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Fortin, Denis, "Are We Confused About Ordination?" (2010). *Memory, Meaning & Life*. 55.
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September 19, 2010

Are We Confused About Ordination?



What an experience it was to be with over 2000 delegates and thousands of church members in Atlanta's Georgia Dome during the recent [General Conference Session](#). I enjoyed the experience, and I marveled at our Church in all its multi-cultural and multi-lingual expressions.

But sitting through long sessions of interminable discussions on amendments to the [Church Manual](#) required some dedication. Most revisions appeared to be reasonable but so many of them generated amendments that after the second day of business I began to tune out. Some delegates became famous for asking questions or proposing amendments. As we worked laboriously through the 160-page document, I began to notice something I had not seen before: our church is really confused about ordination. Let me explain.

Unbiblical Distinctions

I came to this realization during the long and intriguing discussion we had on whether deaconesses could be ordained. Up to now the *Church Manual* simply stated that “the [local] church may arrange for a suitable service of induction for the deaconesses by an ordained minister” (*Church Manual*, rev. 2000, 16th ed., p. 56). The proposed amendment added wording to allow deaconesses to be ordained like their male counterpart: “Deaconesses may be ordained in divisions where the process has been approved by its executive committee.” In the end, the session voted to amend the *Church Manual* and allow deaconesses to be ordained.

Some of the speakers during this discussion helped me to realize this confusion about ordination and the unbiblical distinctions we make. Up to now, we have required the ordination of male deacons (p. 54) and made provision for the induction of deaconesses if deemed appropriate (p. 56). (However, some churches have made no distinction in gender in the office of deacon and have ordained both genders, which I believe is in agreement with the use of the word *diakonos* in the New Testament, see my earlier [post on Phoebe as a deacon or minister](#).) We ordain elders, both male and female without distinction (pp. 48, 49), but we ordain only male ministers while we commission female ministers. (Strangely, the *Church Manual* says nothing about the need of ministers to be ordained. It simply states a minister is ordained. However, the *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Manual* includes chapters on ministers' credentials, the meaning of ordination, and the ceremony of ordination.) Adding to the confusion is one more statement after the sections on the functions of church clerk and treasurer: “All newly elected officers of the local church may be inducted in a service of induction conducted by a minister” (p. 62). This statement is now at the end of chapter 8 and includes all local church leaders.

All this confusion about what to do with our pastors and lay church leaders stems from a poor and practically non-existent theology of ordination. Honestly, I think our church does not understand what ordination is about. And a lot of this confusion, we must admit, stems from our ambiguity about the role of women in ministry.

A Study Of Ordination

I welcome the [call made during the Session](#) that we should study the meaning of ordination in the Scripture and formulate an Adventist theology of ordination. I suggest a few points that ought to be part of this study:

- The meaning of the laying on of hands in the Bible, and particularly in the New Testament;

- The difference between a sacrament and an ordinance, and whether ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist church is a sacrament or an ordinance;
- The historical origins of having deacons, elders and pastors as ordained leaders of the local church;
- Ellen White's meaning of ordination and of her invitation to also set apart by the laying on of hands of medical missionaries and women engaged in ministry ([Ev 546](#); [RH, July 9, 1895](#));
- The differences between laying on of hands, induction, commission, and ordination.


I think a biblical and historical study of these points will help us better understand what ordination is. I personally don't see much difference between induction, commission, and ordination when it comes to laying on of hands. The New Testament speaks of laying hands on servants of the gospel as a setting apart for various kinds of ministry (Deacons, [Acts 6:6](#); Elders, [1 Tim 5:22](#); Missionaries, [Acts 13:3](#)). The context of the ceremony determined its function and purpose. But in all contexts, I think the ceremony says to servants of the church that we see the gifts of the Holy Spirit in their lives and we commission them with our authorization to serve the Lord and the church in a particular ministry.

But it may be that my view is too simplistic so I look forward to this study to bring clarity to our church practices and to my understanding of ordination.

Posted by [Denis Fortin](#) on September 19, 2010 in [Adventist Studies](#), [Missions and Ministry](#) | [Permalink](#)

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I think the recent GC discussion regarding the ordination of deaconesses illustrates the unfortunate conflation of ordination and leadership roles. For many people, they understand ordination as being about specific leadership roles (i.e., if you are ordained, you are a pastor, elder, etc., and thus have a position of spiritual leadership within the body of believers) rather than being about the setting apart of an individual for ministry for a specific role which may or may not be one of leadership. Because of this conflation of two related but separate issues, some stand up to oppose the ordination of a woman for any ministry when in reality what they are truly opposed to is a woman serving in specific positions of spiritual leadership in the body of Christ.

Why do some oppose women serving in specific leadership roles? For some, I suspect, it is a cultural opposition. But for many others, they stand upon a biblical understanding apart from cultural forces.

Posted by: Sean Reed | [September 22, 2010 at 12:36 PM](#)

I resonate very much with your comment. I think you have a good point that our views of ordination and leadership authority have been merged, thus causing us to be confused about the purpose of ordination.

Posted by: Denis Fortin | [September 22, 2010 at 08:33 PM](#)

Dr. Fortin I saw some of the confusion you talk about when I was ordained as a pastor earlier this year. I received two very different responses from those in attendance. Those new to faith asked "so I guess this means you're a real pastor now?" and those from an Adventist background - when I was introduced as "Elder" after the laying on of hands - said "I thought you were already an elder?" The Adventists were confused because I had to be ordained as an "elder" to handle the ordinances in my church district & church plant.

In your post you recommend a deeper study on the issue from a number of angles. In your understanding is it useful or even necessary for our church to embrace a label such as "Christian Egalitarianism"? I noticed recently that we are labeled as one of the proponents of this view on wikipedia over against chauvinism & differentiated from complementarianism? Wiki is obviously not where we should be getting our theology from! But it made me wonder.

To what degree should we give recognition to such labels in addition to the type of biblical & historical study you mentioned?

Posted by: [Wagenersmith](#) | [September 26, 2010 at 01:13 PM](#)

My only question is who ordains, man or God?

Posted by: David de la Vega | [November 19, 2010 at 11:42 PM](#)

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