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### Women's Ordination and the Concept of Present Truth

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# Memory, Meaning & Faith

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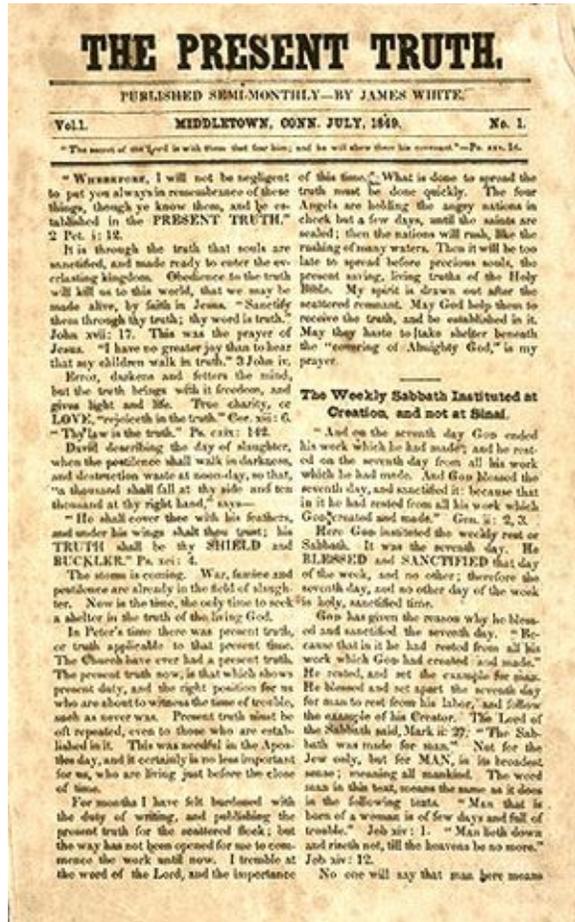
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May 08, 2013

## Women's Ordination and the Concept of Present Truth

By David Penno



The concept of *present truth* is a key part of Seventh-day Adventist theology. Our belief is that God continually reveals new light and understanding as we act on truth that we already understand. So in the 1830s and 1840s the Millerite movement built on the truths that were established in the Reformation and increased the understanding and knowledge of God's will as revealed in the Bible.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was born of a group of Millerites who continued to study and think and pray, and received "new light" on issues such as the Sabbath, the state of the dead, etc. Even though Uriah Smith and others did not believe in the full divinity of Christ, continued study and dialogue in the church, and the influence of Ellen White in books such as the *Desire of Ages*, we came to the point where the church officially accepted this understanding.

There have been times when the church reversed its teaching in a certain area, as new understanding became clearer. The eating of pork and unclean food is just one example of this change in thinking and practice.

### The Principle of Present Truth

Today, the attempt to defend historic Adventism is often practiced improperly. The idea that what Adventists believed and practiced a hundred and fifty years ago is exactly what we should believe and practice today is actually a denial of the concept of present truth. Our pioneers were driven by the idea that there is more to learn, that our living out of the Word of God is

in constant development and improvement.

Change is an essential element of present truth. Therefore, we should expect things to change as God reveals present truth for each generation. To resist change just because it is different from our historical norms is to deny the principle of present truth.

So when we discuss the issue of ordaining women to the pastoral ministry, we should not dismiss it outright simply because it is a change from what has been our historical practice. We have periodically changed our belief and practice throughout our history, based on the principle of present truth.

Apparently Ellen White and the other pioneers did not spend much time opposing the idea of ordaining women to the ministry, nor did they speak much in favor of it. Is it possible that the issue was not present truth at that time? Is it possible that today it is an issue that God would have us move on? I am not suggesting that this is proof that women's ordination is present truth for today, but should we not at least consider the possibility?

We should concede that the lack of belief or practice of ordaining women in the past is not an argument against adopting it

today. We should be willing to give it a fair hearing, and not write it off without careful consideration.

## **An Attitude of Openness**

I am really talking more here about attitude than reasoning. We have reasoned back and forth for decades on this subject, and continue to do so. But I am suggesting that, along with reasoning and discussion, we have an attitude of openness. Whether we finally decide as a church body to ordain or not, we should always be open to the possibility that God is moving the church into new territory as He seeks to mature truth and right practice among his people.

In any discussion, the evidence should be what leads us to conclusions. But sometimes attitudes can cause us to ignore or reject key pieces of evidence that do not agree with our position. The principle of present truth should cause us to honestly consider all the evidence, even that which we do not like. This approach does not guarantee consensus, but it can make it much more likely. Of course it is a rare experience when everyone agrees on anything, but we need a movement toward each other in order to settle serious issues.

## **The Acts 15 Model**

It seems to me that the time has come to settle the issue of women's ordination. As others have pointed out, Acts 15 gives us a model where the church allowed for differences of practice while staying united as a body. Perhaps the present truth for today is that the members of the Adventist Church need to give each other the freedom to minister in the way that is best in their particular culture.

In Acts 15, Christians of Jewish heritage, who formed the majority in the church, believed that Christians should keep all the Mosaic laws, while a minority believed that Christians of Gentile heritage did not need to. But the Holy Spirit was giving clear evidence through the ministry of Paul and Barnabas that He accepted Gentile believers who did not keep all the Mosaic laws (Cornelius and his family, for example). The decision made by the church leaders allowed the church to remain united in spite of cultural and theological differences.

Do we not see this same type of evidence today in the professional ministry of women in China and many Western cultures? Maybe the time has come to permit women's ordination where it will be useful, but not require it everywhere. Maybe God is using the issue of women's ordination to teach us to give each other latitude in areas of belief and practice where the Bible is not clear one way or the other. Maybe a spirit of freedom in unity is the larger "present truth" that the Lord wants us to grasp. Maybe the ordination question is a tool for addressing a larger issue. Maybe.



After 25 years of pastoral ministry, Dr. Penno served the churches of Georgia-Cumberland as the evangelism coordinator for five years. He began his ministry in the Iowa-Missouri Conference in 1980, serving there for 13 years. He moved to the Georgia-Cumberland Conference in 1993. He graduated from Southern Adventist University in 1980 with a BA in Theology and a minor in Biblical Languages. In 2000 he received an MA in Religion from Southern with emphasis in homiletics and church growth. In May of 2009 he graduated with a PhD in Leadership from Andrews University. Dr. Penno--often together with Dr. Bill Knott--teaches the DMin Project Seminar at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. He also works with Andrews University's Institutional Review Board to help expedite the approval process for DMin projects.

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