the duty of the Christian woman to widen her sphere beyond her family, and to make time for work outside the home by greater efficiency within it. For example:

The work you are doing to help our sisters feel their individual accountability to God is a good and necessary work. Long has it been neglected. But when this work is laid out in clear, simple, definite lines, we may expect that home duties, instead of being neglected, will be done much more intelligently. (Evangelism, 461)

We have no right, my Christian sisters, to waste our time, and give example to others who are less able than we to waste their time and energies upon needless ornaments, upon dress or furniture, or to indulge in superfluities in food. We have religious duties to perform, and if we neglect these duties, and give our time to needless things, we will dwarf the intellect and separate the affections from God. The Author of our existence has claims upon our time and our money. (Welfare Ministry, 148)

Intelligent Christian women may use their talents to the very highest account. . . . Wives and mothers should in no case neglect their husbands and children, but they can do much without neglecting home duties, and all have not these responsibilities. (Welfare Ministry, 164)

Some can do more than others, but all can do something. Women should not feel that they are excused because of their domestic cares. They should become intelligent as to how they can work most successfully and methodically in bringing souls to Christ. (Welfare Ministry, 165)

The theme of the messages on service further enlarges on the woman's responsibility to the church and her society and the whole world. It is the messages in this area that are of particular interest in providing guiding principles on the question of whether or not to make full use

of the talents of women through ordination or whether full use can be made without ordination. In these messages, Mrs. White points out the importance of the work that women can do in bringing the Christian message to families, through Christian help work and through Bible studies. For example:

The Lord has a work for women as well as for men. They may take their places in His work at this crisis, and He will work through them. If they are imbued with a sense of their duty, and labor under the influence of the Holy Spirit, they will have just the self-possession required for this time. The Saviour will reflect upon these self-sacrificing women the light of His countenance, and will give them a power that exceeds that of men. They can do in families a work that men cannot do, a work that reaches the inner life. They can come close to the hearts of those whom men cannot reach. (Welfare Ministry, 145)

Sisters, we may do a noble work for God if we will. Woman does not know her power. God did not intend that her capabilities should be all absorbed in questioning: What shall I eat? What shall I drink? and wherewithal shall I be clothed? There is a higher purpose for woman, a grander destiny. She should develop and cultivate her powers, for God can employ them in the great work of saving souls from eternal ruin. (Welfare Ministry, p. 145)

We greatly need consecrated women who, as messengers of mercy, shall visit the mothers and the children in their homes, and help them in the everyday household duties, if need be, before beginning to talk to them regarding the truth for this time. You will find that by this method you will have souls as the result of your ministry. (Evangelism, 459)

The individual work held up in these messages might or might not require ordination. For women it certainly never has received this recognition. However, the minister of the local church is also involved in some of the same work. And he has more authority in doing it, because he is ordained.

But while Mrs. White places great emphasis on this personal work for women, she does not ignore public ministry as a possibility. Instead, she commends the women who have moved in this direction. A passage which shows her counsel to women in public work is this:

Teach this, my sister. You have many ways opened before you. Address the crowd whenever you can; hold every jot of influence you can by any association that can be made the means of introducing the leaven to the meal. Every man and every woman has a work to do for the Master. Personal consecration and sanctification to God will accomplish, through the most simple methods, more than the most imposing display. (Review and Herald, May 9, 1899)

Messages about women

Women are the subject of a number of messages. Probably the majority of these deal with woman's place in the home. Another group of messages concern woman's place in the church and its institutional work. A third group concern her place in society and secular concerns.

Many of the messages about the home plead for better treatment of women, for giving them a more elevated position in the family, and for educating girls in homemaking and child care. There are also messages about the health of the mother and her responsibility for the health of the family. Examples of such passages are:

Many who consider it necessary for a son to be trained with reference as his own future maintenance seem to consider it entirely optional with herself whether or not their daughter is educated to be independent and self-supporting. She usually learns little at school which can be put to practical use in earning her daily bread; and receiving no instruction at home in the mysteries of the kitchen and domestic life, she grows up utterly useless, a burden upon her parents . . .

A woman who has been taught to take care of herself is also fitted to take care of others. She will never be a drag in the family or in society. When fortune frowns, there will be a place for her somewhere, a place where she can earn an honest living and assist those who are dependent upon her. Woman should be trained to some business whereby she can gain a livelihood if necessary. Planning over other honorable employments, every girl should learn to take charge of the domestic affairs of home, should be a cook, a housekeeper, a seamstress. She should understand all those things which it is necessary that the mistress of a house should know, whether her family are rich or poor. Then, if reverses come, she is prepared for any emergency; she is, in a manner, independent of circumstances. (The Adventist Home, 91)

Our sisters generally have a hard time with their increasing families and their unappreciated trials, I have so longed for women who could be educated to help our sisters rise from their discouragement and feel that they could do a work for the Lord. This is bringing rays of sunshine into their own lives, which are reflected into the hearts of others. God will bless you and all who unite with you in this grand work. (Welfare Ministry, 144)

We may safely say that the dignity and importance of woman's mission and distinctive duties are of a more sacred and holy character than the duties of man . . .
Let woman realize the sacredness of her work and, in the strength and fear of God, take up her mission. (Welfare Ministry, 145)

The messages to the church in general about women are also concerned with the treatment of women, giving them responsibility, and paying them adequately for their work in the church and its various organizations.

Examples of these statements are:

Intelligent women, if truly converted, can act a part in this work of holding Bible classes. There is a wide field of service for women as well as for men. (Evangelism, 474)

Select women who will act an earnest part. The Lord will use intelligent women in the work of teaching. And let none feel that these women, who understand the Word, and who have ability to teach, should not receive remuneration for their labors. They should be paid as verily as are their husbands. There is a great work for women to do in the cause of present truth. Through the exercise of womanly tact and a wise use of their knowledge of Bible truth, they can remove difficulties that our brethren cannot meet. (Evangelism, 491)

If a woman is appointed by the Lord to do a certain work, her work is to be estimated according to its value. Every laborer is to receive his or her just due.

It may be thought to be a good plan to allow persons to give talent and earnest labor to the work of God, while they draw nothing from the treasury. But this is making a difference, and selfishly withholding from such workers their due. God will not put His sanction on any such plan. (Evangelism, 491)

I wish to create a fund for the payment of these devoted women who are the most useful workers in giving Bible readings. I am also led to say that we must educate more workers to give Bible readings. (Evangelism, 477)

The tithe should go to those who labor in word and doctrine, be they men or women. (Evangelism, 492)

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. (Evangelism, 493)

Many things connected with different churches are left undone that women, if properly instructed, could attend to. Our sisters might serve as church clerks, and the church business would not be so sadly neglected, There are many other offices connected with the cause of God which our sisters are better qualified to fill than our brethren, and in which they might do efficient service. (Welfare Ministry, 147)

Sister R and Sister W are doing just as efficient work as the ministers; and some meetings when the ministers are all called away, Sister W takes the Bible and addresses the congregation. (Evangelism, 473)

Messages which deal with the place of women in general society take two main forms. First is related to the place in the church: What service does the Christian woman owe society? Second is her relationship to secular matters, including politics. Some of these passages are relevant to our discussion or ordination because of the way they touch on women's public life. Examples are:

The Lord instructed me that our sisters who have received a training that has fitted them for positions of responsibility, are to serve with faithfulness and discernment in their calling, using their influence wisely, and, with their brethren in the faith, obtaining an experience that will fit them for still greater usefulness. (Medical Ministry, 60)

Our sisters have been too willing to excuse themselves from bearing responsibilities which require thought and close application of the mind; yet this is the very discipline they need to perfect Christian experience. (Christian Service, 29)

There should be at our sanitariums intelligent men and women who can instruct in Christ's methods of ministry. (9 Testimonies, 176)

THE CONTEXT OF THE MESSAGES ON WOMEN

Proper interpretation of anyone's message depends on getting it into the appropriate context. This is particularly important when one is not directly conversing with the speaker or able to ask for clarification. There are three types of context that seem to me to be especially important in the interpretation of the passages dealing with the place of women in the church: (1) the values and goals for the church as Mrs. White saw them, (2) the cultural milieu in which she lived and wrote, and (3) the historical events which might have affected women both within and outside the church. I am not attempting to go into depth on any of these, but only to indicate what may affect interpretation.

Values and goals

Mrs. White was active in the "advent movement" almost from the beginning, and she was actually still a child at her first contact with the messages proclaiming the immediate coming of Jesus. The goal of this movement was to prepare a people to meet the Lord--not sometime, but right away. For those who threw themselves wholeheartedly into the work of the movement, as she did, all goals and values were subordinated to the one of warning the world and getting themselves ready for the coming kingdom. The early writings of Mrs. White, and of other pioneers of the movement reflect how this single-minded dedication really fulfils Galatians 3:28: it erased the differences between Jew and Gentile, bond and free, male and female.

As the time set for the return of Jesus came and went, and the movement had to change direction, there was a modification of goals. Not that the goal of warning the world and preparing a people was discarded, or that the value placed on Christian duty as opposed to secular pleasures was rejected. But the loss of the immediacy of a set date meant certain adjustments. There was not only time but necessity to get organized if the rest of the world was to be reached. The stage of "popular excitement" of the movement began winding down following the disappointment of 1844, and virtually ended with the organization of conferences a few years later.

The goal of warning the world actually took on a much richer meaning through the years. It was no longer simply, Get ready! Rather, it included an orientation to the needs of the "whole man." Bodies were to be healed and ill health prevented--as part of Christian commitment. The poor were to be uplifted and educated--as part of the gospel commission. The protestant ethic, or puritan ethic, with its emphasis on work and thrift, was reemphasized. But most important, perhaps, organization itself climbed to a high place in the scale of values. And the combination of a high value on the traditional protestant virtues and a high value on doing things "decently and in order" also put a high value on orderly family life. Certainly we should note the change in the messages through this time as it affected women in the church.

Cultural milieu

Most important aspects of the cultural milieu with regard to our subject are the roles that women were assigned in contemporary society, and the two most relevant role patterns were those connected with the family and the church.

During all of the period in which Mrs. White wrote, the patriarchal family pattern was the norm in the United States (and the rest of the world). By the end of her lifetime the equalitarian family was beginning to appear. But legally, woman's status in the family was inferior. American women in general have always been in a much more favored position in the family than their counterparts elsewhere, partly because of the original scarcity of women in the new country, partly because of the need for both their childbearing capacities and their work potential in pioneer agriculture, yet they did not have equality. In the latter part of the nineteenth century victorian ideas on family life--very patriarchal, very inhibited--dominated the American family scene. Mrs. White's messages on the roles of women within the family are a corrective to some of the abuses and excesses within the family in her time, and an attempt to show the true importance of women's work.

At the same time educational opportunities for women were increasing, and also work opportunities. Women were taking more part in politics, including radical politics, throughout the lifetime of Mrs. White. Their contributions encompassed antislavery work, temperance work, and also attempts to gain suffrage for women. A few improvements in legal status were coming about, and consequently in economic position. Many of these changes merited attention in her messages, and she was usually opposed to radicalism or other unnecessary militancy, favoring instead more gradual reform and education.

Social movements

The advent movement was only one of several social movements which began in the early nineteenth century, and of course there have been other social movements that have started since that time. In considering the messages Mrs. White has left us both to and about women, it is instructive to consider two types of context. One is the stage of the Adventist movement at the time a message was given, and the other is contemporaneous movements and what effect they may have had.

In the first stage of a social movement, classically analyzed as the "unrest stage," anyone who is touched by the issue which initiates the unrest may join the movement. The important thing at this stage is to have as many bodies as possible agitating for change. While powerful men are important, still the indirect power exercised by women throughout history (through their husbands, brother, fathers or sons) also makes them valuable. As the movement moves into the second stage, "popular excitement," numbers are even more important. Here women have their greatest freedom. The leader of this stage is the prophet, a non-organizational, non-authoritative--but powerful--role. This kind of leadership is open to women on almost the same basis as men. In this stage, women may almost reach equality with men, even in a society which does not grant equality in ordinary social life. Most social movements have had influential women among the leadership, and outspoken women among the followers, during this stage. Certainly this is true in the second stage of the Adventist movement. Not only was Ellen White the prophet at the time, but other women were taking an active role in shaping the direction of the movement.

As a movement goes into the third stage ("formalization"), it begins to organize. That is, it begins to set up statuses and roles and arrange

them into hierarchies and formal patterns. And most movements, to make themselves more acceptable to society, and also because they may have no other organizational model, will use organizational patterns similar to what are already found in society. If the society is basically male-dominated and patriarchal, the organization will grow in that direction. For a while women will still play a fairly prominent part in the movement, but a declining one, for as formal statuses are designated, authority connects with them. Women are not assigned, and are not permitted to achieve, statuses with real authority. Ordination is a recognition of status during this stage in a religious movement. Since by custom women are not ordained, they are denied true authority. They are encouraged to labor for the movement, especially in personal ways, with families, but having no status they have no authority really even to direct their own work. They may achieve some personal power through doing a good job, but this is strictly individual. Mrs. White was attempting in some of her messages to gain more recognition for this work as personal missionaries to families.

Another change that comes in gradually as the movement goes from stage 2 to stage 3 is the way in which new members enter the movement and the subsequent organization. Accretions in membership in stage 2 are adult conversion almost entirely. One must be a "true believer" to get into a developing movement, especially a radical or unpopular one. Even children who do join do so as little adults, converted from their former ways. People are not born into a movement in its early stages. But as it begins to get organized, in stages 3 and 4 ("formalization" and "institutionalization") members may be born into the movement and educated to accept it. While in a religious movement that has institutionalized into a church

there may still be a rite of baptism for those born into the group, this baptism is really a confirmation rather than a recognition of conversion. So in stages 3 and 4 the family becomes an important source of membership, and the organization pays considerable attention to proper family life to assure that the potential members will be properly trained for the group. There is still a welcome for the adult convert, but much of the resources of the organization will be spent on "growing" the membership.

This change in emphasis on woman's contribution is important in interpreting any messages concerning women given during the course of the movement. During the popular excitement stage, the urgency of a movement allows or even demands that the involved women not spend much of their energy on home and family. Such allocation of their time and dedication will not be defined during this stage as neglect of family, but simply a reordering of priorities. But as the movement formalizes and institutionalizes, this same behavior on the part of women becomes deviant. Priorities revert again to family first, other activities next. The experience of Mrs. White herself, in her own relation to movement and to family, illustrates this redefinition of the roles of women.

Concurrent social movements are also important as context for the messages to and about women in the church, for there is some interaction between movements going on at the same time. In fact, people may be members of more than one movement if the two are related or at least not contradictory. Since several of the nineteenth century movements had goals of greater freedom for the individual, the relationship of each to women is relevant. Women were prominent in all stages of the temperance movement, the suffrage movement, the antislavery movement, other religious movements, and various health and diet reform movements. And as in present women's liberation activities, they took radical as well as moderate

positions. These factors should be kept in mind as we interpret the messages Mrs. White gave about women, and especially about their relation to society.

INTERPRETATION FOR THE PRESENT

Keeping in mind the context in which the messages were given, how can we make use of them in our time? What general principles on women can we draw from the various messages?

We might summarize the content of the messages this way:

1. Women should not neglect their families in order to serve outside the home--but neither should they so pamper their families that they have no time or energy for wider service.

2. Women should receive the full amount of education of which they are capable, the same as men, and are just as responsible for the use of their abilities.

3. Women who have ability for public work should take (not just be given) every opportunity to do their part for the church in this way.

4. Women are especially valuable in personal work with families, particularly with other women and children. They should be encouraged to devote themselves to this pastoral counseling phase of the ministry in a more professional way.

5. Women should be paid on the basis of the work they do, not on the basis of their gender.

Perhaps a question far more pertinent to our present discussion than any historical one is this, What would Mrs. White say on the subject of the place of women in the church if she were living now?

This is a difficult question to answer, because we have a tendency to simplify the past as we look back at it, while we see the enormous complexity of the present. We must remember that life at any period of history is complex. But even though complexity always exists, conditions may be very different.

But if we take into account the different conditions and the variant types of complexity, it seems to me that this summary of her messages shows that Mrs. White puts herself consistently on the side of more responsible roles and equality of opportunity for women. In our present state of church organization it appears impossible to approach these ideals without ordaining women to church office and the ministry on the same basis as men.