

Pastor's Corner 10-27-2018

A "Brief" History of Women's Ordination in Adventism

Trouble's a-brewin' within the Seventh-day Adventist church and it largely centers around the role that women play in gospel ministry and how to deal with entities that are out of compliance with church working policies. If you're not up to speed on the issues it may be hard to see how these two issues are connected so I've put together a brief history of the women's ordination debate that will hopefully fill in some gaps.

The first time the church considered ordaining women to pastoral ministry was back in 1881 at the General Conference session held in Battle Creek, MI. Up to that point it was just assumed that men were the ordained leaders of churches. Women hadn't been specifically excluded by any vote, committee or formal decision. However, as women engaged in various forms of ministry it seemed prudent to our pioneers to formally consider the possibility of ordaining women to gospel ministry. By the end of the session the following resolution was passed:

"Resolved, that females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry. This was discussed by J. O. Corliss, A. C. Bourdeau, E. R. Jones, D. H. Lamson, W.H. Littlejohn, A. S. Hutchins, D. M. Canright, and J. N. Loughborough, and referred to the General Conference Committee."

Essentially, they voted that women should be ordained, but they shouldn't do it until the subject was discussed in more detail by another committee (which never happened). The issues was shelved but continued to be discussed and debated for decades.

In 1973 an ad hoc committee was assembled under the supervision of the General Conference to take a look at the subject in more detail. They came to several conclusions, that (1) "the equality of all believers was established by creation and is being restored through redemption in Jesus Christ"; (2) there is "no significant theological objection to the ordination of women to Church ministries"; (3) "a pilot program for women in pastoral and evangelistic roles" should be established in receptive fields "on a two-year basis, with the expectation of renewal upon evaluation"; and (4) an interim report of the pilot program should be presented for the 1974 Annual Council, as "a basis for any recommendations concerning the ordination of women to the gospel ministry which would require consideration by the 1975 General Conference session" (Seventh-day Adventists on Women's Ordination: A brief historical overview by Alberto R. Timm, Ellen G. White Estate).

These recommendations made it to the 1974 Annual Council and they voted to accept the part about the priesthood of all believers and voted not to accept the bit about ordaining women to gospel ministry (if that seems like a contradiction that's because it is).

The next big development took place at the 1990 General Conference session where a vote was taken that stated in part:

- "1. A decision to ordain women as pastors would not be welcomed or meet with approval in most of the world church.*
- 2. The provisions of the Church Manual and the General Conference Working Policy, which allow only for ordination to the gospel ministry on a worldwide basis, have strong support by the divisions."*

Later it adds:

"1. While the commission does not have a consensus as to whether or not the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen G. White explicitly advocate or deny the ordination of women to pastoral ministry, it concludes unanimously that these sources affirm a significant, wide-ranging, and continuing ministry for women, which is being expressed and will be evidenced in the varied and expanding gifts according to the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

2. Further, in view of the widespread lack of support for the ordination of women to the gospel ministry in the world church and in view of the possible risk of disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the church, we do not approve ordination of women to the gospel ministry."

Notice that the ordination of women was not refused based on any theological grounds or on a Biblical argument. In fact, when it comes to the Bible and Ellen White, the GC vote specifically states that the study commission couldn't come to a consensus on the topic. The sole rationale for not allowing women's ordination was that many parts of the world would have trouble accepting it, it would be divisive, and therefore we shouldn't do it. This is the first (and only) time the church officially voted against women's ordination at a General Conference session. As a result of this action new committees were formed to study the issue. Books, reports, recommendations and articles followed.

Five years later, at the 1995 GC session the question was again brought forward. At this session the North American division made the following request:

"The General Conference vests in each division the right to authorize the ordination of individuals within its territory in harmony with established policies. In addition, where circumstances do not render it inadvisable, a division may authorize the ordination of qualified individuals without regard to gender. In divisions where the division executive committees take specific actions approving the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, women may be ordained to serve in those divisions."

This request was voted down meaning divisions were not given the authority to decide for themselves whether or not to ordain women. This wasn't a women's ordination vote, it was a church governance vote. More committees were formed to study the issue and even more books, reports, recommendations and articles followed.

In 2010 the Annual Council outlined a process to formally study the issue even further. So yet another committee was formed. This one was called the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC). By the time of the 2015 GC session

the TOSC had reached 3 positions on woman's ordination. In the end 2/3's of the members of the committee were in favor of granting divisions the authority to decide to ordain women in their territory.

The most recent vote on the issue was at the 2015 GC session. Again, the request was made to allow divisions to have authority over this matter. Again, the response was, "no." It is important to point out that (once again) the 2015 session did not vote against women's ordination specifically, they voted against the request to allow divisions to make that decision.

So that's the history but what does it have to do with compliance and church governance? Well, despite the actions taken by GC sessions and Annual Councils there are several unions that ordain women as pastors (or have ceased ordination altogether). "How can they do this," you ask?

In an article for Spectrum Magazine Gary Patterson, a retired field secretary of the GC notes, "Ordination authority is clearly defined in General Conference policy. Regarding the approval of persons designated for ordination policy B 05 states, 'decisions regarding the ordination of ministers are entrusted to the union conference...' Regarding such decisions the policy further states, 'each level of organization exercises a realm of final authority and responsibility...' Thus, in the selection and authorization of such individuals, the General Conference has no authority over the union decisions as long as these decisions are in harmony with the criteria established for ordination by General Conference policy."

He continues by saying, "There are fifteen such criteria listed in policy L 50, none of which refer in any way to gender. If, therefore, any individual approved by the union meets these criteria, the General Conference authority has been satisfied. Given that there is no gender reference in these fifteen requirements, the union is acting within its authority as stated in policy B 05."

Patterson was making the argument that the question of who can be ordained is a decision granted by GC working policy to the unions. This is an interesting shift in the argument because it moves away from theology and into a question of church governance. It reframes the topic as one of union rights vs General Conference authority

The ordination question then becomes one of "who has the authority" and is not dissimilar to the question faced by our own state of North Dakota regarding the legalization of marijuana for recreational use. The federal government says it's illegal, yet several states have voted to make it legal. Can they do that? Well it depends on your view of state's rights vs federal authority.

This appears to be a major consideration in the women's ordination debate. As it stands now the GC does not recognize the ordination of women as pastors. They consider entities who do so to be out of compliance. The unions that ordain women believe that it is within their authority to decide who they ordain (an authority given them by working policy) and therefore the GC would be the ones out of compliance by trying to dictate the issue.

This year the Annual Council voted a resolution giving far reaching power to the GC executive committee to deal with entities they believe are out of compliance. This resolution isn't limited to women's ordination, nor is it limited to matters of doctrine and theology. It can apply to any form of non-compliance, including non-compliance on non-theological matters relating only to policy.

The GC executive committee now has a process in place whereby they can remove leaders of non-compliant entities from office. This would be akin to granting the President of the United States and his cabinet the ability to fire state legislators and governors if their state were out of compliance with federal law. This is a problematic development and a radical shift in church governance.

Happy Sabbath
Pastor Tyler