

POSITION SUMMARY #3

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POSITION SUMMARY #3

INTRODUCTION

Our Church has spent significant time formally discussing the question of ordination to the pastoral ministry and its relationship to gender. After a year and a half, having completed its efforts and reaching a consensus on a general theology of ordination, the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) has not reached a consensus on the question of whether it is appropriate for women to fill the office of ordained minister. Despite using similar hermeneutical methods, and appealing to Scripture rather than to human cultural norms, members of the Committee have reached widely divergent conclusions.

We are now faced with the question of how to move forward as a church, given the existing diversity on the underlying questions. What follows is an attempt to outline a way forward that takes seriously the main concerns identified thus far, while preserving the principle of the authority of Scripture and Church unity.

The Bible calls every Christian to mutual submission, “submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God” (Eph 5:21). By its very nature, mutual submission involves a certain sacrifice by all, for the greater good and unity of all. With the guidance of the Spirit, however, we believe that the central concerns within the various positions in the ordination discussion can be affirmed without sacrificing principle, while still maintaining the unity of the body of Christ.

We begin with a brief overview of our main theological principles, on which we build the justification for our proposal moving forward. These principles are set out in nine paragraphs below, with scriptural references to support the theological points.¹ The second and largest part of this paper outlines our proposal for moving forward, and includes a biblical-theological exposition, which demonstrates the scriptural foundations for a key point in our proposal. The final part of this paper draws conclusions from the biblical exegesis and applies them to our current situation.

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

During the course of the TOSC meetings, we heard many papers offering a variety of views on the questions of ordination to the gospel ministry. While we agreed with some points made by both groups, we found ourselves unable to fully commit to either because of

¹ A fuller discussion of these and other scriptural references relevant to the moderate theological position can be found in a document entitled “Minority Report on Ministry, Ordination, and Gender of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary.” This is available at the website www.freedom-law.com.

differences on key points. Thus, we feel the need to set out our own statement of how we view the main biblical and theological issues on the ordination question.

NATURE OF THE TRINITY

We believe that Christ is co-existent and co-equal with the Father and the Spirit from eternity. Thus, we do not believe in the eternal subordination of the Son, as some presenters opposed to women's ordination have proposed (Deut 6:4; Isa 9:6; Mic 5:2; Matt 28:19; John 8:58; John 17:24; Phil 2:6; Heb 1:8-12; 2 Cor. 13:14).

PRE-FALL ROLES FOR MAN AND WOMAN

We believe there existed meaningful roles for men and women before the Fall that, while not hierarchical, did involve responsibilities for distinct, but complementary, servant-leadership roles. We do not believe in the idea of male headship prior to the Fall, insofar as that involved "authority over" Eve (Gen 2:15-25; 3:9, 16-20; 1 Cor 11:8; 15:22).

POST-FALL FAMILY HEADSHIP

After the Fall, God instituted a male headship role in the family that, while loving, self-sacrificing, and service oriented, gives the male an oversight responsibility for his family that is of continuing validity (Gen 3:16; 18:12, 19; 1 Pet 3:1, 6; Eph 5:22-24).

MALE ECCLESIASTICAL LEADERSHIP

We believe that there is a biblical model of male ecclesiological *leadership* that has validity across time and culture. We see this in Paul's invocation of the creation order and the Fall in discussing the office of elder, in the predominate fact of male institutional spiritual leadership in the OT, in the actions of Christ in choosing twelve male disciples, and in the NT examples of apostles and elders (1 Tim 2:12-13; Num 3:10, 38; Matt 27:55; Acts 1:21-23; Titus 1:6-7).

CHRIST IS HEAD OF THE CHURCH

There is no basis, we believe, to suggest that men have a general *headship* in the church, exercising husbandly or paternal authority over women or anyone else. Only Christ is head in the church. His statement that we should "call no man father" (Matt 23:9) was intended to prevent a human, paternal headship in the church (1 Cor 11:3; Eph 1:22, 23).

GIFTS VERSUS OFFICES

We see an important distinction between *spiritual gifts*, which are given by sovereign

action of the Holy Spirit, where gender considerations are not a biblical concern, and church *offices*, chosen by the church membership according to biblical qualifications, and where gender is mentioned, such as the office of elder (1 Cor 12:4-11; Eph 4:11, 12; Acts 6:5-7; 1 Tim 2:12; 3:1, 2; Titus 1:6-8).

MALE SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

We believe that Paul's statements about a preferred role for a male in the office of elder (the equivalent of our ordained minister) are a functional, ecclesiastical norm meant to further church order, discipline, and mission. We view, however, the gender qualification of elder as one characteristic among many, and as not absolute over all the others. We do not think we should make this point of ecclesiastical order paramount over other more important doctrinal concerns, such as the mission and unity of the body of Christ (1 Tim 2:12-14; 3:1-7; 1 Cor 11:2-5; Titus 2:2-8).

THE ROLE OF TRAJECTORY ARGUMENTS

We believe that positions based on trajectory arguments can be biblically valid. For example, while Scripture regulates slavery to restrain its evils, no Scripture asserts that slavery is part of a divinely created order or integral to the nature of humanity. However, unlike slavery, maleness as a qualification for the office of elder is derived from Paul's inspired understanding and teaching regarding the creation, human nature, the Fall, and the incarnation (Gen 1:27; Gal 3:28; Titus 2:9, 10; 1 Tim 2:12-14; 1 Cor 11:3-5).

HERMENEUTICAL CONCERNS

We believe that the hermeneutical methods that some who support women's ordination use to exegete the New Testament gender texts could create problems in dealing with passages regarding sexual standards. Nevertheless, we believe the issue of maleness as one qualification for ordination is not in the category of moral absolutes, such as the Ten Commandments, or consistent and oft-repeated biblical moral commands, including those dealing with sexual behavior (Ex 20:14; Lev 18:1-30; 20:10-21; Acts 15:28, 29; 1 Tim 2:12, 13; Rom 1:18-27; Gal. 3:28).

A PROPOSED WAY FORWARD

As a practical way forward, we propose that the World Church affirm three biblical principles as a basis for denominational policy on ministry, male and female roles, and the office of ordained minister. These are linked because, as TOSC discussions made clear, the three issues are interrelated. The first two principles build on arguments made by others in TOSC, but the final principle is our unique contribution. For that reason, it is set out at some length, including an exposition of its biblical basis.

EXPANSION OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN MINISTRY

We believe that the best way forward is to start with and build on those things that all positions have in common. In TOSC, a consensus has emerged on the vital importance of empowering Adventist women everywhere, regardless of ordination, to greater involvement in a wide range of ministries. Initiatives both affirming women in ministry and supporting them with education and resources would begin to rectify our failure to do so over much of the last century, in disregard of prophetic counsel.²

MALE RESPONSIBILITY AND LEADERSHIP IN THE HOME

We affirm the concept of male responsibility and spiritual leadership in the home. Most members of TOSC agree that, after the Fall and the entry of sin, men were given a special role of responsibility in the home. “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the Savior of the body” (Eph 5:23).

There is ongoing discussion over how to understand the extent and significance of this leadership role. There is a generally shared view, however, that married men have a responsibility to care for and support their families that has been overlooked and is being neglected in many parts of the world. This is an opportune moment to define this role with care, stressing that it should be a loving, self-sacrificing, servant-leadership like Christ’s. “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph 5:25).

Such leadership in the home should never be used to oppress or abuse. Rather, all men should strive for the ideal of partnership and consensus decision-making, and should provide spiritual leadership within the family, rather than devolving this to their wives.

Wives should respect and encourage their husbands in this role of spiritual leadership and responsibility. The Church should provide for more education and training programs to help educate men in their roles as caregivers, fathers, and spiritual leaders, enabling them to learn better how to model the leadership of Christ in their families.

THE OFFICE OF ELDER, THE CRITERIA OF GENDER, AND THE DIVINE COMMAND/IDEAL DISTINCTION

Now we come to the most challenging issue: the question of how to understand the roles of men and women in relation to the office of pastoral ministry. We do not believe that the headship of the man in the home extends without limits to the Church. Such a position would imply a role of authority for all men in the Church over all women. We simply do not find support for this in the Bible.

² E.g., “If there were twenty women where now there is one, who would make this holy mission their cherished work,” Ellen White wrote in 1879. “We should see many more converted to the truth. The refining, softening influence of Christian women is needed in the great work of preaching the truth.” (Ev 471-472; see also DA 568.)

Indeed, to the contrary, Christ commands that we “call no man father,” which we read as denying to any human a paternal role of authority in the church (Matt 23:9). Quite simply, the only “head” the Bible identifies in the church is Christ (Matt 23:10; Eph 5:23). For this reason, it would go against our Protestant, biblical heritage, we believe, to identify any merely human figure as fulfilling a headship role in the church.

Still, the Bible does identify more limited roles of leadership (of representative and delegated authority) to help provide order in the church, the primary one being the office of elder (1 Tim 3:1-7). One of the several stated criteria of that office is maleness (1 Tim 2:11-15; 3:1-7). This gender preference is not, in our view, an implementation of “male headship” in the church. The authority of the elder in the church is different both in kind and in extent from that of the father in the home. However, both leadership roles are based on similar principles, rooted in Creation and the Fall; this emerges from Paul’s discussions of leadership in home and church (1 Cor 11; 1 Tim 2).

Nevertheless, we are persuaded that the Bible teaches that the office of ordained minister (the functional equivalent of the New Testament office of elder),³ with its gatekeeping responsibility in the church—overseeing the implementation of ecclesiastical standards and discipline in relation to all members—should ideally be carried out by men. This does not prevent a woman from preaching, teaching, and otherwise providing both spiritual counsel and leadership in a church setting. But maleness is a stated qualification for the office of ordained minister, and while an important quality (cf. 1 Tim 2: 11-14), it is only one among a number of qualifications. We see no basis in the text for treating this one qualification in an absolute fashion, or as outweighing all the other criteria combined.

This understanding of the relative importance of the gender criteria is based on the difference between 1) God’s absolute moral commands and eternal truths, and 2) His ideals⁴ for organizing His people. The former include the Ten Commandments, the pillar doctrines of Christianity, and consistently articulated scriptural limits on personal moral behavior. The latter, we believe, deal with ritual, ceremonial, organizational, or legal practices and precepts, whose intention is to bring order to the community of believers, safeguard the identity of God’s people, and enhance the Church’s mission. Such ideals are important, but because they have an ecclesiological function and a missional purpose, the Bible indicates that they can in certain circumstances be modified and adapted. This distinction between eternal commands or truths and ecclesiological ideals can provide, we believe, a key insight that can help the Church move forward in unity, if not uniformity, on this question.

3 Cf. “Consensus Statement on a Seventh-day Adventist Theology of Ordination” (TOSC, voted July 23, 2013).

4 Using the word “ideal” to describe these continuing organizational norms does not mean to imply that any deviation from this standard will necessarily be inferior and secondary. The reality is that an ideal may be varied because specific circumstances mean that another approach may be better or even necessary for some period. Thus, the deviation from the ideal becomes itself a situational ideal, and accordingly should not be considered inferior or secondary. A profound example of this is the incarnation of Christ, which was a situational response to the non-ideal circumstances of the entrance of sin and the necessity of a redeemer.

When the adaptation of a divine ideal occurs in Scripture to meet local needs, foster mission, or promote unity it usually occurs in one of three ways:

- i. God Himself endorses the adaptation
- ii. A biblical prophet confirms it
- iii. The community of believers—the Church—agrees upon this variation from the divine pattern

It is crucial to emphasize that adaptation in Scripture is not the norm, that it never applies to God’s absolute moral commands and eternal truths, and that He allows it only under certain circumstances. But within these limits, there are a number of instances in the Bible where God allows for the modification of His initial plans for the Israelites in relation to matters of leadership and/or gender, such as we are currently discussing. A brief review of a few examples of such adaptations would help us understand the important distinction between commands and ideals.

None of these episodes are directly analogous to the situation in which we currently find ourselves, and they should not be scrutinized for exact parallels with the ordination question. Rather, these stories all illustrate two simple, yet critical points. The first is that a distinction exists between God’s absolute moral commands and eternal truths on the one hand, and divine organizational and ecclesiastical norms on the other. The second point is that God at times allows for variations in these organizational ideals in response to the circumstances, needs, and even desires of His people. How this happens differs from case to case, and thus a review of a number of these stories is important to achieve a balanced overview of how this operates scripturally.

A king in Israel. The Scripture makes it apparent that God’s ideal plan for the nation of Israel was not that of kingship (1 Sam 8:10-20). He wanted them to be led by a combination of prophets, judges, priests, and elders. Still, when the time came that Israel desired a king, God accommodated this desire, even though the choice was prompted by the surrounding society and culture. “The Lord answered [Samuel], “Listen to them and give them a king” (1 Sam 8:23).

At that point, not only did the kingship become acceptable to God, the king himself became the Lord’s anointed, literally, when Samuel poured oil on Saul (1 Sam 10:1). Thereafter, kings were frequently anointed by prophets or high priests as a sign of divine appointment (1 Sam 16:13; 1 Kgs 1:39, 45; 2 Kgs 9:1-6; 2 Chron 23:11; cf. 1 Kgs 11:35-37).

The fact that the kingship was often a burden to Israel and that individual kings fell into sin did not change God's endorsement of the institution. Indeed, from then on, it became a mark of loyalty both to Israel and to God to accept and support the new king (e.g., "Saul also went to his home in Gibeah, accompanied by valiant men whose hearts God had touched" [1 Sam 10:26]). Those who did not support the new king are described in Holy Writ as "some troublemakers," who "despised him and brought him no gifts" (1 Sam 10:27).

This story of the king is instructive on a number of points. First, it shows that God is willing to vary His organizational ideal to accommodate cultural circumstances and the desires of His people, even when those desires caused the people to have "rejected" God and His will on a particular issue (1 Sam 8:7). Since God was not willing to reject His people for rejecting one of His organizational ideals, it should cause us to seriously reflect on how we relate to one another when there are differences in understanding such ideals.

Second, these new plans become just as much a part of His work and will, as had His original plan. The new leader is the Lord's anointed just as much as the previous leadership had been. Third, if individual Israelites opposed God's adaptation of His ideal, they were in danger of opposing God Himself.

As noted earlier, adaptation is not possible where a universal moral imperative or eternal truth is at stake. In the event that adaptation of the Ten Commandments, a core doctrine such as Creation or the Sanctuary, or clear and oft-repeated scriptural restrictions on personal moral behavior were proposed, then God's people should resist and if need be institute reformation. But the choice to alter Israel's leadership plan and go with a king did not justify such a response—just the contrary.

Some will note that already in the book of Deuteronomy God himself had made allowance for the variance of kingship (Deut 17:14-20). This passage does indeed talk about Israel having a king at some point in the future. But the language used indicates that this is not God's plan, but the people's. It was the people who would say, "I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are about me" (Deut 17:15).

God's prediction of the variance—His foresight of Israel's departure from the divine theocratic template—did not make it any less a variance from the ideal, as both the prediction and the fulfillment reveal. Deuteronomy notwithstanding, Samuel denounced the Israelites, declaring "your wickedness is great . . . in asking a king for yourselves"—and they accepted their guilt, confessing "we have added to all our sins the evil of asking a king for ourselves" (1 Sam 12:18-19, NKJV). But God's response to the people, transmitted through Samuel, is striking: "Do not fear." Samuel reveals that, despite their departure from His ideal plan, "the Lord will not forsake His people" (1 Sam 12:20, 22, NKJV). God accepts even very significant variation in His organizational ideals, and we should not be quick to condemn others

whom we view as departing from such ideals.

The Bible also reveals that not all variances need to be predicted or revealed by God ahead of time to be appropriate. Adaptations might come about in spontaneous response to circumstances and human requests. This unexpected adaptability is revealed by a story connected with the modification of God's laws of property inheritance.

The daughters of Zelophehad. In ancient Israel, sons were intended by divine law to inherit property, with a double portion going to the first-born son (Deut 21:15-17). But the four daughters of Zelophehad had no brothers and, once their father died, his name and property would be dissipated among the people. The daughters petitioned Moses that, in the absence of brothers, they be allowed to inherit property. Moses brought the case to the Lord, Who said that "the daughters of Zelophehad speak right: thou shalt surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father's possession" (Num 27:7).

Again, in this instance the Lord explicitly approves the adaptation, but He does it in response to a human need and a human request. There was nothing in the law prior to the daughters' entreaty that suggested adaptation or variation of the law was permissible. Rather, God modified His law, His civil statutes, at the request of not just important community leaders, but of young, unmarried girls in a highly patriarchal culture. The story thus indicates that there is an important role for the community of believers in adaptations of God's plans for ordering His people.

In addition, however, we also have a biblical story that shows the adaptation and variation of an ideal is possible without a recorded explicit divine command. This story is found in Judges 4 and 5, and concerns Deborah and Barak.

Deborah and Barak. The story of Deborah the Judge is often told in the context of the ordination discussion to prove that women can hold positions of spiritual institutional authority, similar to that of elder. But the story is more complicated than this, and actually helps to illustrate the moral command/ideal dichotomy in the context of leadership and gender. Judges in ancient Israel had spiritual, legal, and military roles in the community.⁵ These roles can be seen in the lives of Ehud—the assassin of Eglon, king of Moab—Gideon, and Jephthah (Judg 3, 6, 7, 11, 12).

Deborah "led" or "judged" Israel, and "held court" under a palm tree, where she decided the "disputes" of the Israelites (Judg 4:4, 5). Even though the Hebrew word used to describe Deborah as a judge is the same as is used for all the other judges, there are indications in the story that a female judge was a rare and unusual event. Deborah is the only woman recorded

⁵ In ancient Israel, judges did not have purely civil roles. In a theocracy, those who carried out the role of judging were also intimately involved in religious matters, as seen in their role of keeping the people from spiritual corruption (Judg 2:16-19). Of course, Deborah's prophetic role only enhanced the spiritual aspect of her work.

in the Bible to have been a judge of Israel.⁶ This apparent pattern of exceptionality is supported by Ellen White's comment that "in the absence of the usual magistrates, the people had sought to her [Deborah] for counsel and justice" (YRP 260).

Further, when it came time to mount a military campaign against Sisera and his army, rather than take command as most judges did, Deborah called on a warrior, Barak, to lead the troops. He was unwilling to assume the command unless she came along to support him at the battle. This she agreed to, but in a rebuke of his unwillingness to carry out his role as a man, she told him that the glory for the victory would go to a woman (Judg 4:9). The story of Deborah shows that women, when they played the role of judge, were expected to play a more limited role than that of a male judge. They were not ideally to be involved in or lead out in combat.

Deborah's role as judge and military escort was unusual, made necessary by circumstances including the failure of men to accept their expected roles. Thus, the Deborah story contains at the same time pointers towards the general biblical ideal of male spiritual institutional leadership, but also biblical evidence of its variability.

This story makes at least three important points about ideals and their exceptions. First, it suggests that certain leadership roles are meant to be filled by men. Second, it also shows, however, that certain circumstances may call for the involvement of women in positions they do not usually fill, including even attending and observing a battle. This ideal of women not playing combat roles is stretched further, and even broken, when the story ends with Jael killing the enemy general Sisera with a hammer and nail (Judg 4:21, 22). This act is subsequently praised in a hymn of Deborah, who rejoiced that the "most blessed of women be Jael" (Judg 5:24). Whether or not Jael was inspired, there is no doubt that Deborah was called of God to exercise spiritual authority.

Third, and finally, unlike the king in Israel and the daughters of Zelophehad, the story is silent regarding any divinely given directive regarding these exceptions and modifications. However, the Bible is clear that "the Lord routed Sisera" and that "God subdued" the enemies of His people (Judg 4:15, 23) demonstrating divine endorsement of the atypical leadership of Deborah and Barak. Thus, circumstances of national peril called for a response, which was then taken in light of the organizational and missional needs of God's people, and the response that varied from the divine ideal then received divine blessing. The narrative of the story itself, along with Deborah's hymn, reveals that the gender and leadership variants the story records were part of God's providential plan.

⁶ Some have considered Hulda the Prophetess to be a judge in Israel, but the Bible does not call her that. Rather, she is called a "prophetess," *nabiah* in the Hebrew, which is a feminine form of *nabi*, which is a speaker or prophet. She gives counsel to King Josiah, but that counsel is a prophetic, spiritual message, and not any kind of legal decision that a judge would render (2 Kgs 22:14-20).

King David and the Moabite restriction. The laws of purity and organization that God gave Israel could even be modified to allow a forbidden outsider to play the most powerful leadership roles in the land, as the reigns of David and Solomon and the genealogy of Jesus demonstrate.

Because the Moabites had seduced the Israelites into idolatry, God had commanded that a “Moabite shall not enter into the Assembly of the Lord; even unto the tenth generation shall none belonging to them enter into the assembly of the Lord for ever” (Deut 23:3). This was relevant to David because his great-grandfather was Boaz, who married Ruth, the Moabite (Ruth 4:16-20), but had done so in defiance of a Mosaic prohibition that had been repeated by Joshua (Deut 7:3; Josh 23:12).

Under a strict application of the Levitical code, Boaz’s marriage to Ruth was illegitimate. She and her descendants should have been forbidden from playing any formal roles in the nation of Israel until ten generations had passed. This would have excluded David from being king. The entire book of Ruth, which we generally treat as a sort of pious love story, can be seen as an extended defense and legal argument as to why Ruth was really a Jewess, and no longer a Moabite.⁷

Her famous soliloquy, “where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay, your people will be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16), takes on a whole new significance when this larger context is understood. So does the story of her redemption by Boaz, and their subsequent marriage. The argument is made in alternate ways: she is an Israelite because she left Moab and chose Israel and Israel’s God; she is an Israelite because she is redeemed by an act of sacrifice by Boaz, an act of grace which transfers rights and identity; finally, she is an Israelite because she marries a faithful, conscientious, law-abiding Israelite. Fittingly, the book ends with a short description of the genealogy of Ruth leading to David (Ruth 4:16-20).

Once one understands the truly spiritual nature of Jewish identity, all these arguments work. Obviously they worked in their historical context, as a majority of Israel and Judah accepted David as king. But an important point for our purposes is that none of these “exceptions” to the Mosaic prohibition can be found in the law itself! They were all created by the circumstances of the story itself, as Israel’s legal and spiritual expositors and leaders wrestled with the meaning of God’s laws and the *spirit behind them* in a particular concrete context.

God did not provide a short cut. A prophet could have stated, “God has said this is okay,” or “we can make an exception for David.” If this had happened, the book of Ruth would not

⁷ That the purpose of the book of Ruth is to “promote the interests of David and his dynasty” is the position of a “large consensus” of modern interpreters: Robert Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth in The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 37. Further, a number of these have seen the central focus of the book as dealing with and making acceptable the identity of Ruth as a Moabite: see *ibid.*, 40-42; Murray Gow, *The Book of Ruth: Its Structure, Theme, and Purpose* (Leicester, UK: Appollos, 1992), 132-36 (Gow notes that both the Babylonian Talmud and the Midrash on Ruth reference ancient arguments made against David’s legitimacy based on his Moabite ancestry); Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary* (London, UK: SCM Press Ltd, 1997), 23-28.

have been needed. But it was needed for, as God's people seek to understand, apply, and adapt divine leadership ideals, God regularly guides through the sanctified prayer, Bible study, and discussion of the community of faith. It is notable that the decision to accept Ruth was taken by the elders of Bethlehem (Ruth 4:9, 11). The story shows how integrative and open God and His people were on matters of mission and organizational rules. The story of Ruth and Boaz is one of the Old Testament forerunners of Acts 15, where the community submitted lesser organizational ideals to more weighty and important issues of mission for God and His Church.

David, the showbread, and Christ. Sometimes God even works through the reason and faith of individuals who find themselves in exceptional circumstances, as he did with David and the showbread (1 Sam 21:1-8). David's act in eating the showbread is one of the most famous examples of a divine ideal (in this case a ceremonial/ritual command) giving way to the larger spirit behind these laws. Fleeing from Saul, David in his haste to escape had left without sufficient provisions or weapons. Arriving in Nob, he asked Ahimelech the priest for bread to eat. Ahimelech said that the only available food was the showbread, which was reserved by the law for the priests (Lev 24:5-9).

Due to David's pressing circumstances, however, Ahimelech was willing to allow David and his men to eat the bread, as long as they were ritually clean from sexual relations (1 Sam 21:4). It is intriguing that Ahimelech was willing to break one ceremonial rule—non-priests eating the showbread—but desirous of keeping another rule—ritual purity from sexual relations.

This partial application is characteristic generally of individual and spontaneous human attempts to adapt and modify ritual or organizational laws to new or exceptional circumstances. One only alters the original as much as needed to deal with the exigent circumstance. It is evidence that the exception granted was a spontaneous human-devised alteration, and not one found in the original law itself, or some other legislatively created standing law.

This nuanced caveat is what one would expect from a human agent engaged in ethical/legal reflection, thinking about how he would explain his conduct to others. "Well, I did give him the bread, but it was an emergency, and also I made sure he was ritually pure." The story ultimately shows that God's ritual and organizational ideals are expected to be applied in a common-sense manner by proper ecclesiastical leaders, such as Ahimelech, in a way that furthers the larger values, mission and unity of the community.

Strikingly, too, that is how Christ understood the story. For the story of David and the showbread makes a notable appearance in the New Testament. Christ justified both David's acts as well as those of his disciples in the face of criticism from the Pharisees that his disciples did not keep the Sabbath properly because they plucked ears of corn to eat (Matt 12:3, 4; Mark 2:25, 26; Luke 6:3, 4).

While the context of the Pharisees' remarks is Sabbath observance, the Sabbath command itself was not an issue. There is nothing in that command or its application in the Torah that would forbid plucking corn to eat it on the Sabbath. Rather, it was the rules and traditions of the Pharisees and elders that had been constructed to safeguard the Sabbath that the disciples were accused of violating. Still, in responding to the Pharisees, Christ called upon a counter-example that did involve an undoubted law of the Torah: the limitation of showbread to the priests.

David was justified, Christ said, in eating the showbread, in violation of an explicit divine rule, to preserve life and health. So how much more are His disciples justified in eating corn on the Sabbath, which merely violates a man-made rule of the Pharisees? The important point for our purposes is that Christ ratified human ability to adapt and modify divine rules that provide ecclesiastical order in pursuit of higher principles of the preservation of life, health, or well-being of the community and its members.⁸

The Jerusalem Council: differences over divine ideals. Circumcision was a vitally important act for every male Israelite. It was a sign of God's everlasting covenant with Abraham, to be kept "for the generations to come;" in fact, those who were not circumcised were said to have "broken the covenant" (Gen 17:9-14). Moses's failure to circumcise his son was seen by God as so great a failure as to justify his death (Exod 4:24, 25). So essential was it to the Israelites' covenant with God that, after the prolonged and complete failure to circumcise male children during the 40 years in the wilderness, it was felt essential for Joshua to circumcise all the adult males of the children of Israel after crossing the Jordan River (Josh 5:1-7). Circumcision was considered essential to the identity of Israel as God's covenant people.

Understanding this background, it is not difficult to understand why some Jewish Christians argued, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). This strict requirement caused a great deal of dissension in the local churches at Antioch.

Ultimately the issue was referred to a council of leaders gathered in Jerusalem. Deliberating together, the Church came to the conclusion that circumcision and other ceremonial provisions of the Old Testament were unnecessary for Gentile believers. They were to "abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled and from blood" (Acts 15:20). In light of the cross, and to preserve the unity and mission of the Church, the Jerusalem Council, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, altered a divine organizational/identity marker that was practiced by God's people for centuries.

⁸ The portion of the story where Christ discusses the activity of the priests in the temple is less relevant for our purposes. The priests were following the divine law in ministering on the Sabbath, and thus by definition were not defiling the Sabbath when they carried out that which was commanded by the Lord of the Sabbath. But in eating the showbread, David was not acting according to any explicit, written divine command.

Ellen White's comment on the prevailing attitude of the Jews is insightful: "The Jews could not believe that they ought to change the customs they had adopted under the special direction of God" (AA 192). It was difficult for these Jewish Christians to allow for a variance in what they believed to be God's ideal for all believers. Yet in the end, the unity of the Christian church was preserved in the midst of diversity. Jewish Christians continued practicing Jewish customs while Gentile Christians did not feel compelled to adopt them. "The broad and far reaching decisions of the general council brought confidence into the ranks of the Gentile believers and the cause of God prospered" (AA 197).

We do not believe that circumcision and ordination are the same kind of issues in all respects. Circumcision was an ethnic marker, instituted during the time of Abraham, that lost its central meaning when the borders of Israel became defined by those of spiritual Israel. Leadership and gender roles go back to Eden. That biblical model should, we believe, still be taken into account today. But Paul elsewhere indicates that organizational ideals, even "commands," of the Lord that are of continuing validity may be varied from. In 1 Corinthians 9:14, Paul acknowledges "the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel." Yet, in the next verse he says, "but I have made no use of these rights" (1 Cor 9:14-15, ESV).

The command to support ministers from the tithe could be varied on an individual basis, Paul demonstrates, if the minister himself chooses to do so. This individual choice, however, did not do away with the general rule. Other organizational principles that affect the church more broadly must be agreed to more widely. We believe that the Jerusalem Council highlights four vitally important principles that should be taken into account whenever organizational guidelines of broad impact on the church, such as qualifications for ordination, are being applied or adapted by the church. These principles are:

First, an issue of church order and organization fracturing the unity of the church should be decided by a representative council of the church. Second, the decision, though taken collectively, may not require uniformity of action on the part of all, as the Jerusalem Council allowed Jews and Gentiles to approach circumcision and ritual differently. Third, the decision should foster both the unity and mission of the church within the framework of biblical principle. Fourth, the decision should foster unity, just as the New Testament church, composed of Jewish and Gentile believers, was united in Christ through the Holy Spirit on the eternal, unchanging truths of God's Word. They shared, as we should, an all-consuming desire to reach the world with the message of His grace. But they were not always united in the particulars of ecclesiastical practice. In Christ, however, they were able to live with these differences, and so should we.

Ideal and variation in the writings of Ellen White. Ellen White showed a distinct awareness of the variable nature of organizational ideals. She was supportive of church order and the need for pastoral ordination, but she was very clear that such organizational rules should not stand in the way of the mission of the Church. In 1896 she wrote about an un-ordained worker and his mistake in not being willing to baptize when no ordained pastor was available:

[I]t has been a great mistake that men go out, knowing they are children of God, like Brother Tay, [who] went to Pitcairn as a missionary to do work, [but] . . . did not feel at liberty to baptize because he had not been ordained. That is not any of God's arrangements; it is man's fixing. When men go out with the burden of the work and to bring souls into the truth, those men are ordained of God, [even] if [they] never have a touch of ceremony of ordination. To say [they] shall not baptize when there is nobody else, [is wrong]. If there is a minister in reach, all right, then they should seek for the ordained minister to do the baptizing, but when the Lord works with a man to bring out a soul here and there, and they know not when the opportunity will come that these precious souls can be baptized, why he should not question about the matter, he should baptize these souls (MS 75, Nov. 12, 1896, pp. 1-2).

In this single quotation we have both the acknowledgment of the ideal (“they should seek for the ordained minister to do the baptizing”) and the variation or adaptations (“to say they shall not baptize when there is nobody else, is wrong”). Ellen White’s clear and urgent overriding concern was for the ministry and mission of the Church. Organizational guidelines have their place, but should give way when they impede mission.

In another instance, Ellen White described how an apparently clear statement of her own regarding school order and restrictions should be set aside based on “reason from common sense.” She met with a group of parents and educators who were considering starting a kindergarten. Some of these conscientious Adventist believers opposed it, as they had read her counsel regarding not sending children to school until they were eight or ten years old.⁹

Ellen White’s response is quite instructive. She acknowledged her earlier statements about students and age, but said that rather than being left loosely supervised, it would be much better for the young children to be in a well run Adventist school. She explained her response in terms of a wider principle, one that should command our attention: “God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things” (3SM 217).

⁹ “Parents should be the only teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age. . . . The only schoolroom for children from eight to ten years of age should be in the open air” (CE 8).

Here again Ellen White demonstrates her ability to distinguish between God’s moral imperatives—His divine commands—and divine ideals, which are subject to adaptation. The divine ideal of the parents teaching their children for the first eight to ten years does not forbid, under some circumstances, those children attending school. Neither did it forbid the Church to start a kindergarten. For parents in other circumstances, the ideal continued to be that they instruct their children till eight or ten. It is surely instructive that Ellen White was very comfortable living in a denomination that could take into account local circumstances when applying these ideals.

Determining when to vary the divine pattern. We believe that the biblical examples we have discussed collectively show that any decision to adapt the divine organizational or ecclesiastical norms ought not to be taken individually, unilaterally, or rashly. Rather, the church should engage in such application and adaptation collectively, carefully, and deliberately, guided by those who have been duly appointed to exercise servant-leadership of God’s people. While none of the stories discussed above on their own would justify a modification of the qualifications for elder, we believe that the collective principles embodied in them support such an outcome.

Three of the stories—the king in Israel, Deborah, and David’s Moabite heritage—show God’s willingness to allow, and even endorse, deviation from leadership norms in the organization of His people. Two of the stories—the daughters of Zelophehad and Deborah—show again an adjustment of regular rules and practices in connection with gender. Another story—that of David and the showbread—shows God’s willingness to allow the adjustment of organizational and ritual norms based on need and pressing circumstances without a special word from the Lord or a prophet. At least two of the stories—Deborah and David and the showbread—show that a deviation or modification can happen without it doing away with the underlying general rule: the variation does not become the “new norm.” Finally, the Jerusalem Council provides the primary model for how variation and modification should most frequently and properly happen in the era of the Church, though the story of Ruth is also relevant here.

How then, can we today know when God has allowed the community to adapt or modify an ideal? When we see that the Holy Spirit has led God’s duly authorized servant-leaders of the religious community to move forward on the basis of good order and process; when there has been a collective study of the Scriptures; and when a decision is made by those duly chosen to represent the community to make changes in organizational, ecclesiological, or leadership issues; then we risk opposing God if we continue to openly and disruptively work against what the community of believers has, with proper order and procedure, so decided.

Stories such as the sons of Aaron and the use of common fire in the sanctuary, and Uzzah's presumption in steadying the ark reveal that individual decisions made haphazardly and based on personal preference to vary ritual or ceremonial commands are presumptuous and can incur divine wrath (Lev 10:1, 2; 2 Sam 6:6-8, 1 Chron 13:9-11). We do not today have a Moses, a Urim and Thummim, or an Ark with the special presence of God to speak to us directly and approve our variance of an organizational norm. God today can verify adaptations of his non-moral organizational ideals by the way in which He speaks and acts through His people when they pray and study together: as they did at Jerusalem (Acts 15), as early Adventists did in "Bible conferences," and as we do when representatives of the world Church gather in a General Conference Session.

APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

As the above examples show, God in His love and grace accommodates His divine ideal throughout Scripture and salvation history. Again, this reasoning does not apply to universal moral commands or truths. None of the examples set out above—whether the king in Israel, or inheritance laws, or Deborah and Barak, or David and the showbread, or the Jerusalem Council, or Ellen White's counsel on the age of children attending school—involved variations or deviations from God's moral laws, whether it be the Ten Commandments or prohibitions against sexual immorality such as adultery or homosexuality. Careful and limited modifications of God's organizational, ritual, or ecclesiastical ideals create no precedent for any attempt to vary or adapt God's moral laws.

But God's organizational ideals are somewhat different. They should not be lightly or cavalierly disregarded. But neither should they be allowed to hinder the mission of God's church. These types of standards are created to further God's primary desires of the unity of His church and for His people to be focused on their divinely appointed role as instruments in God's mission of seeking and saving the lost (Matt 18:10-12, Luke 19:10, Matt 28:18-20). Organizational and ritual norms, even those that point to abiding principles, are sometimes adapted to further these ultimate goals of salvation.

In the family, where the responsibility of male leadership applies most directly, the father may be dead, absent, spiritually uncommitted, or otherwise irresponsible, so that the wife must assume the role of spiritual leader. In a local church, the men who are available, even if committed Adventists, may lack some or all of the qualifications or gifts for the office of local elder.

Would it be wise to place a male in the office of elder if he had only one or two of the listed qualifications, when there were women available with most of the qualifications, but were simply not male? It is possible to extrapolate from such a hypothetical situation on a

local scale to the larger world Church. The reality of demographics within certain cultures is such that the divine ideal regarding gender and leadership may stand in the way of the mission and unity of the Church if maleness becomes the sole criterion or absolute ideal of leadership. Accordingly, the world Church could develop a comprehensive position on ordination that would allow for the proper authorities in a region or area (such as a conference, union, or division) to be given the freedom to seek the Holy Spirit's leading in applying and adapting the divine pattern to their local situation.

Many who adhere to the biblical ideal of male spiritual leadership will agree that sometimes women may need to assume the role of spiritual leader or elder in the absence of qualified men. Thus, they do not view the prohibition of women leading out as being based on sacramental concerns—that women somehow cannot make efficacious ecclesiastical rituals or rites (e.g., the position of the Roman Catholic Church). There are those who would typically limit this exception to very extreme cases. But the fact that nearly everyone agrees that women *can* carry a primary role of spiritual leadership *under certain circumstances* (e.g. as currently is happening in China) is significant. The key, of course, is how those circumstances are understood and defined.

We propose that the world Church acknowledge the general ideal of male leadership in the office of ordained minister, but that it also allow for women to be ordained, where local circumstances may make that ideal difficult or impractical to implement, to further the unity and mission of the Church. The Church should also recognize that biblical principles of religious liberty mean local organizational units and regions should be able to deal with their cultures in applying these principles in ways that will most effectively advance the gospel mission of the Church in their fields.

Such an approach, mutually agreed upon, prayerfully and carefully thought through, and appropriately carried out, would leave our hermeneutics and theology uncompromised. It would affirm the Jerusalem Council's principles of unity and interdependence in Church decisions being taken together, even when allowing for diversity. It would take seriously what Paul says about the ideal for Church leadership. But it would recognize the missional nature and flexibility of that principle: that it is neither one of the Ten Commandments, nor an issue of salvation, nor a doctrinal pillar identified by our pioneers.

Some may interpret and apply these organizational ideals differently than others, but under biblical principles of mutual Christian liberty we should grant tolerance and forbearance to each other (Gal 2:3-5). Under these same principles of freedom, no organizational unit or employee should be required either to support or to promote ordained female pastoral leadership should they conscientiously object to it. If the united community of believers agrees both to affirm a divine organizational and ecclesiastical ideal, yet also to allow its ad-

aptation for the sake of mission and unity, then church members should accept the mutually agreed diversity that will result. We should respect views with which we disagree, “submitting [ourselves] one to another in the fear of God”, and “forbearing one other and forgiving one another” (Eph 5:21, Col 3:13). As Ellen White wrote:

Let us all remember that we are not dealing with ideal men, but with real men of God’s appointment, men precisely like ourselves, men who fall into the same errors that we do, men of like ambitions and infirmities. No man has been made a master, to rule the mind and conscience of a fellow-being. Let us be very careful how we deal with God’s blood-bought heritage. . . . Of us He says, Ye “are laborers together with God: ye are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building.” This relationship we should recognize. If we are bound up with Christ, we shall constantly manifest Christlike sympathy and forbearance toward those who are striving with all their God-given ability to bear their burdens, even as we endeavor to bear our appointed burdens. (TM 495)

A final issue that needs addressing is that of the 1984 allowance for women to be ordained as local elders. A rollback on this point would be extremely destructive to the Church and its unity, and is inconsistent both with the interpretation of Scripture set out above and with a conservative reading of the New Testament. The position of elder, as it is currently carried out in most local Seventh-day Adventist congregations, is in practice more akin to the biblical office of deacon—a role that most people agree the Bible permits women to hold. In Adventist ecclesiological practice, it is the ordained minister who more closely fills the biblical position of “elder.”¹⁰

In conclusion, this is not a call to compromise biblical beliefs. Rather, it is an appeal to listen to the Bible itself on how it applies its various standards and teachings. It is an appeal to unite in Christ on divine, unchangeable truths, applied in the spirit of God’s Word, and to focus on the mission of reaching lost people for the Kingdom. It is also an invitation to follow the biblical principles of charity, mutual submission, and Christian freedom within the Church on matters that are not salvific or pillars of the faith, for the sake of the mission, integrity, and unity of the body of Christ.

¹⁰ See footnote 3, above. Although at times the local elder may carry out some of the functions of the New Testament elder, we believe that we could deal with the core of Paul’s teaching on the ideal of men leading out in providing spiritual accountability and discipline for other men by recommending a guideline such as the following: “In those instances where a head elder is a woman, there should be a male co- or vice-elder who can handle those circumstances where the head elder needs to lead out in the ecclesiastical discipline of a man.”