



Theology of Ordination

Report of the Biblical Research Committee

South Pacific Division

November 2013



The Process:

The Biblical Research Committee of the South Pacific Division was tasked with examining the topic of ordination, first to determine what the Adventist theology of ordination actually is. This was not a simple matter, as it had not been done before. The church had inherited a tradition arising from pragmatic necessities during its infancy, but it did not found the practice of ordaining ministers on biblical teachings per se. At its meeting in August 2011 the BRC chose a number of scholars from this division to explore the topic and report back. In the two meetings of 2012, papers were read and a report sent to the General Conference's Biblical Research Institute. This process continued into 2013, with the discussions focussing more on the ordination of women, and a number of conclusions drawn up that are presented in this paper.

People Involved

The members of the Biblical Research Committee in the South Pacific are:

Barry Oliver (chair), David Tasker (secretary), Lawrence Tanabose, Jerry Matthews, Leigh Rice, Daniel Reynaud, David Thiele, Neil Watts, Wendy Jackson, Ray Roennfeldt, Ross Cole, Bradley Kemp, Jorge Munoz, Robert McIver, Drene Somasundram, and Branimir Schubert.

Papers Presented:

“The Problem of Ordination: Lessons from Early Christian History,” Darius Jankiewicz PhD, Andrews University.

This paper explores and compares ministry and ordination in the Bible and in the various epochs of Post Apostolic Christianity, including the early Adventist Era. In Scripture there is not an unambiguously clear theology of either ministry or ordination, and the office of pastor does not correspond readily to any position in the early Christian church. Further, there is no direct Scriptural evidence that local elders/bishops were actually ordained through the laying on of hands, nor is there evidence that only ordained pastors or elders laid hands on those being ordained, or that there are three levels of ordination: pastor, elder and deacon.

In the post-Apostolic era, after Christ had not returned, all the leaders had died, and persecution became more widespread, the church faced a crisis that it met by developing a leadership structure that continues to influence the church to this day. Institutional aspects of church replaced mission, and rank, status and position became more important than the gospel commission. Sacramentalism was used to protect the church structure, and the persecuted church became a persecuting church. That is what our church needs to guard against. We need to focus more on our roots when we were a movement with a mission rather than repeating the mistakes of the early church in being more interested in preserving the institution.

“ ‘The Lord Has Ordained Me’: Ellen White’s Perspective,” John Skrzypaszek, Ellen G. White/SDA Research Centre, Avondale College of Higher Education.

Although Ellen White does not delineate a theology of ordination her views on the topic fall into three distinct categories: a) personal experience, b) biblical reflection, and c) practical application; each of which demonstrates her clear understanding of God’s involvement in the process. She encapsulates her conviction in the phrase “The Lord has ordained me as his messenger.” The context of her reflections suggests that the purpose of God’s act of calling or ‘ordaining’ primarily makes a person aware of their specific role. It is clear that in Ellen White’s understanding the intimacy of her own role as a messenger includes emotional struggles; “How clearly I remembered the experience of forty years ago, when my light went out in darkness because I was unwilling to lift this cross, and refused to be obedient.”

She sees a number of components in the act of ordination, first being the revelation of God’s love, then a matured burden for people, followed by a clear understanding of the task ahead, and finally the outflow of active ministry striving for the conversion of the lost.

Her biblical reflections reiterate that ordination is simply a public recognition of the divine call. She affirms that no virtue is imparted by the laying of hands (AA, 161-2). In fact, she recognized that with the passing of time “ordination by laying of hands was greatly abused” and that “unwarranted importance was attached to it as if a power came at once upon those who received such ordination” (p. 162).

The depth of Ellen White’s sentiments regarding God’s direct involvement in the process of divine ordination is clearly expressed in a letter written from Australia. “The Holy Spirit, attending the worker together with God, enables him to gather in the sheaves. It is not learned men, not eloquent men, who are to be depended upon to do the work now needed, but humble men, who are learned in the school of Christ....” It seems that in her later years she became more gender inclusive as she saw the “emergency situation” of a lost world and the urgency required to get as many as possible into the active service of preparing people for Christ’s soon coming.

“A Biblical Theology of Ordination,” Kyle de Waal PhD, Avondale College of Higher Education.

An examination of all the potential NT words for ordain/commission/appoint, together with a review of the practises of the early Christians and of course that of Jesus too. Also examined is the idea of the laying on of hands in Luke and Paul’s writings as well as brief consideration of the role of women in the OT and NT. The paper argues for inclusivity in terms of the roles of male and female in the early church. Preliminary conclusions lean toward historic Christian understandings of the priesthood of all believers, the granting of the gifts of the Spirit to all believers and the equality of all believers before God and in the church.

“The Language of Ordination in Scripture,” Ross Cole PhD, Avondale College of Higher Education.

An overview of what the OT teaches about “ordination.” Although the word “ordination” as such is not found in the Bible, the laying on of hands is found in association with a number of offices and roles. Delegation of authority and the resourcing of the Spirit are fundamental elements symbolized in the act. Empowerment for a new role is always in view, not a reward for having already done the job well. Symbolism is vital, but the reality is in some way present beyond the symbol. Standing the candidate before the people signals readiness to serve.

The themes celebrated as hands are laid include divine sovereignty, separation to the will of God, the diversity of the gifts placed in the body, and the generosity of God in providing officers, and in endowing His servants with all the resources necessary for ministry. There are also the themes of servanthood, delegated authority, and ministry as representation of God and humans.

“Should Ordination be Considered a Sacrament in the Seventh-day Adventist Church? An Evaluation in the light of Biblical Data,” Wendy Jackson PhD (Cand.), Avondale College of Higher Education.

While Catholic theology places importance on the sacramental nature of ordination, Protestants have generally rejected the idea. Sacramentalism contains four elements: obvious symbolism, it conveys grace, it needs to be instituted by Christ, and it needs to make a distinction between laity and clergy. Seventh-day Adventists followed the Protestant tradition in rejecting sacramentalism, and went a step further, dropping sacramental terminology as well, preferring instead the term “ordinance” to describe baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and foot washing. However there may be lingering traces of sacramentalism in some church practices.

Therefore to prevent any vestige of sacramentalism, the Church needs to be careful of any suggestion that gives ministers higher status over and above laity. The process of ordaining ministers should not be seen as more important or special than the ordination of deacons and elders, and there needs to be some way to involve the congregation in the ordination process rather than restricting the proceedings to those previously ordained.

“The Ordination of Women: A Biblical-Theological Introduction,” David Thiele PhD, Pacific Adventist University.

There are only two unchangeable and irrefutable biblical pieces of data that relate to the ordination of women: first, there were no female priests in the Mosaic cultus of Israel, and second, Jesus did not choose any women to be among His twelve disciples. However, neither of these points forbids anything; they merely relate what happened in the past. If we in fact applied this principle, then only males can worship Jesus, since only male shepherds and Magi were able to worship Jesus at His birth.

Scripture nowhere disqualifies women from ministering, physically, spiritually, ontologically, or culturally. It was the Greek philosopher Aristotle who made the statement that “the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled.” The Gnostic heresy that plagued the early Christian Church, although heavily dependent on Greek philosophy, declared that women were above men as Eve had been elevated in status above Adam by eating from the tree of knowledge, prompting some of the apparently harsh words against women believers by the NT writers.

While Jesus may not have chosen women disciples because of the cultural taboos, Paul, ministering in a Gentile world, clearly worked with a number of influential women leaders. On that basis it is reasonable to accept ordained women in contexts where that is acceptable and not to force the issue in areas where it is not.

OBSERVATIONS FOR THE THEOLOGY OF ORDINATION STUDY COMMITTEE

Global Observations:

1. The foundation principle for the resolution of questions regarding ordination is the use of the correct hermeneutic.
2. The discussion is driven by our understanding of the nature of the church, its role and its function.
3. An Adventist theology of ordination will be based on scriptural principles.
4. Where Scripture is silent on current issues, a theology of ordination must be based on the principles of Scripture, taking adequate account of what Scripture says as applied in its local or issue-specific contexts.
5. The words translated “ordain” have a very wide usage.
6. While the roots of many NT practices can be traced to the OT there is discontinuity between them. There is no practical connection for example, between priests, Levites, elders, and deacons.
7. Ordination is a practice driven by mission and practical needs – informed by biblical studies and theology.
8. The Bible does not command ordination; however it does encourage the church to develop modes of maintaining order in the exercise of its mission. These modes may go beyond biblical practice but must be consistent with it.

9. Ordination is not to be considered a sacrament. Biblical evidence supports the symbolism of the laying on of hands when appointing individuals for a task, but there is no firm evidence for the transfer of grace or virtue in this context. Consequently, we must reject attributing sacramental value to ordination.
10. The theology of ordination informs and is informed by the practical implementation of our ecclesiology, i.e. the global and local nature of the church, which, expressed in its various forms, facilitates mission.
11. The significance of ordination is influenced by culture. In some parts of the world, culture bestows inordinate status upon a minister at ordination.
12. EGW considers that ordination contains an experiential element that has its basis in a call from God. Although some women may not be concerned about non-ordination, for others it creates great angst because of their sense of their divine call, which the church does not seem to recognize.

Conclusions:

1. The Biblical Research Committee of the South Pacific Division does not see any scriptural principle which would be an impediment to women being ordained.
2. The calling of the Holy Spirit needs to be recognized for both men and women. There is a sense of injustice that needs to be addressed.
3. The mission of the church is a primary determinant of praxis, both in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and in its climax as the Holy Spirit is poured out on both men and women during the latter rain.