

Some Wrong and Right Reasons in the Women's Ordination Debate

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Some people do good works because they believe that by doing them they may have a better chance to be saved. Others do good deeds because they are grateful for God's gracious gift of redemption and want to follow the example of their Master. Should Christians do good works? Yes. The Bible repeatedly stresses the importance of good works as exemplified in Jesus' famous parable about the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31-46). After having stated that true believers have been saved by grace through faith and "not as a result of works," Paul adds, "for we are . . . created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph 1:8-10). Is it possible to do the right thing for the wrong reasons? Obviously it is.

Presently, the Adventist Church discusses the topic of ordination with a focus on the ordination of women to the pastoral ministry. This article does not deal with the question whether or not the ordination of women as pastors is possible or should be pursued. However, it seems to this author that some arguments in favor of women's ordination misrepresent Scripture or do not take it seriously. Arguments opposed to women's ordination likewise reveal similar flaws. Let us take a look!

Ordination for Wrong Reasons

Adventists emphasize the importance of the Word of God and seek guidance from Scripture. In matters of faith and practice of the Christian life, the Bible occupies an unsurpassed and unrivaled place. But some arguments used in the debate do not represent Scripture well or have not much to do with Scripture and therefore are either false, weak, or of a secondary nature only. Here is a sample of arguments that do not work well or are even inconsistent:

1. *The ordination of women is necessary because of a cultural and societal consensus.* It is no question that society and current culture in many countries around the world have redefined the role and functions of women and exert pressure on those that do not comply. This can easily lead to the perception that the church must adapt to culture in order to be relevant and not to be considered a cult. But culture is not automatically right and cannot determine what believers should believe and how they should act. In certain areas, for instance, when it comes to promiscuity and exploitation of others, true Christianity will be countercultural.

2. *The ordination of women is necessary because since other churches have decided to ordain female clergy, Adventists should not be the last to follow.* The question is not what other churches do or not do but what the right thing to do. Other churches also practice infant baptism and keep Sunday.

3. *The ordination of women is necessary because the early Adventist Church may have a track record of supporting women in ministry and possibly here and there women's ordination.* However, even historical developments in the Adventist Church are no guarantee that things were or are right and should be pursued. The Church has had a fair amount of crises and challenges, and mistakes happened occasionally.

4. *The ordination of women is necessary because it is unethical not to ordain women.* Viewed with the eyes of this generation, the issue is an ethical one, at least for many, and it maybe so indeed. However, the Bible does not contain a command to ordain women to pastoral ministry. Therefore, it must be clarified first whether or not the Bible allows for or implicitly suggests the ordination of women. Having clarified this issue, one can talk about ethics. Otherwise, it could be argued that from a biblical perspective it may not be morally wrong to withhold ordination from women and that refusal to do so by no means violates the divine command, as there is no violation of a divine command by not ordaining Sabbath School teachers.

5. *The ordination of women is necessary because change must happen regularly and is unavoidable.*

While some change has to be expected, because the Holy Spirit continues to guide the church, change for the sake of change is not the best possible reason. Church history is full of examples of bad choices in theology and practice. In Scripture, the Athenians' preoccupation with "something new" is not necessarily understood as praiseworthy (Acts 17:21).

6. *The ordination of women is necessary for practical reasons.* Although practice may have oftentimes influenced theological reflection, and such an influence may not be wrong but may even be necessary, it can, on the other hand, lead to false developments that are extremely difficult to correct. The development of the hierarchical priesthood, the primacy of the bishop of Rome, and his elevation to pope are without biblical support.

7. *The ordination of women is necessary because it opens the way to the acceptance of a homosexual lifestyle by the Adventist Church.* The two issues are not related to each other and should be kept separate. While the Bible clearly forbids homosexual activity, it does not explicitly—and some would argue that not even implicitly—prohibit ordination of women.

8. *The ordination of women is necessary because the issue will not go away.* There are other issues that will not go away either, such as the evolution versus creation debate, Sunday keeping versus Sabbath keeping, belief in the natural immortality of the soul versus belief in the non-immortality of the entire human being. If the Church has to yield in a case in which the issue does not go away, would that not logically extend to all issues that remain to be challenges? This is hardly a biblical approach. It makes the Church dependent on majority views and not on Scripture.

This list of arguments in favor of ordination of women to the pastoral ministry is by no means exhaustive. It shows that some arguments are questionable, difficult to accept for Adventists or of a secondary nature, that is, they may be supportive if the ordination of women can be established on other grounds.

Non-Ordination for Wrong Reasons

We now turn to arguments against the ordination of women that are equally flawed:

1. *Ordination of women is unacceptable because whatever happens in society and culture should be rejected.* Such an argument would consider culture and societal norms as completely and always opposed to God, a position that is hardly sustainable. Culture is a mixed bag which Christians cannot accept in a wholesale way. But they do not need to reject everything either. For instance, Christians are not called to reject government which is part of culture (Rom 13:1-3).

2. *Ordination of women is unacceptable because whatever happens in other churches should be rejected.* While Adventists do not just imitate other churches, they do not object to everything that is done by and in these churches. Adventists stand on the shoulder of other Christians. They are grateful for biblical teachings that the Reformers, the Anabaptists, and others have rediscovered and practiced.¹

3. *Ordination of women is unacceptable because in spite of discussing the issue for more than forty years, the Church has never officially accepted it.* Such an argument would be an argument based on tradition, in this case Adventist tradition. It is not a biblical argument. It also took Adventist pioneers a while to agree on other issues. For instance, the doctrine of the Trinity, though clearly endorsed by Ellen G. White, was not easily accepted.

4. *Ordination of women is unacceptable because of a militant feminist agenda and dominant females.* While some forms of feminist theology completely reinterpret Scripture based on the presupposition that Scripture is not the Word of God and may actually be harmful, which is unacceptable to Adventists, and while some actions of feminists may irritate large parts of the Church, their approval of women ordination does not

mean that it cannot or should not be pursued. Usage of wrong arguments on either side should not hinder us to do things for the right reasons.

5. *Ordination of women is unacceptable because it is opposed to the traditional understanding of the role and functions of women. It militates against family relations that are described in terms of submissiveness.* This argument is not necessarily true. Many proponents of women ordination would still maintain that within the household women should be submissive to their husbands and husbands should love their wives with the love of Jesus. However, they would not accept that each and every woman must be submissive to each and every man. On the other hand, even if this argument were true, it cannot be used to prevent change, if Scripture would imply change.

6. *Ordination of women is unacceptable because of practical reasons. New developments create anxiety and rock the boat.* Although it is quite likely true that new developments may create uncomfortable feelings, some kind of anxiety, and would leave males wondering what their roles are and how they should relate to females in authority, nevertheless practical reasons cannot be the ultimate judge whether something should or should not be done.

7. *Ordination of women is unacceptable because it could be linked to an endorsement of a homosexual lifestyle.* It is true that some people would link women's ordination to the endorsement of a homosexual lifestyle. Others who support the ordination of women to pastoral ministry would be strictly opposed to practicing homosexuals, because the Bible prohibits a homosexual lifestyle. Again wrong reasons used by some should not prevent us to do the right thing for right reasons.

8. *Ordination of women is unacceptable because its proponents use forms of liberal theology and critical approaches to Scripture.* This argument is largely not true for Adventists. While some connect the ordination issue with a liberal theology, most likely the vast majority does not. It is those that have a high view of Scripture that oftentimes support women's ordination.

Ordination or Non-Ordination for the Right Reasons

Throughout their history Adventists have emphasized that they accept Scripture as the Word of God and are dedicated to study the Bible and follow its direction. However, it seems that in the ordination debate this is not always what happens. At times, we short-circuit the debate by secondary and even wrong arguments. We should not allow this to happen. It only creates an emotional atmosphere and makes us focus on arguments which are not very helpful instead of allowing us to focus on Scripture and its implications.

How to go about this enterprise of studying Scripture and which questions to ask I have outlined somewhere else.² Here it is sufficient to state that in areas where the Bible does not contain explicit commands Adventists do not subscribe to the following approaches (1) what Scripture does not prohibit is permitted—this would allow us to smoke tobacco and take narcotic drugs—and (2) what Scripture does not permit is prohibited—this would outlaw the use of modern medicine and the Adventist Church structure. Therefore, we take seriously the biblical principles and make a distinction between biblical descriptions and biblical prescriptions. We also trace developments within Scripture (e.g., from the bill of divorce in the Old Testament to Jesus' clear position against divorce).

Studying Scripture and trying to discover biblical principles that can guide us in the ordination debate, weighing all biblical evidence, praying, and allowing the Holy Spirit to guide us need to be our focus. After this is done some of the secondary arguments may provide some additional support. But Scripture remains first and foremost.

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¹See E. G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911), 61-264 (chapters 4-14).

²E.g., Ekkehardt Mueller, “Hermeneutical Guidelines for Dealing with Theological Questions,” *Reflections: The BRI Newsletter* October (2012): 1-7. It will soon be placed on the BRI website (<http://adventistbiblicalresearch.org>).

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