

PRINCIPLES OF ORDINATION IN THE EARLY SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH, 1844-1900

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Seventh-day Adventists began to practice the ritual of ordination even before their official organization in 1863. The issue did not stir any controversies within the denomination until several decades ago when the question of women's ordination arose. Many opinions have been expressed on both sides of the issue, as authors have tried to defend their positions from the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White. Few, however, have asked the question: What were the guiding principles and motivations that prompted the early Sabbatarian and Seventh-day Adventist leaders to begin to ordain people to ministries? The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine and analyze three broad reasons that guided early Adventist practices of ordination. The essay will finish with short concluding remarks.

The Beginning of Ordination as Practical Necessity

The Sabbatarians (later Seventh-day Adventists) did not doubt the biblical validity of ordination from the very beginning of their existence. They believed that the practice was rooted in the New Testament and played a necessary role within the early Christian church.¹ Beyond that, James White and Joseph Bates, two of the founders of the Sabbatarian movement, had been ordained by their Christian denomination before they became Adventists. Therefore, the earliest discussions and practices of ordination within the Sabbatarian movement did not come as a result of theological controversies, but rather because of pragmatic and ecclesiastical necessities.

The first substantial discussion of ordination among Sabbatarians began during the 1850s when the movement had experienced rapid growth. The growth brought its own challenges, however. Since the movement lacked any kind of organization, believers were open to various fanatical teachings and extreme views prevalent at that time.² Anybody, for example, could claim to be an Adventist minister, as there was not a system by which to check one's credibility. Moreover, since 1853, the Sabbatarians had dealt with the first offshoots, the "Messenger party," and the "Age to Come" movements, that came out from their midst. The Messengers also started to publish the first

¹James White, "Gospel Order," *Review and Herald*, Dec. 20, 1853, 188-189; J. B. Frisbie, "Church Order," *RH*, Jan. 9, 1855, 153-155; J. H. Waggoner, *The Church: Its Organization, Ordinances, and Discipline* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1886), 15-16; J. N. Loughborough, *The Church: Its Organization, Order, and Discipline* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1907), 66-71.

²George R. Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1999), 58-60.

periodical against the Sabbatarians as they questioned some of their major teachings.³ It is in this context that James and Ellen White began to discuss the necessity for more formal organization and the need for a recognized ministry.

On December 6, 1853, James White wrote that gospel order had been “much neglected, and that the attention of the church should be turned to this subject. . . .”⁴ Two weeks later he noted further that “gospel order” included the ordination of ministers and gave three main reasons for that. First, the ordained ministers would know that they had “the sympathy of [the] ministering brethren and of the church.” Second, it would be a vehicle to “unite the people of God.” And third, it would “shut a door again Satan” and the “influence of false teachers.”⁵

The same year Ellen White wrote in a similar tone:

The Lord has shown that gospel order has been too much feared and neglected. Formality should be shunned; but, in so doing, order should not be neglected. There is order in heaven. There was order in the church when Christ was upon the earth, and after His departure order was strictly observed among His apostles. And now in these last days, while God is bringing His children into the unity of the faith, there is more real need of order than ever before; for, as God unites His children, Satan and his angels are very busy to prevent this unity and to destroy it. . . . *Men whose lives are not holy and who are unqualified to teach the present truth enter the field without being acknowledged by the church or the brethren generally, and confusion and disunion are the result.*⁶

The solution, she noted, was to have recognized ministers set apart by laying on of hands.⁷

Other Sabbatarians began to express the same relationship between “gospel order” and ordination. J. B. Frisbie, for example, wrote that “gospel order in the ministry” was that “which will bring us into the unity of the faith, and cause the watchmen to see eye to eye.”⁸ R. F. Cottrell also noted that the “order in the Church of God has been vindicated by different writers in the Review [sic], and has been established to a considerable extent by the ordination of officers in the churches.”⁹ Not surprisingly, the Sabbatarians began to ordain their ministers in the beginning of 1850s.¹⁰

³Theodore N. Levterov, “The Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Understanding of Ellen G. White’s Prophetic Gift, 1844-1889” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2011), 81-83.

⁴James White, “Gospel Order,” *RH*, Dec. 6, 1853, 173.

⁵James White, “Gospel Order,” *RH*, Dec. 20, 1853, 188-189.

⁶Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 97; emphasis supplied.

⁷*Ibid.*, 101.

⁸J. B. Frisbie, “Church Order,” *RH*, Jan. 9, 1855, 154.

⁹R. F. Cottrell, “What are the Duties of Church Officers?” *RH*, Oct. 2, 1856, 173.

¹⁰Loughborough, *The Church*, 100-102.

At the same time, the Sabbatarians also began to raise questions about the practical necessity of ordaining local officers to serve the Sabbatarian churches. In December 1853 H. S. Gurney wrote that the churches in Fairhaven and Dartmouth, Massachusetts, decided to select two brethren, “to act the part of ‘deacons,’ as denominated in the Bible.” Since Sabbatarian ministers had been “called to travel,” and believers had been deprived of the Lord’s Supper, he reasoned, “it seemed proper to set apart some one in the church for the purpose of more fully maintaining Gospel Order.”¹¹

In January 1855 John Byington wrote to the *Review* that many of the Sabbatarian churches were in a “distracted and discouraged condition.” He, therefore, wondered if elders and deacons should be appointed in “every church.” James White replied that the Bible supported the establishment of such offices. Based on Acts 14:21-23 and Titus 1:5-16, he believed that since the early church ordained local officers, they were also needed in the “last days” to prevent “confusion,” “disorder,” or “unscriptural notions.” He also urged the brethren to “express their opinion on the subject.”¹²

In January 1855 J. B. Frisbie published an article to explain the issue further. He noted that in the New Testament there were two kinds of “preaching elders.” One, the “evangelical or travelling elders or bishops,” such as Silas, Timothy, Titus, and Paul, who were responsible for the “care of all the churches”; and two, those who “had the pastoral care and oversight of one church.” Their primary role was to “administer all the ordinances of the church of God on earth. Matt. xxviii:19” and to look after “the spiritual affairs of the church.” On the other hand, there was the office of the deacons to take care of the “temporal affairs of the church essential to its prosperity. . . .”¹³ Interestingly, Frisbie expanded his position a year later, and noted that the early church also had deaconesses who served the local church and “were ordained to their office by the imposition of the hands of the bishop. . . .”¹⁴ It seems, however, that the early Sabbatarians did not follow Frisbie’s reasoning and did not ordain deaconesses, at least initially.

The reluctance to ordain deaconesses, however, appears to have been more a cultural than a biblically based decision, as later references show. In 1883 W. H. Littlejohn, for instance, acknowledged that the existence of deaconesses in the apostolic days was “highly probable.” And while some Seventh-day Adventist churches had the custom “to elect one or more women to fill a position similar to that which it is supposed that Phoebe and others occupied in her day,” it had not been “*the custom* with us [Seventh-day Adventists] to ordain such women.” The same was true with women being

¹¹H. S. Gurney, “From Bro. Gurney,” *RH*, Dec. 27, 1853, 199.

¹²James White, “Church Order,” *RH*, Jan. 23, 1855, 164.

¹³J. B. Frisbie, “Church Order,” *RH*, Jan. 9, 1855, 154-155.

¹⁴J. B. Frisbie, “Deacons,” *RH*, July 31, 1856, 102. Frisbie cited an extract from Adam Clarke’s commentary.

or acting as elders.¹⁵ Thus by the 1860s the Sabbatarians had begun to ordain ministers, elders, and deacons, and were happy with the results.

By 1863, when the Seventh-day Adventist Church was officially established, the ordination practices were well in place, although questions related to ordination and its practical application continued to be examined and discussed.¹⁶ One can argue, therefore, that a major principle that guided the practice of ordination among the early Sabbatarians was based on the practical needs of the church rather than theological rationale.

Ordination as Public Recognition of Divine Appointment

A second general principle recognized by the Seventh-day Adventist Church was the belief that ordination was first and foremost a calling from God, while the ordination ritual itself was a simple confirmation of that calling. Thus ordination was related to the spiritual gifts that God gave to people in the church.

In 1856 J. B. Frisbie wrote that “the power and authority to ordain elders or bishops in the church came from the Holy Spirit of God.” The laying on of hands, on the other hand, did not bring any “higher power,” but was “the separating act by which the grace of God was imparted.”¹⁷ Ellen White also agreed that those who had “given full proof that they have received their commission of God” were to be set apart “to devote themselves entirely to His work” by ordination.¹⁸ G. I. Butler similarly explained that ordination was “simply an outward ceremony by which a body of believers set apart or installed a person into some official position, as that of minister, local elder, or deacon.” Using the example of Paul and Barnabas, he noted that it was the Holy Spirit who called them first, after which the people simply acknowledged their ministry by laying “hands on them.”¹⁹ Uriah Smith, likewise, noted that

the authority of the gospel minister rests upon a divine call to the work, and if he has not such a call, he has no authority to preach the gospel, no matter how many hands have been laid upon him, nor how pompous the ceremony of ordination performed over him. Christ can give authority to men to preach his gospel, as well in the nineteenth century as in the first. . . . So we say, again, that they have authority to preach whom the Lord calls to the work. If it is asked, why then have any outward ceremony of ordination at all, a sufficient answer is found in the fact that such a service gives unity

¹⁵W. H. Littlejohn, “The Church Manual,” *RH*, July 3, 1883, 426; emphasis supplied; idem, “The Duties of Local Church Officers,” *RH*, Nov. 22, 1887, 730.

¹⁶Some points of discussion were: reelection and re-ordination of officers, the validity of one’s ordination in case of moving to a different church, the validity of ordination of ministers and elders coming from other denominations; the proper pay of ministers, and others.

¹⁷J. B. Frisbie, “Church Order,” *RH*, June 26, 1856, 70.

¹⁸Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, 101.

¹⁹G. I. Butler, “Ordination,” *RH*, Feb. 13, 1879, 50-51.

to the work, and is a means by which the church can show its acquiescence in, and its harmony with, what they consider the divine will.²⁰

Despite that belief, however, promising young people were initially issued licenses and went through a “trial” period in order to show their “fitness for the work” and to give evidence that they were “called of God to that service.”²¹ After an individual had worked for one or more years “acceptably,” it was “customary for the State Conference to ordain him and give him credentials, and a certificate of ordination.”²² This method seemed to work well. In 1886 G. I. Butler, the president of the Michigan Conference at that time, reported that they had received “quite a number of applications for labor in churches in various places” for consideration.²³

The ordination service usually resembled the order of the Protestant tradition. It was usually performed by several ordained ministers and included a sermon, a prayer (with laying on of hands), and a charge to the ordained.²⁴ An interesting detail, however, was the greeting of the ordained with a “holy kiss” by the officiating pastors at the end of the service to welcome them to the gospel ministry.²⁵ Thus, the ordination procedures among Seventh-day Adventists, with few exceptions, have not changed substantially through the years.

Early ordination services also seemed to be highly emotional and charismatic. The presence of the Holy Spirit was seen as an approval of the ordained. In 1861, for example, A. S. Hutchins reported that at the ordination of brother D. T. Bourdeau “the Holy Spirit fell sweetly and powerfully upon us, manifestly approving of the solemn and important step.” After his ordination, Bourdeau baptized ten people.²⁶ At the ordination of church officers in Indiana, S. H. Lane wrote: “The blessing of the Lord rested upon us, and as one after another testified of their love for the truth nearly all in the house were moved to tears and some wept aloud.”²⁷ At another ministerial ordination, that of Brother Nettleton, G. I. Butler testified that “the Lord’s Spirit came in and witnessed to the act, as it seemed to us all. Many were in tears, and a very tender, precious influence affected the hearts of all. And so our meeting closed, and the brethren and sisters went to their homes encouraged.”²⁸ Thus Seventh-day Adventists saw ordination to ministries

²⁰Uriah. Smith, “In the Question Chair,” *RH*, Oct. 20, 1891, 648.

²¹Uriah. Smith, “To Correspondents,” *RH*, June 27, 1878, 4; Waggoner, *The Church*, 19.

²²W. H. Littlejohn, “The Church Manual,” *RH*, Sept. 11, 1883, 586.

²³G. I. Butler, “Work in Michigan,” *RH*, Dec. 21, 1886, 793.

²⁴See, for example: Uriah Smith, “The Conference,” *RH*, Oct. 17, 1878, 124; James White, “Meeting at Oakland,” *RH*, Apr. 11, 1878, 112.

²⁵“The Church Manual,” *RH*, July 17, 1883, 457-458.

²⁶A. S. Hutchins, “Report of Meetings,” *RH*, June 25, 1861, 40.

²⁷S. H. Lane, “Indiana,” *RH*, Mar. 4, 1875, 78.

²⁸G. I. Butler, “The Nebraska Camp-Meeting,” *RH*, Oct. 11, 1881, 239.

as being a calling from God and the ordination ceremony as the outward confirmation of that calling.

Ordination and Fulfilling the Great Commission

A third general principle that guided ordination in Seventh-day Adventism was related to the fulfillment of the mission of the church. Although the small Sabbatarian group initially believed in the “shut door”²⁹ theory, by the beginning of 1850s they realized that they had a message to share with others.³⁰ The ritual of ordination, consequently, began to be seen as an integral part of the fulfillment of that mission.

As the church grew through the years and its mission expanded, the demand for more workers and missionaries became obvious. By the 1870s and beyond, Seventh-day Adventists began to urge people, especially young men and women, to get educational training and become involved in the work of the church. It is in this context that Adventists began to consider the participation of women in ministry of various kinds.

An interesting accident happened in 1867. James White reported that he ordained “Bro[ther] and sister Strong” to the ministry by “prayer and the laying on of hands.” “I mention the name of sister Strong on this occasion,” he explained, because “my views and feelings are that the minister’s wife stands in so close a relation to the work of God . . . that she should, in the ordination prayer, be set apart as his helper.”³¹ In 1870 the “Minister’s Lecture Association” offered a series of trainings for ministers. Both men and women were invited to enroll. The price of membership was “\$5 for men and \$3 for women.”³² In 1879 James White also wrote an article entitled “Women in the Church,” aiming to explain 1 Cor 14: 34-35 (“Let your women keep silent in the churches. . .”). Among other arguments, White noted that “in the sacred Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, holy women held positions of responsibility and honor” and defended their full participation in the work of the church.³³ Similar articles continued to appear in the Adventist publications.³⁴

Ellen White similarly urged the participation of women in the work of the church. “Women who can work are needed now,” she wrote in 1879, “women who are not self-important, but meek and lowly of heart, who will work with the meekness of Christ wherever they can find work to do for the

²⁹The belief that no more people could be saved after October 22, 1844.

³⁰James White, “Call at the Harbinger Office,” *RH*, Feb. 17, 1852, 95.

³¹James White, “Report from Bro. White,” *RH*, Aug. 13, 1867, 136.

³²James White, “Minister’s Lecture Association,” *RH*, Jan. 10, 1870, 32.

³³James White, “Women in the Church,” *RH*, May 29, 1879, 172.

³⁴Some examples are: “Shall Women Speak in the Church?” *RH*, Mar. 14, 1871, 99; J. H. Waggoner, “Woman’s Place in the Gospel,” *ST*, Dec. 19, 1878, 380; N. J. Bowers, “May Women Publicly Labor in the Cause of Christ?” *RH*, June 14, 1881, 372-373.

salvation of souls.”³⁵ In 1895 she also specifically noted that women should be ordained for specific ministries. The context of her article clearly shows her concern with the noninvolvement of church members in the work of the church. “The burden of church work should be distributed among its individual members,” she wrote, “so that each one may become an intelligent laborer for God. There is altogether too much unused force in our churches.”³⁶ She then urged leaders to involve every member, including women, in the work. As she put it:

Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be *set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands*. . . . This is another means of strengthening and building up the church. We need to branch out more in our methods of labor. Not a hand should be bound, not a soul discouraged, not a voice should be hushed; let every individual labor, privately or publicly, to help forward this grand work.³⁷

Whatever interpretation one may make of the above paragraph, Ellen White clearly indicated that ordination was appropriate for women who were willing to be involved in some capacity in the ministry of the church. Thus she broadened the concept of ordination and its true meaning. Ordination, in her mind, was not limited in scope as only belonging to men.

In 1898 Ellen White again asserted that women “should labor in the gospel ministry,” since there were situations where “they would do more good than the ministers who neglect to visit the flock of God.”³⁸ Intriguingly, *The Review* and the *Signs of the Times* also began to report specific “religious news” of ordination of women among other Christian denominations.³⁹ Not surprisingly, we find that since the 1870s women began to be much more involved within the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its mission.⁴⁰

The high point for women in ministry, however, came at the General Conference meeting in 1881. Prompted by the belief that all members were to participate in the mission of the church, the General Conference issued an official resolution stating that “*females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of*

³⁵Ellen G. White, “Address and Appeal, Setting Forth the Importance of Missionary Work,” *RH*, Jan. 2, 1879, 1.

³⁶Ellen G. White, “The Duty of the Minister and the People,” *RH*, July 9, 1895, 433.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 434; emphasis supplied.

³⁸Ellen G. White, “The Laborer Is Worthy of His Hire,” MS 43a, 1898, HRC, LLU.

³⁹“Religious [Notes],” *ST*, Sep. 11, 1884, 558; “Religious [Notes],” *RH*, Feb. 28, 1893, 143.

⁴⁰For a list of Seventh-day Adventist women in ministry see: Josephine Benton, *Called by God: Stories of Seventh-day Adventist Women Ministers* (Smithsburg, MD: Blackberry Hill Publishers, 1990), 229-234.

the Christian ministry.” It seems that the issue was discussed for a while and then “referred to the General Conference Committee.”⁴¹ However, we find no further decisions concerning the issue.

The demands of missionary labor also called Seventh-day Adventists to become more flexible and accommodative to the vast challenges of the missionary tasks. Thus, for example, Adventist missionaries in the state of Tarapaca, Chile, baptized and ordained brother Julian Ocampas, who was previously a Methodist preacher. The need to ordain him immediately was “considered especially necessary.” Since there were others who were soon to “require baptism,” and the “distance” was “too great” for a Seventh-day Adventist pastor to visit, the two missionaries believed that this was the right action for that particular situation. “He has preached for the Methodists, and so far as we could learn fills the requirements of 1 Timothy 3,” they reported. “We have an abiding faith in God that he will increase this nucleus to his glory and to the salvation of souls. Let all God’s people pray that this may be.”⁴²

Ellen White also wrote of a certain Brother Tay, who went as a missionary to Pitcairn. Although he had a few people that were ready for baptism, he “did not feel at liberty” to baptize them “because he had not been ordained.” “That is not any of God’s arrangements,” Ellen White responded, “It is man’s fixing.” She then explained:

When men go out with the burden of the work and to bring souls into the truth, those men are ordained of God [even] if [they] never have a touch of ceremony of ordination. To say [they] shall not baptize when there is nobody else, [is wrong]. If there is a minister in reach, all right, then they should seek for the ordained minister to do the baptizing, but when the Lord works with a man to bring out a soul here and there and they know not when the opportunity will come that these precious souls can be baptized, why he should not [sic] question about the matter, he should baptize those souls. . . . Philip was not an ordained minister, but when the eunuch began to inquire about this matter, Philip opened to him the Word, and then what? He says, “What doth hinder my being baptized?” Sure enough, what did hinder? It was not considered that anything hindered, and Philip went down and baptized him.⁴³

Thus Seventh-day Adventists related ordination to the mission of the church. It was in this context that they also began to consider women in ministry much more seriously than before. Although there were several suggestions that women could be ordained as ministers, the issue seemed to wane by the first half of the twentieth century.

General Conclusions

Several conclusions can be made as a result of this study. First, Seventh-day Adventists began to practice ordination because of practical necessities and

⁴¹S. N. Haskell and Uriah Smith, “General Conference,” *RH*, Dec. 20, 1881, 392.

⁴²G. H. Baber, “Chile,” *RH*, Feb. 9, 1897, 89.

⁴³Ellen G. White, “Remarks Concerning Foreign Mission Work,” MS 75, 1896, HRC, LLU.

not strictly theological questions. Therefore, the function of ordination was to serve the church and its needs. It was related initially to “gospel order,” fighting fanatical religious extremes, establishment of local church ministries, and others. As the needs and the mission of the denomination expanded, however, Adventists were willing to reexamine and clarify questions related to the function and the practical applications of ordination and enlarge its meaning. It was because of this understanding that Seventh-day Adventism began to consider the ordination of women later on. Thus a guiding principle of ordination was its practicality for the church and its mission.

Second, it seems that early Seventh-day Adventists, including Ellen White, did not discuss ordination in terms of gender. Ordination was rather a calling from God and included a designation to a particular office, recognition of a spiritual gift, or a calling to a specific mission. Seventh-day Adventists, therefore, encouraged all to become engaged in the ministries of the church. At the same time, they refrained from ordaining women, although they deliberated it. The reason for that, however, was not based on biblical reasoning, but rather on a tradition or “custom.” There is not a single published article, up to 1900, that argued against women’s ordination based on the Bible. On the contrary, Seventh-day Adventists defended the role and participation of women in ministry and even began to include them in various ministries of the church. Thus the Adventist understanding of ordination was guided by a much larger principle than what some consider ordination to be today.

Third, the history of Seventh-day Adventism teaches us that the church should constantly consider and reevaluate its understanding of ordination and its function as it relates to the mission of the church. It is interesting to note that the more important the mission of the church became, the more willing the denomination was to include everyone, including women, in ministry. Since ordination among the early Seventh-day Adventists was guided by pragmatic necessities, was viewed as a calling from God, and was to serve the mission of the church, Seventh-day Adventism today has a good platform to take a new look at ordination and its meaning for the twenty-first century based on these broad principles.