

The Biblical Research Institute and the Issue of Women's Ordination to the Pastoral Ministry

By Ekkehardt Mueller

1. BRI and Women's Ordination

The issue of women's ordination to the pastoral ministry has been with the Seventh-day Adventist Church for many decades. With the new developments this quinquennium, BRI members were asked to participate in various committees. Some wrote papers; a few addressed the topic publicly. In each case, BRI members shared their personal opinions on the issue of women's ordination to ministry. As of now the BRI as an entity of the Church has not taken an official position on the issue. It has neither opposed nor endorsed women's ordination. The ultimate decision remains with the worldwide Church.

2. Concerns

The BRI is quite concerned about some fallouts of the current debate. It seems that after the Theology of Ordination Committee (TOSC) finished its work, the dispute reached a new level that, in our opinion, is detrimental to the Church and to church members—that is, those directly affected and those listening to the debate. We have the impression that the discussion is no longer on a biblical-theological and factual level but that individuals and groups are being heavily criticized and condemned by others. In theology we refer to these as *ad hominem* arguments. Here are some potential effects of such an approach:

- (1) *Ad hominem* arguments not only hurt people but may also create hostility between the attacker and the attacked, destroy trust, and hinder future cooperation and teamwork. In the end we may have a split within the Church—if not visible, then invisible. This may hinder the unity and mission of the Church for years to come.
- (2) Quite likely, onlookers will also be affected. Non-Adventist observers of the debate may be appalled by what they see happening in Adventist circles and what they read on the Internet. Thus the debate may have negative effects on the Church's outreach and on its reputation in the general public.
- (3) The same may be true of our church members and young people. The ordination debate has nothing to do with the Bible's most fundamental teachings. It does not belong to the core of Adventist beliefs. Hence, it is all the more disturbing to church members when they see people involved in the debate avoid, offend, and judge one another because they are on different sides of the ordination debate—and they see little to nothing of the divine love that Jesus wants His disciples to exhibit. This may raise serious doubts about the Church in the minds of church members.
- (4) Another major problem is the erosion of biblical authority and hermeneutics. It is perplexing, especially for young people, to see people who hold a high view of Scripture come to different results. As a result, they may conclude that the Bible is irrelevant to some or all issues that we face today, and that the Church has failed to articulate a methodology that brings us all to the same conclusions. This is very serious because such a conclusion would destroy the foundation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

3. Response

Responding to these challenges, we urge those directly involved in the debate to be extremely careful when presenting their own views as well as those of others. Be gracious and kind. Our pioneers were able to handle different theological perspectives and still work together in mutual esteem. They were even able to live with unresolved issues until an agreement was reached years later. So should we.

We also need to consider the cost of our actions. Persons involved in the debate must look ahead and ask themselves: How could what I present adversely affect the Church and church members, not just here and now but also in the future? What would be gained if my position were accepted but people lose their faith in God and Scripture and their trust in the Church? When the debate ends, healing will be necessary. How can I contribute to that healing process already today? Is the issue of women's ordination really so big that the cost of it does not matter?

The time has come to stop rhetoric that hurts others. Individuals and institutions should foster peace and refrain from adding fuel to the fire. All of us need to reach out to others in respect and love, even if some differences remain.

To the observers we would like to say: do not be disturbed. Scripture is the Word of God. The Bible not only speaks to the past but it also speaks to our times. Typically, the problem is not Scripture but the human interpreter. Since all of us are fallible human beings, differences in interpretation will occur. However, there are biblical passages and topics not directly addressed in the Bible that are more difficult to understand and on which legitimate differences of opinion still exist in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. For example, this is the case with certain passages in Daniel and Revelation. The Holy Spirit still has some work to do with us, and we must allow this process to happen. These biblical passages and theological topics that are not yet completely clear to us do not affect our fundamental understanding of God and His message for us. That we wrestle with issues is good; that we disagree in some areas is not necessarily all bad either. Still, Scripture is the final authority in all matters of faith and Christian life, revealing to us God's wonderful plan of salvation and of our crucified and risen Redeemer, Lord, Example, and Mediator Jesus Christ, whom all tongues will praise some day.

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