Setting Apart for the Ministry: Theory and Practice in Seventh-day Adventism (1850–1920)

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Introduction

Sabbatarian Adventism\(^1\) emerged in a milieu that was strongly antagonistic toward established religious bodies and any organizational form going beyond local church structures.\(^2\) Their anti-organizational attitude was based on the belief that elaborate organizational structures were markers of apostate churches. Since this attitude was common to all groups stemming from the Millerite movement\(^3\), it comes as a surprise that James and Ellen White as early as 1850 began calling believers to adhere to “gospel order,” a principle illustrated in the order in heaven, among

\(^1\)The term “Sabbatarian Adventism” refers to Seventh-day Adventism before the formal organization of the church in 1863. Although the name “Seventh-day Adventists” had been used already since 1853, it was not applied unanimously to the body of believers until 1861. See S. T. Cranson to James White, 20 March 1853, printed in idem, “From Bro. Cranson,” *Review and Herald*, 14 April 1853, 191. That is why in this paper the first term is used for Seventh-day Adventists before 1863 and the second term is employed for the church after 1863.


Christ’s disciples, and in the early NT church. Although it took some time for other members of the movement to warm to this recommendation, by the early 1860s, the anti-organizational attitude among members of the movement as a whole had dissipated enough for Sabbatarian Adventism to formally establish itself as a church. Over the years, the ecclesiastical structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church underwent various changes and developments, as may be seen in the establishment of publishing, health, and educational institutions, as well as in the creation of unions and divisions and in the integration of numerous associations and societies into the church structure as departments. These changes from rudimentary local structures to highly complex global structures were paralleled by changes in the distribution of work, responsibilities, and authority within the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

As the ecclesiastical organization of the movement grew and developed, so too did the movement’s understanding and implementation of the act of ordination. In the beginning, when

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Sabbatarian Adventists first united themselves around the beliefs of “present truth” in the late 1840s, there was no formal process of ordination. The majority of the leading persons were ministers who had been previously ordained in their former denominations, and they undertook the responsibility of sharing their beliefs with other former Millerites and drawing new members for the Sabbatarian Adventist movement through a traveling ministry. A problem soon developed, however: Other travelling preachers who had not embraced the Sabbatarian Adventist message followed the same procedure, frequently promoting erroneous and heretical views, and it became difficult to distinguish between authentic Sabbatarian Adventist leaders and other travelling ministers who represented alternative doctrines. Problems arose not only from outside but also from within, as several self-appointed and self-confident preachers inside the Sabbatarian Adventist movement began to generate “confusion and disunion.” Thus Ellen and James White suggested that such persons were “not called by God,” lacked judgment and wisdom, were “unqualified to preach the present truth,” and had not been “acknowledged by the church or [the] brethren generally.”

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6Initially the term “present truth” referred to recently discovered theological truths such as the extended atonement ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary, the seventh-day Sabbath, the third angel’s message, and the sealing message. It was later enlarged as Adventists made new discoveries.


For this reason, Sabbatarian Adventists began to see the need to apply the principle of “gospel order” and develop some way of certifying acknowledged leaders of the group in order to protect the believers from “false brethren.” This objective was accomplished through the establishment of a procedure for the ordination, or “setting apart,” of individuals for the ministry. The present paper builds upon previous historical studies to discuss various elements and developments of this process of ordination in the Sabbatarian Adventist movement and in the Seventh-day Adventist Church from the early 1850s to the early 1920s.

The Rationale for and Objectives of the Practice of Ordination

The first step toward a process of certification was made when those who were well known among Sabbatarian Adventists began to issue recommendation cards to trustworthy ministers. Thus, in January 1853, James White and Joseph Bates signed a card and handed it over to J. N.

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Loughborough. A second step was taken in the late fall of that year when the leaders of the Sabbatarian Adventist movement began “setting [people] apart to the ministry.” From the beginning they used this phrase interchangeably with the terms “ordain” and “ordination.” Although a first ordination had admittedly occurred already in July 1851, it was not until 1853 that the leaders of the movement instituted a proper and intentional practice of ordaining people for the ministry.

**A Biblical Rationale for the Practice**

In the 1850s Sabbatarian Adventist literature did not indicate the use of any sources “beyond the Bible” in justifying “the developing position on ordination.” During that time it was

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14 Washington Morse had been encouraged by James White “to engage in public labor in preaching the message.” See G. W. Morse and Lizzie J. Morse, “A Pioneer Gone to Rest,” *Review and Herald*, 23 December 1909, 17. Thus, in July 1851, G. W. Holt discretely set him apart “by the laying on of hands, to the administration of the ordinances of God’s house.” See F. M. Shimper, “From Sister Shimper,” *Review and Herald*, 19 August 1851, 15. While the report itself remains ambiguous as to whether he was ordained to the ministry or as an elder, a later account suggests that it was in 1851 that he began working as a minister. See Washington Morse, “From Bro. Morse,” *Review and Herald*, 4 October 1853, 103; cf. Neufeld, *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 254; Knight, *Organizing to Beat the Devil*, 35, 36. The 1888 recollection that dates his ordination to the summer of 1853 is most likely a slip of memory because the contemporary sources point to 1851 and the 1888 report also contains other dating problems. See Washington Morse, “Items of Advent Experience During the Past Fifty Years, No. 4,” *Review and Herald*, 16 October 1888, 643; Knight, “Early Seventh-day Adventists and Ordination, 1844-1863,” 104. Loughborough later claimed that his ordination was the first of its kind, yet there is no contemporary evidence. He joined the church in 1852 and was not ordained until 1854. See J. N. Loughborough, *Miracles in My Life*, comp. by Adriel Chilson (Payson, Ariz.: Leaves-of-Autumn Books, 1987), 39; Knight, “Early Seventh-day Adventists and Ordination, 1844-1863,” 104.

15 Ibid., 102.
consistently emphasized that ministers had to be ordained according to the NT pattern, for they considered the practice an application of the principle of “gospel order.”

James White saw the precedence for ordination in Jesus’ commissioning the twelve disciples to preach, teach, and baptize believers in his name (Matt 28:19-20). Then he referred to such biblical texts as Mark 3:14; 1 Tim 4:11-16; 2 Tim 1:6; Titus 1:5, 7; and 1 Pet 2:25, suggesting that those “who are called of God to teach and baptize, should be ordained, or set apart to the work of the ministry by the laying on of hands.” Further, he argued that Eph 4:11-16 showed the continuance of the offices of preaching and evangelism in the church until the end of time. Ellen White described the situation of the NT church even more. As the church was assailed by false teachers, the practice of setting apart ministers by the laying on of hands was God’s solution to that problem. Shortly afterwards J. B. Frisbie pointed to three NT examples: the choosing of an apostle to replace Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:20-26); the setting apart of Paul and Barnabas for the ministry (Acts 13:1-4); and the subsequent ordaining of other people for the cause of Christ by Paul and other early Christian leaders. Since the Holy Spirit was the causative power in all three examples, he argued that “the power and authority to ordain elders or bishops in the church came” not by human invention but “from the Holy Spirit of God” (Acts 13:2).

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20 Frisbie, “Church Order,” 26 June 1856, 70.
In later years Ellen White made several further reaching remarks about ordination in her writings about biblical themes and events, indicating her belief in the biblical origin of the basic practice. The earliest example she provides for an ordination is found in God calling, commissioning, and ordaining Moses “to his great work.” She emphasized Moses’ “deep sense” of his “own weakness and unworthiness” when God called him. \(^\text{21}\) Ellen White saw the next example in Jesus’ ordination of his disciples, yet the example she cited was not the giving of the gospel commission in Matt 28, to which James White had referred, but an ordination that came earlier in Jesus’ ministry, after his initial calling of the disciples and his early instruction to them about the duties and responsibilities of their mission. It was during this time that Judas Iscariot pressed self-confidently into the group of disciples, exemplifying an attitude very different from that of Moses and the disciples. Then Jesus gathered them around him, bowed in their midst, laid “his hands on their heads, offered a prayer, dedicating them to this sacred work. Thus,” she stated, “were the Lord’s disciples ordained to the gospel ministry.” \(^\text{22}\) Later she termed the initial calling of the disciples “ordination” and an “appointment to the work of the gospel ministry,” thus suggesting an initial ordination at the calling and a formal ordination after their instruction. \(^\text{23}\) A third reference to a biblical precedent for ordination is found in her description of the “ordination of Paul and


Barnabas,” covering an entire chapter in *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 3, in 1878. Ellen White remarked that the leaders of the church in Jerusalem and Antioch ordained Paul and Barnabas only after they had been “made thoroughly acquainted” with the details of their divine calling and the mission given to them by the Holy Spirit. Thus the ordination of Paul and Barnabas was an “open recognition” that the two had been truly chosen by the Holy Spirit for this special mission. When the elders of Antioch laid their hands on them, they asked God to bless them in the work assigned to them by the Spirit. Ellen White spotted the original pattern for the practice of the laying on of hands in the OT—a father laying his hands on his children to bless them and a priest laying his hands on the head of a sacrificial animal. In the NT it became an “acknowledged form of designation to an appointed office.”

Interestingly, in all three references she emphasized that it was God who had called and set apart, explicitly equating the terms “commission” and “ordination.” In the context of the ordination of the disciples and that of Paul and Barnabas she suggested that the “ordination from above precedes [a formal] ordination by the church.” She described Paul’s ordination by human hands as a “formal ordination.” Like Ellen, James White also denied the idea that the church had the power to call people into the ministry or that its act of ordination made them ministers of Christ.


Rather, the church was to ordain those who had already been called into the ministry by God. This aspect is significant when we begin to discuss the authority and power of ordained ministers.

The Benefits and Objectives of the Practice

If God was ultimately the one who called and set apart, this raised the question of why a formal ordination by the church was necessary at all. Responding to this question, James White pointed to three objectives of the practice: (a) The candidate receives confirmation of the approval and sympathy of both his colleagues and the church. (b) By the laying on of hands the church shows its united agreement with the ordination of the respective individual, thereby producing and securing union in the church. (c) Ordination solved the urgent need for some kind of authentication. This third objective received the bulk of James’s attention, and he explained at length how ordination would prevent the influence of false teachers who brought reproach on the present truth and the cause of God. Similarly, Ellen White remarked that the application of this NT practice would signify “the approving voice of the church” and “secure the peace, harmony, and union of the flock.” Interestingly, even those who opposed the establishment of any formal church structure, such as R. F. Cottrell, affirmed the practical need for and biblical foundation of the ordination of ministers. Joseph Bates added that the NT depicted ordination as a means of choosing or appointing a person to an office, an aspect that was basically also supported by Ellen White.

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31 Ellen G. White, Supplement to the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White, 19.
The Qualifications of the Candidate

The above biblical considerations served as the theoretical basis for developing practical criteria for the qualification of a candidate for the ordination to the ministry. These criteria were developed further over the years as practical circumstances called for additional refinements and clarifications.

A Calling of God

When Sabbatarian Adventists began setting people apart for the ministry, they emphasized that a divine calling to preach was one of the most important prerequisites for ordination. This idea was derived from the biblical examples shown above and supported with such texts as Luke 6:13; Mark 3:14; Matt 10:16; 28:16-20; Gal 1:11, 12; 1 Cor 10:2; and Eph 4:11-16. James White suggested that these texts were still applicable in the present time because “the church has never arrived at the state of unity and perfection” predicted in these passages. The need for a divine calling was repeatedly emphasized in subsequent years. James White asked churches to recognize the responsibility that God had laid upon one of their members and to urge that person into the field of labor. After these individuals had proven to have “received their commission of God,” the church was, said Ellen White, to acknowledge the divine calling by setting them apart.


37 Ellen G. White, Supplement to the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White, 19.
four decades later the General Conference stated that candidates had to be sure about their call of God to the work of the ministry.  

Evangelistic / Ministerial Experience

The most feasible way to prove one’s calling was by entering new fields where the present truth was still unknown, and thus a period of “labor[ing] publicly in the cause of God” became a second prerequisite for ordination. This period of labor, sometimes called a time of “improving,” was usually marked by missionary activities in untrodden fields, often lasting one or two years, so that the church could recognize the candidate’s calling and ordain him. Ellen White compared this time of “improving” to the Waldensian practice of holding off on “ordination to the sacred office” until the candidates had completed a three-year missionary experience in the outside world. The rationale was that being accompanied, trained, and mentored by an experienced minister taught candidates how to deny themselves, sacrifice, preserve the truth in its purity, and let their light shine in darkness.


39James White, “Eastern Tour,” 15 November 1853, 149.


After the official organization of the General Conference, it was decided that individuals who wanted to engage in evangelistic work and prove their divine calling should receive licenses which would certify their status as Adventist “messengers or preachers.” Later, in 1886, it was recommended to the General Conference Committee that the Committee prepare and publish standards of “attainment to be required of those who receive a license,” as well as establish “a course of study to be pursued by licentiates before [their] ordination,” and “a course of study in our schools, not to exceed two years, especially adapted to ministers and workers.” This indicates that the licentiate could be considered an apprentice who tried to improve his knowledge, skills, and faculties to prove worthy to be given a position of trust within the church. Yet, prior to their ordination licentiates were not authorized “to celebrate the ordinances, to administer baptism, or to organize a church.”

Beliefs and Actions in Harmony with the Main Body

A third prerequisite for ordination emphasized by a variety of early Adventist leaders was that candidates adhere to sound biblical doctrine. For example, James White suggested that “gospel order” required teachers of the Bible to be “in union in sentiment and in their course of action” to avoid divisions and confusion among church members. Shortly afterwards Frisbie emphasized that the NT provided the basis for the “theoretical and doctrinal qualification” of a candidate for the


43 G. I. Butler and Uriah Smith, “Twenty-Fifth Annual Session, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists: Fourteenth Meeting, December 6, 1886,” Battle Creek, Mich., GCA.

44 Cf. Trim, “Ordination in Seventh-day Adventist History,” 19, 20. That was probably the reason why James White suggested to give them a license that they may “improve their gift” by laboring for the salvation of souls. See James White, “The Ministry, No. 4,” Review and Herald, 8 August 1865, 76.

45 G. I. Butler and Uriah Smith, “Twenty-Fourth General Conference Session, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists: Fourteenth Meeting, December 2, 1885, 9:30 a.m.,” Battle Creek, Mich., GCA.

46 James White, “Gospel Order,” 20 December 1853, 188.
ministry. James Sawyer promoted a similar view when he referred to 1 Tim 4:12, 15 and stressed the need for ministry candidates to be an example in word, in spirit, and in faith. In 1878, church leaders resolved to grant licenses to those who want “to preach the third angel’s message” only after they were examined as to “their doctrinal and educational qualifications.” In the mid-1880s the General Conference saw the need to respond to the problem of several ordained ministers leaving the ministry by recommending to ordain only those persons that were both willing and able to devote their time to the work of the ministry and “sound in faith and practice upon all Bible doctrines as held by Seventh-day Adventists.” This was of considerable importance because ordained ministers filled “offices of trust in God’s work.” In the early 1890s the General Conference resolved that the committee would require satisfactory evidence for the candidate’s standing on “various points of present truth, especially in regard to Spiritual [sic] gifts, tithing, health reform, or any other distinctive feature of our faith or of our work.” The repeated emphasis of this aspect may be indicative of a specific need among Adventist ministers.

**Intellectual and Spiritual Fitness**

Closely related to the emphasis on sound biblical doctrine was the stress laid on intellectual and spiritual fitness as a prerequisite for ordination, based on the criteria laid down for church

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49 James White and Uriah Smith, “Seventeenth Annual Session of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists: Seventh Meeting, October 11, 1878, 8:30 a.m.,” Battle Creek, Mich., GCA.


52 “General Conference Proceedings,” 6 March 1893, 483.
leaders in the NT. James White adopted the NT criteria for “elders” and “bishops” and applied them as qualifications for modern ministers.\(^{53}\) Ellen White similarly sought to apply these NT criteria, thus urging leaders to see if the candidates were able to rule well their own family and preserve its order, and if they “could enlighten those who were in darkness.”\(^{54}\) She stated further that those whose judgment and intellect had been weakened through their involvement in such errors as perfectionism and spiritualism were unfit for the ministry because they were unable to bear opposition, to avoid getting excited, and to remove objections with calmness and meekness.\(^{55}\) She added that the church should examine the lives, qualifications, and the general course of the ministerial candidates to see if God had truly called them to the ministry.\(^{56}\) In 1881, the General Conference resolved to examine all candidates for license and ordination “with reference to their intellectual and spiritual fitness” for the successful performance of the duties.\(^{57}\)

A Sense of One’s Own Weakness and Incompetence

In 1853, James White mentioned yet another criterion for ordination, though this criterion reappeared only seldom in later years. He suggested that the candidate should feel his own frailty and incompetence for the work,\(^{58}\) an aspect that reminds of Ellen White’s later remarks about


\(^{54}\)Ellen G. White, Supplement to the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White, 19.

\(^{55}\)Ibid., 20.

\(^{56}\)Ibid., 18, 19; cf. idem, Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1923), 171, 172; idem, Pastoral Ministry (Silver Spring, Md.: Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1995), 42.

\(^{57}\)Haskell and Smith, “General Conference,” 20 December 1881, 392; cf. O. A. Olsen to W. C. White, Battle Creek, Mich., 21 September 1891, EGWE.

\(^{58}\)James White, “Gospel Order,” 20 December 1853, 189.
Moses’ deep sense of his own weakness and frailty that stood in stark contrast to Judas Iscariot’s self-confidence and pride.  

A Special Circumstance: The Question of Women in Ministry and Ordination for Women

Although the criteria enumerated above established some basic prerequisites for ordination, a major question remained: were women eligible for ordination to gospel ministry? The church’s handling of this subject was somewhat complex: Ordination to gospel ministry was reserved for men, yet women were still invited to participate in preaching and evangelism. Indeed, when James White announced the establishment of the “Minister’s Lecture Association” in 1871, he invited both men and women to become members of the association and to enroll in a four-week term of lectures.  

With the establishment of Battle Creek College in 1874, both young men and young women began receiving educational and professional training to be able to work for the church in various lines.

Although the church allowed both men and women as “licentiates,” they did not practice the ordination of the latter. However, there was at least some support for the idea of setting apart


60 James White, “Minister’s Lecture Association,” Review and Herald, 10 January 1871, 32.

females for the ministry, as shown by the resolution at the 1881 General Conference session “that females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may with perfectly propriety, be set aside by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry.” The proposal was referred to the General Conference executive committee but obviously no further actions were taken in this regard. The initial move may have been a response to Ellen White’s call in early 1879 for meek and humble women to engage in instructing church members in matters of personal piety and home religion, to make up for the deficiency left by the debating-style method of the itinerant Adventist

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63 Roger W. Coon, “Ellen G. White’s View of the Role of Women in the SDA Church” (Ellen G. White Estate Shelf Document, Washington, D.C., 1986), 8; Emmett K. VandeVere, “Years of Expansion, 1865-1885,” in Adventism in America: A History, ed. Gary Land, Rev. ed. (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1998), 54; Bull and Lockhart, Seeking a Sanctuary, 270. The explanations as to why the resolution was referred to the General Conference Committee have been highly diverse. See Bernoi, “Nineteenth-Century Women in Adventist Ministry Against the Backdrop of Their Times,” 224; Randal R. Wisbey, “SDA Women in Ministry, 1970-1998,” in Women in Ministry: Biblical & Historical Perspective, ed. Nancy Jean Vyhmeister (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1998), 235; Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, “Are Those Things So?—Part II: A Summary and Evaluation of Key Historical and Theological Arguments of Women in Ministry,” in Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry, ed. Mercedes H. Dyer (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Adventists Affirm, 2000), 293, 294. While other resolutions at this session were “adopted,” this one was apparently not. Yet, the report of the business proceedings in the Signs of the Times creates some ambiguity for it suggests that the resolution was “adopted” without any further discussion and revision. Strangely enough, the Signs did not print a correction regarding this resolution in subsequent issues. See “General Conference,” Signs of the Times, 5 January 1882, 8. Referring matters to the General Conference Committee had usually the purpose of delegating the decision about the implementation and application of a resolution to that committee. See S. N. Haskell and Maria L. Huntley, “Fourth General Session of the General Tract and Missionary Society,” Review and Herald, 11 December 1879, 185; James White and Uriah Smith, “General Conference,” Review and Herald, 11 December 1879, 190; James White and Uriah Smith, “General Conference of S. D. Adventists: Business Proceedings,” Review and Herald, 21 October 1880, 268; G. I. Butler and A. B. Oyen, “General Conference Proceedings: Twenty-Second Annual Session,” Review and Herald, 20 November 1883., 733; G. I. Butler, “Changes in the Field of Labor,” Review and Herald, 27 November 1883, 752. If the delegates were not satisfied with a resolution or desired a reformulation of a specific resolution, it was customary to refer it back to the Committee on Resolutions. See D. M. Canright and Uriah Smith, “Business Proceedings of the Fourth Special Session of the General Conference of S. D. Adventists,” Review and Herald, 24 April 1879, 132; Haskell and Smith, “General Conference,” 392; G. I. Butler and Uriah Smith, “General Conference Proceedings: Twenty-Fourth Annual Session,” Review and Herald, 24 November 1885, 729. This could indicate that the resolution was referred to the General Conference Committee to develop some ways of implementing or applying the resolution. If that was indeed the case is, however, uncertain.
ministry. She had argued that Mary Magdalene was the “first” that “preached a risen Jesus,” adding, “If there were twenty women where now there is one, who would make this holy mission their cherished work, we should see many more converted to the truth.” In the 1880s and 1890s, Adventist periodicals sometimes reported about other denominations ordaining women as ministers, often without providing an evaluation or opinion. Some Adventist writers explicitly expressed their disapproval of these procedures in other denominations, suggesting that it was one of the infidel goals of the women’s rights movement.


67 E. J. Waggoner, “Back Page,” Signs of the Times, 8 June 1888, 358; idem, “How Readest Thou?,” Signs of the Times, 29 December 1890, 602, 603. Although J. H. Waggoner supported the commitment of females in “exercises purely religious,” he stressed that they “cannot occupy the position of a pastor or a ruling elder.” Thus while females could engage in “the work of the gospel,” exhort, comfort, prophesy, pray in public, they were not to conduct “the duties of business meetings, . . . ruling elders, and pastors.” If females would engage in these duties, it “would be looked upon as usurping authority over the man,” which is prohibited in 1 Tim 2:12 and Eph 5:23. See J. H. Waggoner, “Woman’s Place in the Gospel,” Signs of the Times, 19 December 1878, 380. Similarly, his answer to the question if a sister could act as presiding officer in the business meeting of a certain church in case that church did not have an elder was revealing. He argued it would probably be better to choose a male member “to preside for the time, as moderator of that meeting,” since it may otherwise raise questions “which would be liable to lead to unpleasant results.” See idem, The Church, 124, 125 (emphasis in original). When invited to join the women’s suffrage movement, which sought to legalize the right of women to vote and to become political office holders, Ellen White declined because she believed that all of the church’s resources were to be employed for “the promotion of the kingdom of God and the hastening of Christ’s second coming.” See Coon, “Ellen G. White’s View of the Role of Women in the SDA Church,” 12. Cf. Ellen White to James White, Battle Creek, Mich., 10 July 1874 (Letter 40a, 1874), EGWE. In the early and mid-1860s Ellen White suggested that spiritualists had associated themselves closely with the American costume and the women’s rights movement. Adopting that dress would have destroyed all influence for good because the public would then link
Although women in the Seventh-day Adventist church were generally excluded from ministerial ordination, the cases of Ellen White and Lulu Wightman may be mentioned at this point, since both constitute partial exceptions to that rule. Although neither was ever set apart by the laying on of hands, both nevertheless received ministerial credentials. Indeed, the Michigan Conference granted Ellen White the credential of ordained minister in 1871. In subsequent years she was listed among the conference’s ordained ministers and later on received ministerial credentials from the General Conference as well. After the death of her husband in 1881, she received the salary of an ordained minister until she passed away in 1915. The church obviously had confidence in her work and recognized her divine commission and ordination. She herself


71 Arthur L. White suggested that denominational leaders considered her ordination to be of a higher character and that it would have appeared anticlimactic for them to ordain her for the Lord’s service although God himself had already proven beyond any doubt that he had called her and set her apart for his service. See Arthur L. White to Lashley, 1 October 1936; idem to Bauman, 13 December 1956; idem to Thiele, 18 December 1956; cf. A Critique of the
stated that “the Lord ordained” her “as his messenger” in late 1844\(^72\), and it was he who had put her “into the ministry,” quoting the words of 1 Tim 1:12.\(^73\) However, while she sometimes gave the prayer at ordination services, it does not seem that she ever performed other functions of ordained ministers.\(^74\)

The other exception to the rule was Mrs. Lulu Wightman, who was reportedly the most successful minister in the New York Conference. In 1901, R. A. Underwood, president of the Atlantic Union Conference, stated his opinion in favor of her ordination. Yet, it was decided to refrain from ordaining Wightman because A. G. Daniells, then president of the General Conference, expressed his doubts about whether a woman could “properly be ordained, just now at least.” The conference nevertheless voted to pay her the salary of an ordained minister because they considered her work as “that of an ordained minister unquestionably.”\(^75\)

Lateral Entry of Ministers Previously Ordained in Other Denominations


\(^74\)Ellen G. White to W. C. White, Mary K. White, and S. N. Haskell, Buffalo, N.Y., 16 September 1880 (Letter 41, 1880), EGWE; Arthur L. White to Elliot, n.d.; idem to Lashley, 1 October 1936; idem to Bauman, 13 December 1956; idem to Thiele, 18 December 1956; Coon, “Ellen G. White’s View of the Role of Women in the SDA Church,” 7.

In the early years, Adventists took no issue with admitting people to the ministry who had been previously ordained in their former denominations. While Sabbatarian Adventist ministers considered the denominations they had left in the mid-1840s part of Babylon, they did not renounce the ecclesiastical authority of these churches by seeking re-ordination, as the early Puritan ministers (who had previously been ordained by the Church of England) had done after their arrival in New England.\(^7^6\) Thus for several years, ministers of other denominations transferred into the Adventist ministry without having to be re-ordained. By 1862, however, the Michigan Conference no longer recognized these ordinations and began requiring re-ordination for ministers who wanted to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church and to continue working as ministers. It was recommended that other conferences follow the same procedure, and by 1863 re-ordination became General Conference policy.\(^7^7\)

In 1867, James White argued that the ordination was invalid if not performed by the proper person. Referring to the Jewish priesthood in NT times, he suggested that even priests who, like Paul, might convert to the Christian faith were ordained again by the apostles for the new work, even though they were only taking a step “from light to greater light.” Yet some ministers, James White argued, turned “from error to truth” when they joined the Seventh-day Adventist

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Church, which is why it was necessary for them to cast away the errors and “be set apart anew to the sacred work of the closing message.” He was also stated that an ordination was no longer considered valid after a minister apostatized.78

The Ordination Ceremony

The early ceremonies in which candidates were set apart for the gospel ministry were simple and stark, but these initial rites gradually developed into more elaborate and formal ceremonies. Initially, ordinations were often accompanied by manifestations of the Holy Spirit, though this changed over time. There were also gradual changes over time in regard to who was permitted to participate in the ordination ceremony and how the action of the laying on of hands was understood.

Elements of the Ordination Ceremony

Initially, the action of setting an individual apart for the ministry usually involved a prayer79 and the laying on of hands80. Later, the ordination ceremony grew more elaborate and came to involve an ordination sermon, the laying on of hands, a prayer, a charge, a “holy kiss,” and

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78 James White, “Re-Ordination,” 120.


extension of the right hand of fellowship. However, even the later, more elaborate version of the ordination rite was still understood to be a “simple but impressive New Testament ceremony.” It certainly contained some elements—sermon, prayer, laying on of hands, and charge—that were also present in the ordination ceremonies of the mid-19th century Methodist Episcopal Church, yet it did not reflect the high church elements found in the strongly liturgical Methodist rite.

Manifestations of the Holy Spirit

Initially, ordination ceremonies were accompanied by highly emotional manifestations of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Thus it was frequently stated that “the blessing of the Lord rested upon us,” “a very tender, precious influence affected the hearts of all,” and “the Holy Spirit fell sweetly and powerfully upon us.” Visible signs of the Spirit’s moving were the


82 “Ordination,” 12 November 1889, 720.


86 Hutchins, “Report of Meetings,” 40; cf. Ellen G. White to W. C. White and Mary K. White, Malvern, Kans., 28 May 1876 (Letter 30, 1876), EGWE; Butler to James White and Ellen G. White, 28 September 1880; S. N. Haskell
gift of tongues, weeping, encouragement and rejoicing, and mutual testifying of the participants’
love for the truth. 87 These signs and results were regarded as a distinct divine approval “of the
solemn and important step”, as a “signet” placed by the Lord upon the work, and as a blessing upon
the candidate. 88 However, such manifestations vanished in later years.

Participants in the Ceremony

An important aspect of the ordination was the question of who was authorized to set a
person apart for the ministry. Ellen White briefly and succinctly summarized the principles guiding
the action as follows:

Brethren of experience, and of a sound mind, should assemble, and follow the word of God, and
with fervent prayer, and by the sanction of the Spirit of God, should lay hands upon those who
have given full proof that they have received their commission of God, and set them apart to
devote themselves entirely to the work. 89

Frisbie suggested that it was the presbytery (Luke 23:66; Acts 22:5; 1 Tim 4:4, 14) that had
the authority to ordain elders or bishops. He added that this group of elders had been ordained or
appointed by the church through a “vote taken by the lifting up of hands, according to the direction
of the Lord.” 90 Initially, those that were both known to most church members and ordained in their
previous churches were responsible for ordaining new ministers, but later ordinations were often

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89 Ellen G. White, Supplement to the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White, 19.

performed by officers of the conferences or the General Conference. While in the early years ordination usually occurred in local churches with the members being present at this occasion, later ordination ceremonies were often integrated as a part of the annual sessions and camp meetings of the state conferences and the General Conference. Thus all ministers present at the meeting frequently joined in the laying on of hands.

It was customary to lay hands only on the minister that was to be ordained. Yet, in 1867, James White remarked that he had included the wife of a minister into the ordination “to the sacred office of the holy ministry by prayer and the laying on of hands” because he thought that “the minister’s wife stands in so close a relation to the work of God, a relation which so affects him for better or worse, that she should, in the ordination prayer, be set apart as his helper.” It does not seem, however, that this procedure became a general practice in the church.

Symbolic Action vs. Sacerdotal Rite

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Apparently almost from the beginning there existed two very different views as to the nature and meaning of the laying on of hands. All understood that ordination meant assigning a mission to the candidate or appointing the individual to an office, but there arose the question of whether the laying on of hands was merely a symbolic action or whether the act itself might actually impart a sort of mystical grace or power to the candidate. In the mid-1850s, Frisbie took the latter view and defined the laying on of hands as “the separating act by which the grace of God was imparted.”96 In the late 1860s G. I. Butler similarly expressed the idea that a person may be qualified and changed through the act of ordination.97 In 1879, the General Conference suggested that the act of ordination confers “spiritual blessings which God must impart to properly qualify him [the candidate] for that position.”98 Representing a similar view, former General Conference president O. A. Olsen referred to cases where leaders of companies had administered baptism and the Lord’s Supper even though they had not been “consecrated to such service by prayer and the laying on of hands.” He remarked, “That is wrong.” For in his opinion, “it brings the most sacred service of God and the most sacred ordinances to the level of the common affairs of life,” which Olsen compared to Nadab and Abihu offering strange fire in the tabernacle (Lev 10:1-3).99 It should be noted that the wrongdoing Olsen pinpointed was not improper or irreverent administration of the ordinances, but rather the fact that someone who had not been ordained unduly claimed authority to baptize people or administer the Lord’s Supper. This reveals a view that attributes sacred qualities to both the ordination and the ordinances.

96Frisbie, “Church Order,” 26 June 1856, 70.
97G. I. Butler to James White and Ellen G. White, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, 15 March 1869, EGWE.
98G. I. Butler, “Eighteenth Annual Session, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists: Twelfth Meeting, November 24, 1879, 7 p.m.,” Battle Creek, Mich., GCA.
99O. A. Olsen, “Qualifications, Duties, and Responsibilities of Elders and Deacons of the Local Church—No. 6,” Church Officer’s Gazette, October 1914, 1 (emphasis added).
Beginning in the late 1870s, however, Ellen White began making statements that seemed to reject the above ideas. Thus she wrote that in post-apostolic times the ordination act was “greatly abused” by attaching “unwarrantable importance” to the laying on of hands, as if the act would transmit special power, virtue, and qualification. She emphasized rather that the act “added no new grace or virtual qualification.”

In the same vein Uriah Smith emphasized in the early 1890s that if a minister has no divine call, “he has no authority to preach the gospel, no matter how many hands have been laid upon him, nor how pompous the ceremony of ordination performed over him.” Hence the laying on of hands does not bring along a certain power, grace, or authority *ex opera operatum*. Rather the authority of the minister to preach “rests upon a divine call to the work.”

Similarly, Ellen White argued that “one may receive ordination for the ministry . . . but this does not give him the oil of grace whereby he may feed his lamp that it shall send forth clear rays of light.”

**Authority and Responsibilities of Ordained Ministers**

Once the Sabbatarian Adventists had developed a system for identifying qualified candidates and setting them apart for gospel ministry, questions arose as to the responsibilities and duties of an ordained minister. Among the questions were these: Which duties and responsibilities should be reserved for ordained ministers alone, and which positions and responsibilities were open to individuals who were not ordained? In what area was an ordained minister licensed to work? And

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101 Smith, “In the Question Chair,” 648.

102 Ellen G. White to Byron Belden, Wellington, New Zealand, 23 April 1893 (Letter 6a, 1893), EGWE.
finally, was ordination the sole door of entrance into leadership positions? In each case, the answers morphed over time, demonstrating that the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the nature and responsibility of ecclesiastical and administration office was not static, but rather developed in response to changing circumstances.

Basic Responsibilities of Ordained Ministers

From early on it was suggested that those whom Christ called to teach had specific responsibilities and tasks (Matt 28:18). Among the tasks and responsibilities of an ordained minister were (1) administering “the ordinances of God’s house,” referring to the Lord’s Supper and the baptism of those who repent and believe; (2) keeping members from backsliding; (3) preaching the Word of God, evangelizing, reproving, rebuking, and exhorting with all long-suffering and doctrine; (4) giving himself wholly and entirely to the work; and (5) establishing churches and ordaining local church officers (elders and deacons). These functions of the minister were considered an implementation of “gospel order.”


108 Frisbie, “Church Order,” 26 June 1856, 70; Cottrell, “What are the Duties of Church Officers?,” 173.

Refinements Required by the Developing Organization and Growing Mission Work

When the churches in Michigan organized themselves as the Michigan Conference in 1861, they took the opportunity to more clearly define the duties and authority of ordained ministers. In particular, it was decided that (1) those holding lower offices could not perform tasks of a higher office unless they were ordained to that office, yet those holding higher offices could perform all tasks of the lower offices (minister, local elder, deacon); and (2) travelling ministers had to receive letters of recommendation from their local congregations to prevent “false brethren” and “strangers” from troubling the churches, which suggests that churches were still being disturbed by strange travelling preachers. It was also decided to issue to ministers “certificates of ordination and credentials to be signed by the officers of the conference,” which were “to be renewed annually.”

Later, church entities turned from issuing these ministerial credentials annually to issuing them only quadrennially. In 1862, the Michigan Conference resolved to assign specific fields to every minister, changing the previous custom of ministers going wherever they thought they might be needed, which had resulted in some churches being continually neglected and other churches having more ministers than needed. Now, the conference also required ministers to provide work reports enumerating their activities of the past year at the annual meeting.

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111 See, e.g., Ministerial Credentials of John N. Loughborough, issued by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, June 1, 1922, CAR.

the Michigan Conference were subsequently adopted by other state conferences. Yet, it seems that, by the early 1880s, the wants of the churches were still not met systematically, which is why it was again recommended to allocate a certain area to each “ordained minister” for a specific period so that he could assist church members in their spiritual growth before he would again enter new fields.

**Authority to Administer Ordinances**

In late 1853 James White insisted that only those called to teach God’s Word “should administer this ordinance,” supporting this principle by referring to Matt 28:18; Acts 2:28, 41; 8:12, 26-40; 9; 16:13-15. Similarly, Uriah Smith suggested in 1858 that “it is contrary to both the practice and views of the church, that any one should administer the ordinance of baptism who has not been regularly set apart to the work by the laying on of hands.” A side benefit of ordination was the fact that it qualified Adventist ministers to legally marry couples and, at least theoretically, to visit Adventist inmates in prisons. Yet, it seems that until the late 1870s there still existed some diversity among the conferences as to “who is authorized to baptize and administer the other ordinances.” To secure unity of action among the conferences and ministers, the 1879 General Conference resolved that “none but those who are Scripturally [sic] ordained are properly qualified

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114 S. N. Haskell and Uriah Smith, “Twentieth Annual Session, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists: Eighth Meeting, December 9, 1881, 2 p.m.,” Battle Creek, Mich., GCA.


to administer baptism and other ordinances.”¹¹⁸ In 1896, Ellen White made a statement in the context of foreign missions that was seemingly contrary to that resolution from the late 1870s.

Another thing I want to tell you that I know from the light as given me: it 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] that man 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.¹¹⁹

Then she added that “Philip was not an ordained minister,” but he opened the Bible to the eunuch and did not see any hindrance to baptize him, again implying that ordination was not a prerequisite to conduct a baptism.¹²⁰ Ellen White obviously considered it a legitimate human application of the divine principle of “gospel order” to limit certain tasks to the ordained ministry for the purpose of ensuring order and unity, yet in the above remarks she also emphasized that it would be wrong to conclude that these human applications constitute a divine imperative and that no person other than an ordained minister was allowed to perform the ordinances.

Positions of Leadership and Administration

Initially, ordination was not a prerequisite for holding positions of leadership in areas such as publishing, education, and church administration, since individuals in these areas were not understood to be directly engaged in gospel ministry. Somewhat paradoxically, however, those who served in positions of leadership and administration and thereby demonstrated their fitness for that

¹¹⁸Butler, “Eighteenth Annual Session, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.”


¹²⁰Ibid.
work were often subsequently ordained as a way of recognizing their calling from God to work in that particular position, and eventually ordination became a prerequisite for holding positions of leadership and administration in the higher levels of the church organization.

As has been shown above, Ellen White is a prime example of one who received ministerial credentials without having been formally ordained. Up until the late 1870s, she was probably the only individual to be credentialed without ordination, but a certain piece of advice that the General Conference gave to its conferences in 1879 may be indicative of the existence of additional cases by that date. Namely, the General Conference suggested to its constituent conferences that they refrain from granting “credentials to individuals to occupy official positions among our people, who have never been ordained or set apart by our people,” which suggests that such credentialing of unordained individuals was indeed occurring up to that point.¹²¹ Six years later the discussion resurfaced when the committee on resolutions suggested that credentials be given only to those who were willing and able to devote all of their time to the work of the gospel ministry. The resolution was revised and it was eventually decided that “exceptions to this rule” were possible but should be made “very carefully.”¹²² So then, it appears that credentials were usually given only in conjunction with ordination, which was in turn a setting apart for the ministry or, in other words, an acknowledgement of a calling to the “work of the gospel ministry,”¹²³ yet there were apparently

¹²¹ Butler, “Eighteenth Annual Session, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.”

¹²² Butler and Smith, “Twenty-Fourth Annual Session, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists,” 23 November 1885; G. I. Butler and Uriah Smith, “Twenty-Fourth Annual Session, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists: Eighth Meeting, November 24, 1885, 9:30 a.m.,” Battle Creek, Mich., GCA.

occasions on which credentials were given apart from ordination and the work in the gospel ministry.

To explain why this was so, it is worth remembering, as others have pointed out previously, that Ellen White employed the general words “minister” and “ministry” in three ways: sometimes to refer to a work that all believers should engage in; sometimes to refer to diverse ministries that augment the ministry of the Word; and sometimes to refer specifically to the gospel ministry of the Word commonly reserved for ordained ministers.124 The distinction between ministers of the gospel and ministers of other ministries that merely augmented this primary ministry explains why those who had never worked in ministerial lines but who served in publishing, administrational, medical, or educational lines were usually not ordained—they were not regarded as ministers in the “work of the gospel ministry,” and therefore ordination was not needed.

A few examples may suffice to illustrate this fact. To begin with, prior to his ordination in 1874125, Uriah Smith served many years as editor of the Review (1855-1861, 1864-1869, 1870-1873, 1874) and for several periods as secretary of the General Conference (1863-1874). Since he had never worked as an itinerant minister, church leaders considered it unnecessary to ordain him for a number of years. There was a recommendation on at least three occasions that he “be set apart

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124See Moon, “A Power That Exceeds That of Men,” 188, 189. As a result of his study, Moon concluded that Ellen White used the term “ministry” to designate the work of women in all three categories. See, e.g., Ellen G. White, “The Reward of Faithful Toil,” Bible Echo, December 2, 1901, 776; idem to Teachers in Emmanuel Missionary College, St. Helena, Calif., 21 September 1903 (Letter 210, 1903), EGWE; idem, “The Laborer Is Worthy of His Hire,” 22 March 1898 (Manuscript 43a, 1898), EGWE. Thus she stated, e.g., that “Sister Robinson [is] doing the work of ministering, fully as valuable as any ordained minister,” which did not mean that she was performing the exact same functions but that her work of ministry (“visiting and giving Bible readings”) was as valuable as his. See idem, Diary entry for 21 May 1898 (Manuscript 182, 1898), Sunnyside Cooranbong, Australia, EGWE.

125Uriah Smith, “Camp-Meeting Notings,” Review and Herald, 18 August 1874, 68.
for the work of the ministry,” but it was not executed.\textsuperscript{126} Instead, in 1868, Smith was “granted a license to improve” his “gift in preaching.”\textsuperscript{127}

A second example of a church administrator serving without being ordained is G. I. Butler, who in 1865 began serving as president of the Iowa Conference, even though he had “no experience as a preacher.” It was not until June 6, 1867, that he received a ministerial license, and it was not until September 28 of that year that he received ordination.\textsuperscript{128} Interestingly, even after he had been elected conference president, the church saw no need to hurry his ordination, as they apparently did not see it as necessary prior to him beginning his service as president..

Besides these examples, it may be mentioned that a number of women served in various administrational, educational, and medical positions on the conference, union, and General Conference level, without having been ordained or holding ministerial credentials. Thus some served as secretaries and/or treasurers of these entities or associated societies (later departments).\textsuperscript{129}

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\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 69.


\textsuperscript{129} Various books and articles have been published dealing with this question. Just a few individuals may be mentioned at this point. Allie Guthrie was the secretary and treasurer of the North Missouri Conference as well as for the Tract Society of said conference (1910-1912). See \textit{1910 Year Book of the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination} (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1910), 35; H. E. Rogers, ed., \textit{1911 Year Book of the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination} (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1911), 26; idem, ed., \textit{1912 Year Book of the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination} (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1912), 26. Mrs. A. F. Harrison was the secretary and treasurer of the Sabbath School Association in the Southern District No. 2 in 1897. See L. A. Hoopes, “Mission Fields,” \textit{General Conference Bulletin}, July-September 1897, no. 3, 110. L. Flora Plummer became the “organizing secretary” of
Although ordination was not a prerequisite for service in leadership and administration positions, somewhat ironically, individuals who demonstrated capable service in such positions were often ordained, even if they had no prior experience in the gospel ministry of the Word and were not preparing for such ministry. An illustration of this point is G. I Butler, who, as mentioned just above, had not been ordained at the time he was elected conference president, but was subsequently ordained two years later when his calling and fitness for the work became clear. Likewise, in 1889, the General Conference ordained W. W. Prescott, then president of Battle Creek College and education secretary of the General Conference, even though he had never served in ministerial lines. Witnessing the fruits of his educational work and his powerful preaching abilities, church leaders were more than convinced of his divine calling. “If he could serve the cause of God any better in receiving ordination and credentials,” Ellen White surmised, “it would be best” for him to be ordained.130

Despite the fact that ordination was not initially a prerequisite for leadership positions in ministries not directly related to the ministry of the Word, the situation gradually changed, and soon ordination became a requirement for such positions. In the 1920s, for example, church leaders began to insist that leadership positions of the home missionary and missionary volunteer departments be filled “preferably” with ordained ministers and that educational departments be filled with those who had “practical experience in teaching and in soul-winning work.” The rationale behind this decision was to counter the increasing local church pastorates and to foster the

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idea that all departments are “soul winning agencies.” At the same time, the document *The Work of the Minister* was approved, which recommended to “every minister, whether resident pastor or a departmental secretary, [to] make it his objective to engage in aggressive effort to win new members to the faith.”\(^{131}\) Since all ministries, even those not previously understood to be directly engaged in the ministry of the Word, were now encouraged to view themselves as active evangelists engaged in the ministry of the Word, ordination was increasingly thought appropriate even for leaders working in such areas as publishing, education, and administration. One significant result was that women, who were not eligible for ordination as gospel ministers, were therefore no longer able to fill such leadership positions. While women were still eligible to be church missionary secretaries on the local church level, they gradually disappeared from such positions at the conference, union, division, and General Conference level as ordination became an entrance requirement for these positions.\(^{132}\)

In sum, the early practice of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was to allow unordained individuals, both male and female, to serve in leadership positions in publishing industries, church administration, and education. However, as such leaders demonstrated their calling and fitness for their work, their call was often recognized and confirmed by ordination, even if they had never served in pastoral ministry. Since ordination was not initially required for service in these non-ministerial leadership positions, women initially often filled these roles, but this practice changed over time and such positions became restricted solely to those who had been previously ordained as ministers.

\(^{131}\)“General Conference Committee Meetings for 1923: One Hundred Eighty-Fifth Meeting, Milwaukee, Wis., Oct. 10, 1923, 8:00 a.m.,” Milwaukee, Wis., 447, GCA; cf. Bert Haloviak, “Adventism’s Lost Generations: The Decline of Leadership Positions for SDA Women,” Unpublished manuscript, Silver Spring, Md., 1990, 2; Kit Watts, “Moving Away from the Table: A Survey of Historical Factors Affecting Women Leaders,” in *The Welcome Table: Setting a Place for Ordained Women*, eds. Patricia A. Habada and Rebecca Frost Brillhart (Langley Park, Md.: TEAM, 1995), 54; Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 270. In 1927, LeRoy Edwin Froom complained, “The Home Missionary Department was originally founded to lead the laity into service, but it has so far been absorbed by the financial endeavors of the movement that it has become really an adjunct to the treasury. We must emphasize anew the call of God upon consecrated men and women to witness for Him.” Quoted in Haloviak, “Adventism’s Lost Generations,” 5.

\(^{132}\)Ibid., 2; Watts, “Moving Away from the Table,” 54; Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 270.
Diversity of Ministries

Early Sabbatarian Adventists understood ordination to be particularly significant for the setting apart of preachers and evangelists, yet they also saw that preachers and evangelists were not the only individuals in the NT who were ordained by laying on of hands. Indeed, the apostles also began ordaining individuals to serve as elders and deacons in order to address specific needs that arose in their first-century communities. As the Sabbatarian Adventists perceived similar needs arising in their own communities, they followed the NT model and likewise began ordaining elders and deacons. Later on, as the growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church necessitated the creation of new offices and the further expansion of organizational structures, the church’s understanding of which offices merited ordination likewise adapted. By the 1890s, for example, Ellen White was suggesting a broadened view of ordination that would allow for the setting apart and ordaining of individuals for a variety of lines of ministry, not just for the ministry of preaching. Thus, ordination came to be understood as an act that was not limited solely to the setting apart of clergy, but an act which could also be used to set apart individuals in other ministries as well, including those serving in the roles of deaconess, missionary, or medical physician.

Deacons and Deaconesses

In late December 1853, H. S. Gurney reported that churches had begun to set apart deacons “as denominated in the Bible” because ministers had been “called to travel” with no one left in the churches to fully maintain “gospel order.” Six months later Joseph Bates suggested the setting

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133 Gurney, “From Bro. Gurney,” 199. Cf. Neufeld, Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, 254; Knight, Organizing to Beat the Devil, 37; Land, The A to Z of the Seventh-day Adventists, 218. It should be noted too that it was no until the 1920s that Adventist ministry changed from an itinerant-type ministry to a local church pastor pattern. See S. N. Haskell, “Present Duty in Reference to Our Periodicals,” True Missionary, January 1874, 5; idem, “Our Periodicals,” Signs of the Times, 22 April 1880, 188; A. G. Daniells (1912), quoted in Russell Burrill, Revolution in the Church (Fallbrook, Calif.: Hart Research Center, 1993), 41; Harwood and Beem, “A Work for All to Do,” [18]; Knight, “Early Seventh-day Adventists and Ordination, 1844-1863,” 106.
apart of individuals as deacons “by prayer and the laying on of hands,” a practice that was founded on such texts as Acts 6:1-6; Titus 1:5, 6; and 1 Tim 3:8-13. He later emphasized that the apostles set apart deacons in answer to a real and practical need. In early 1855 John Byington wrote to James White asking how the distraction and discouragement of the churches could be solved; he wondered if “every church” should appoint deacons and elders, and, if so, who should perform the setting apart. In response, James White stressed that the scriptural testimony was to be the foundation for any decision in this “subject of such vast importance.” The problems would be solved if the churches would adopt “the all-powerful and perfect system of order, set forth in the New Testament.” Thus those that had been called by God and approved by the church to preach the Word and to set things in order in the churches should be the ones to set apart church officers. The qualifications of deacons were laid down in such passages as Acts 14:21-23 and Titus 1:5-16. At the same time, J. B. Frisbie, in outlining the offices of the NT church, pointed out that deacons were to take care of the “temporal affairs of the church [that were] essential to its prosperity.” One and a half years later, he added, quoting from Adam Clarke’s commentary, that the early church also had deaconesses that “were ordained to their office by the imposition of the hands of the bishop.” Yet, the church did not accept his argumentation and avoided the setting apart of deaconesses.


137Frisbie, “Church Order,” 9 January 1855, 155.

In 1874, G. I. Butler found the biblical basis for deacons in 1 Tim 3:8-10 and Acts 6, indicating that they were responsible for the care of the church’s “temporal matters.” A decade later, W. H. Littlejohn remarked that some Seventh-day Adventist churches elected “one or more women to fill a position similar to that which it is supposed that Phebe and others occupied in her day,” yet he admitted that it was not the general “custom with us to ordain such women.” He underlined, however, that it was “highly probable” that the apostolic church had deaconesses.

Ellen White, meanwhile, encouraged the installation of deaconesses, suggesting while in Australia that “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.” She suggested that this would be “another means of strengthening and building up the church,” emphasizing that the church needs “to branch out more” in its “methods of labor,” indicative of her idea of a diversity of ministries.

Subsequently a number of women were set apart in Australia and New Zealand in response to this advice. Yet, this phenomenon did not become an established practice within the Adventist Church, instead disappearing after a few years.

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139 G. I. Butler, “Thoughts on Church Government—No. 5 [b],” Review and Herald, 8 September 1874, 92.


142 About a month later J. O. Corliss and Bro. McCullagh “set apart . . . deaconesses by prayer and the laying on of hands.” See Report of nominating committee, Ashfield Seventh-day Adventist Church, August 10, 1895, quoted in Arthur N. Patrick, “The Ordination of Deaconesses,” Adventist Review, 16 January 1986, 18; Coon, “Ellen G. White’s View of the Role of Women in the SDA Church,” 8. In 1896, Bertha Larwood was ordained deaconess by J. O. Corliss to her duties in the church at Perth, Western Australia. See W. C. White to Members of the [Australasian] Union Conference Committee, Cooranbong, N.S.W., Australia, July 15, 1896, CAR. Three and half years later, on January 6, 1900, W. C. White ordained Mrs. Broannyrane and Patchin as deaconesses at the Ashfield Seventh-day Adventist Church. See Ashfield Seventh-day Adventist Church Minutes, entry for 7 January 1900, and W. C. White, Diary entry
Later Ellen White pointed out that the ordination of the seven deacons in the NT church was a “step in the perfecting of gospel order in the church,” in that it developed a “plan for the better organization of all the working forces of the church.” While she suggested that the church in Jerusalem served as a model church, she added that in the later history of the early church “the organization of the church was further perfected” to maintain “order and harmonious action,” implying that additions or modifications to the NT leadership structure were both appropriate and necessary.  

She also spoke of the further perfecting of gospel order and organization in her current context. Other Adventist writers had expressed the idea of perfecting the organization already since the 1860s; likewise, James White moved from his early insistence on an organizational structure that did not go beyond the NT model toward recommending a developing organizational


146 James White, “Church Order,” 23 January 1855, 164.
system “which is not opposed by the Bible, and is approved by sound sense.” It seems that the structure and the offices of the church could be developed, expanded, and adapted to ensure order, unity, harmony, and efficiency as the church labored for the fulfillment of its mission, the proclamation of the message of salvation.

Elders

In 1855, about a year after some local churches began setting apart deacons, Frisbie expressed his opinion on the overlapping nature of the NT roles of bishops (episkopoi) and elders (presbyteroi). In his understanding, both were more or less elders, but he perceived “two classes of preaching elders” in the NT, namely “evangelical or travelling elders or bishops” and “local elders.” The first class of elders functioned as supervisors over several churches whereas the second class “had the pastoral care and oversight of one church.” Distinguishing the local elders from the deacon, Frisbie stated that the local elders had “the oversight of the spiritual” while deacons took care of the temporal affairs. Frisbie argued that specific people were called by God and afterwards “chosen by the church and set apart by the laying on of hands of . . . elders and bishops.” He added that the “churches chose, ordained or appointed by holding up their hands in voting their choice who should be messengers of the churches.” The primary biblical passages used in support for these arguments were Acts 13:1-4; 14:23; 20:28; 1 Cor 12:28; 2 Cor 8:19; and


149 Frisbie, “Church Order,” 26 June 1856, 70.

150 Ibid., 70.
Eph 5:11. Sabbatarian Adventists saw the need to set apart elders because some churches had not celebrated the Lord’s Supper for numerous weeks or even years due to the lack of visiting ministers. By 1856, the setting apart of elders seems to have become a regular practice. In early October of that year Cottrell added that elders had to perform all the duties of the ordained minister (“travelling elder or evangelist”) in the latter’s absence, duties such as administering the Lord’s Supper, baptizing new converts, receiving them into membership, building up the church and preaching the truth. Ellen White basically agreed with Frisbie’s distinction of local and travelling elders, yet, like Cottrell, she added that it was the duty of the local elders “to administer baptism . . . [and] to attend to the ordinances of the Lord’s house” if it were necessary and if the minister were absent. Both had been “appointed by the church and by the Lord” to oversee the spiritual concerns of the church. It seems that, in 1861, the Michigan Conference officially adopted Ellen White’s position of the overlapping duties of these two offices. Interestingly, elders and deacons were frequently set apart by the laying on of hands at the same service, especially during the establishment of new churches.

151Ibid., 70.
152Cf. S. N. Haskell to Ellen G. White, South Lancaster, Mass., 27 January 1887, EGWE.
154Cottrell, “What are the Duties of Church Officers?,” 173.
In the mid-1870s Butler added that a candidate for elder should be selected by a committee consisting of an ordained minister and two persons chosen by him, with the church accepting or rejecting this nomination. The elder was supposed to be set apart by an ordained minister, which allowed him to baptize, administer the ordinances, and perform all duties to be done “by those in offices lower than” himself in the church. It was his task to feed the church spiritually so that “the graces of the Spirit” (Phil 4:8) might become visible in them. Accordingly, he had “a measure of authority superior to that of the private members of the church.”

At the 1885 General Conference session delegates discussed whether an elder had to be re-ordained in the new church after moving from one place to another one. The matter was eventually referred to another committee. The committee saw the value of confining the ordination of an elder to the church which elected him, but also saw the value of permitting the elder to act “as unrestricted as a minister.” The dilemma of which course to take led them to propose a sort of compromise between the two alternatives. The committee stated, “All agree that it is to be regarded as purely a matter of church discipline, and we believe there is truth in both positions which may be combined into one consistent system.” Thus it gave the following recommendations to the conferences: (a) The authority of an elder is confined to the church “which elected him as elder,” except if the conference committee “under special circumstances” thought it advisable to send him to another churches. (b) An elder should not be re-ordained if he is properly elected or re-elected in another church. (c) An elder should be considered a normal member upon his removal to another church or conference, and his qualifications should be evaluated just as if he had never been an

157G. I. Butler, “Thoughts on Church Government—No. 5,” Review and Herald, 1 September 1874, 85.

158Ibid., 92.

159G. I. Butler and Uriah Smith, “Twenty-Fourth Annual Session, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists: Fifth Meeting, November 20, 1885, 9:30 a.m.,” Battle Creek, Mich., GCA.
elder before. (d) A ministerial license does not enlarge the sphere of an elder beyond his local church. (e) Although the ordination of an elder is valid “for all time, except in case of apostasy,” he cannot act as an elder beyond his allotted time, “unless he is re-elected, or elected by another church.” It was argued that the conferences’ failure to conform to these recommendations “will open the way to disorder and confusion in our churches.”

Missionaries to Foreign Countries

In the 1890s the General Conference began setting apart individuals by the laying on of hands when the delegates decided to call these persons to a foreign mission field. The wives of these missionaries then received missionary licenses. Even if the missionary was to serve primarily in educational, publishing, or medical lines, he was still ordained on the grounds that it was quite possible that he might need to engage sometimes in ministerial activities, especially in the mission field.161 Three examples may suffice to illustrate this procedure. The General Conference decided to send A. B. Oyen as a missionary to Norway to “labor in connection with the publishing work there and to obtain all the help possible in translating the important works . . . into the Danish language.” At the same occasion he was “ordained.”162 Another example is the ordination of Percy T. Magan. Although the General Conference committee initially decided to ordain Magan, “it was deemed

160 Buter and Smith, “Twenty-Fourth General Conference Session.”


162 Butler, “Changes in the Field of Labor,” 752.
expedient to leave the matter for the time being” “when he was connected with the school work.”

After he had worked as head of the Bible and History department at Battle Creek College for about six years (1891-1897), the General Conference Committee decided again to ordain him in case he “be accepted by the Foreign Mission Board as its secretary.” Since Magan never assumed that position, it was decided not to follow through with the decision. Two years later, in 1899, he was ordained anyway, even though he was still not engaged in missionary work. Another example is the ordination of Walter K. Ising in 1908. For three years Ising had been the secretary of the German Union Conference, which included Russia, Austria, Hungary, and the Balkan countries. He was also editor of the German paper Zionswächter and other papers in Hungary, Russia, and Estonia. He was still regarded as “rather young and inexperienced in evangelical work.” But he believed that God had called him into that work and he was willing to commit himself entirely to “the work of the gospel missionary in Syria.” Thus the leading brethren acknowledged his divine calling and ordained him on March 4, 1908. These examples reveal that church leaders did not consider it necessary for workers in administrational and educational positions to be ordained. It was only when these workers wanted to enter foreign missionary work that the church deemed it important to set them apart for the gospel ministry.

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164E. A. Sutherland, “[Obituary] Dr. Percy Tilson Magan,” Review and Herald, 29 January 1948, 20. Although some writers have claimed that Magan “was ordained to the gospel ministry” by either E. A. Sutherland or W. C. White on July 27, 1897, it may be questioned why then Sutherland himself suggested that Magan was, in fact, ordained by G. A. Irwin in 1899. See Merlin N. Neff, For God and C. M. E.: A Biography of Percy Tilson Magan Upon the Historical Background of the Educational and Medical Work of the Seventh-day Adventists (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1964), 64; Ira Gish and Harry Christman, Madison, God’s Beautiful Farm: The E. A. Sutherland Story (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1979), 64.

Medical Missionaries

In 1893, Ellen White used the Holy Spirit’s call to set apart Paul and Barnabas for their specific mission as the biblical precedent for ordaining both men and women as medical missionaries.

May the voice from the living oracles of God, the startling movings of providence, speak in clear language to the church, “separate unto me Paul and Barnabas.” Holy and devout men are wanted now to cultivate their mental and physical powers and their piety to the uttermost, and to be ordained to go forth as medical missionaries, both men and women. Every effort should be made to send forth intelligent workers. The same grace that came from Jesus Christ to Paul and Apollos, that distinguished them for spiritual excellencies can be reproduced and brought into working order in many devoted missionaries.\textsuperscript{166}

Interestingly, she used the same text and argumentation commonly employed to support the ordination of ministers, namely the ordination of Paul and Barnabas. Similarly, Ellen White made an interesting statement in regard to the ordination of “missionary physicians” in 1908, when the medical work at the three sanitariums in California was still in its infancy:

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.\textsuperscript{167}

Obviously she had a broader understanding of ordination that allowed a specific setting apart with prayer and the laying on of hands for diverse ministries and not merely for the gospel ministry.

While the ordination of a missionary physician for his work was comparable to the ordination of a minister for the gospel ministry, it did not make the physician a minister. Also, the setting apart of medical workers as missionary physicians was a tool to keep them spiritually and missionary

\textsuperscript{166}Ellen G. White to J. H. Kellogg and Wife, 19 February 1893 (Letter 35, 1893), EGWE, printed in idem, \textit{Manuscript Releases}, vol. 6 (Silver Spring, Md.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), 226 (emphasis added).

minded in their work. In talking about the commission given by Christ to the first disciples, Ellen White suggested that both “men and women,” if they yield to the consecrating influence of the Holy Spirit, are “ordained of God to bring salvation to human hearts and minds,” confirming her view that ordination sets apart the ordained individual for a spiritual purpose, which apparently applied even to those primarily engaged in medical work.168

Every Believer a “Minister”

With the growing missionary perspective of Seventh-day Adventists came also an understanding of the necessary involvement of every believer in the missionary work. Similar to Ellen White’s threefold view of “ministry,” A. T Jones remarked that the word “ministry” in 2 Cor 6:3 does not merely refer to the “ordained ministry of the pulpit” but to everyone who received God’s grace. Based on 1 Pet 4:10 he suggested that it was the task of every believer to participate in this ministry of grace.169 Later he seemed to emphasize that “ordained and licensed workers” mutually engage in missionary work, but when these workers leave an established church to enter a new field, it is up to the remaining, unordained church members, men and women, to engage in various lines of ministry in order to continue what the paid workers started in their community.170 In 1894, S. N. Haskell wrote about an ordained minister from Russia who was frequently ordered to leave the country after making new converts in a certain area. Then his wife would return to the place because the authorities were not used to women missionaries and did not act against them as


they did against men. After she took the place of her husband, Haskell stated, she made “more converts than he [did].”171

Although Ellen White suggested that ordained ministers should act as representatives of God on earth, she also emphasized that every believer is Christ’s representative.172 It should also be noted that Ellen White employed the term “pastor” not as an equivalent for ordained ministers but rather to refer to a person who does the personal, spiritual work and care that is often neglected by the ministers. In her view, women were especially suited to the role of pastor.173 She pointed out that many are “laborers together with God” that are not discerned by leaders and members because they have never been formally ordained for the work, yet they carry Christ’s yoke and exert a saving influence.174 Also, she repeatedly encouraged people to actively engage in the cause and mission of the church and stressed that “ordination” was not a prerequisite for such work.175 If willing individuals asked God in faith, trusted in Christ’s merits, and depended upon Christ in a consecrated, self-denying, and self-sacrificing spirit, God would fit them for that work and give

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171S. N. Haskell to W. C. White, Kopenhagen, Denmark, 5 June 1894, EGWE.


them the Holy Spirit. Many souls would be saved “as a result of men looking to Jesus for their ordination and orders.”

She suggested that a minister’s wife who “devotes her time and strength to visiting” families, “opening the Scriptures to them, although the hands of ordination have not been laid upon her,” could accomplish a work in the line of ministry. Accordingly, she should be paid a salary proportionate to the time spent. Ellen White argued that God regarded it an injustice for such a woman to be treated as another minister’s wife who did not engage in the work at all. While the church used tithe money only for the support of the ministers, she recommended that wives who actively supported their minister-husbands and women who engaged in missionary work should also receive a wage from the tithe. It seems that her concept as described above is in harmony with the Protestant idea of the priesthood of all believers. Thus it seems reasonable when she says, “All who are ordained unto the life of Christ are ordained to work for the salvation of their fellow-men.” The gospel commission is therefore not only addressed to the twelve initial


177 Ellen G. White, “Consumers, But Not Producers,” 25 April 1901 (Manuscript 35, 1901), EGWE.


179 See, e.g., Breed, “General Conference District No. 6,” 217; idem, “District 6,” 19.


181 This was pointed out in Fortin, “The Concept of Ordination in the Writings of Ellen G. White,” 115, 116. Cf. Ellen G. White to Bro. and Sr. Maxson, Adelaide, South Australia, 12 October 1896 (Letter 73, 1896); idem, Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers, 212, 213, 441; idem, Testimonies for the Church, 2:169 [1868]; 6:123, 274 [1900]. She repeatedly quoted and alluded to 1 Pet 2:9 and John 15:16.

182 Ellen G. White, “Our Work,” Signs of the Times, 25 August 1898, 2. In this quotation different shades of meaning of the word “ordain” become visible. While she used the term in referring to the appointment of someone to an
disciples but to all believers, even though they may not have been set apart with human hands. They may nevertheless look “to Jesus for their ordination and order,” knowing that he “has laid his hands” upon them.

Summary

When Sabbatarian Adventists began setting apart people for the gospel ministry in the early 1850s, they supported that practice primarily from the NT. They saw the need to apply NT passages regarding ordination or the laying on of hands in order to create order, unity, and harmony among the believers and to prevent the influence of false teachers. While early on they did not want to go beyond the pattern outlined in the NT, they later modified this position and began to allow for adaptation of NT patterns in order to accommodate changing circumstances, insisting merely that all new developments be in harmony with the Bible even if they were not an exact reflection of biblical precedents. Practical necessities, the growing mission of the church, and its increasing organizational structures lead them to create new offices, positions, and ministries. Often new regulations were not supported by any biblical passages, but they were justified on the grounds that the new regulations and refinements were not so much biblical prescriptions but valid human applications of the principle of gospel order to ensure unity, order, and harmony in the church. Reflecting this openness to development, the ordination ceremony itself, which was initially very simple, gradually became more elaborate and came to reflect some basic elements present in the Methodist Episcopal ordination rite.

office/mission or the practice of laying on of hands, she also used it to mean “to command or decree” and “to order or organize.” See Forin, “The Concept of Ordination in the Writings of Ellen G. White,” 117, 118.


184Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, 6:444 [1900]; idem, “Words to Our Workers,” Review and Herald, 21 April 1903, 7.
Though some individuals suggested that baptism was a sacred ordinance that could be conducted only by an ordained minister, Ellen White argued against this. Although she agreed that church members should, for the sake of order, allow the minister to perform the baptism, it was not wrong for them to do it in case of his absence.

While Seventh-day Adventists generally followed the practice of ordaining only those individuals for the ministry that had proven their divine call in evangelistic or ministerial field work, they sometimes also ordained individuals that did not have an experience in these lines of the work. When these individuals had proven their abilities and skills in other lines of the work (educational, administrational, etc.), the church frequently decided to set them apart too.

Interestingly, although ordination eventually became a requirement for serving in administrative or educational leadership positions, ordination was not initially a prerequisite for these positions, because these were distinguished from the gospel ministry. Seventh-day Adventists were generally open to the engagement of women in various lines of ministry, yet it was not their practice to ordain them for the gospel ministry. In earlier years they practiced only the ordination of ministers, elders, and deacons, yet by the 1890s Ellen White recommended the ordination of people, both male and female, for various lines of ministry. Thus she emphasized that ordination was not an act linked solely to the clergy but she envisioned ordination as a practice that set apart and committed people to various specific lines of ministry such as deaconesses, missionaries, medical physicians, etc.

Setting people apart for a specific ministry did not automatically turn that person into an ordained minister. Although the church began to implement some of these recommendations, it seems that it never really effectuated them entirely.
In summary, the general Seventh-day Adventist practice of ordination was specifically based on NT passages, yet the practice and its implications developed over time and were influenced by external necessities and the growth of the church structure and the mission of the church.