

**IDOL MEAT AND THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN:
REFLECTIONS ON CHURCH UNITY**

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Last year in Chicago the Adventist Society of Religious Studies (ASRS) decided that the theme of this year's meeting would be: Adventism, Scripture, and Unity. The theme was chosen in the hope of providing the church with helpful discussion regarding the challenges we face in preserving the unity of a growing denomination that encompasses more than 17 million people of vastly different backgrounds and cultures around the world. As I began thinking about the specific direction of my presidential address last year, several people suggested I focus my paper around my background in New Testament textual criticism, picking perhaps an interesting textual variant that might shed some light on our discussion of unity. As much as I tried, I could just not come to peace on that option, though it would have been in many ways an easier and safer paper. So I apologize to those of you who were hoping for a titillating Friday night presentation on textual criticism. I decided, instead, to pick a much more sensitive and therefore risky subject—the issue of the ordination of women in relation to the unity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. At the outset of my address, however, I want to state clearly that my purpose is not to make an argument either for or against the ordination of women. My goal is rather to consider the current situation in light of the issue of church unity.

It is somewhat ironic that I've chosen this topic, since for the vast portion of my ministry I've had little interest in the issue of the ordination of women. As a student and pastor, and even during my first few years as a professor, I was always far more interested in the debates about the nature of sin, righteousness by faith, and the humanity of Christ than I ever was with the issue of women in ministry. Although I was personally uncomfortable with the idea of having a female pastor, and questioned the practice of ordaining women in light of certain passages in the Bible, particularly those of the apostle Paul, the issue seemed largely irrelevant to me. As I look back now, however, I see that all those other debates have largely subsided. Yet the issue of the ordination of women has not only not gone away, but it has grown to the point that in the minds of some it now has the potential to threaten the unity of this denomination more than any other issue.

Although I used to be largely opposed to the ordination of women, my personal perspective on the issue has changed over the last several years as

I began working on a project in 1 Timothy. As a result of my work, I was invited to present a paper on 1 Tim 2 at the General Conference's Theology of Ordination Study Committee in Baltimore last summer.¹ While I went into the meeting with some degree of optimism that a historic consensus might be reached, I did not leave nearly as optimistic. Those arguing for and against ordaining women seemed strongly entrenched in their positions, with little common ground between them. As I talked with various people, many felt that without divine intervention they simply did not see how a consensus could be reached.

Complicating the issue is the fact that the divide between the two camps is not just the classical division between liberals and conservatives, or even between our two societies. Individuals on both sides of the issue belong to Adventist Theological Society (ATS) and Adventist Society of Religious Studies (ASRS), and I believe those on both sides of the issue also hold a high view of Scripture and appeal to it for the sole basis of their position. The two groups simply disagree over how to interpret several passages from Scripture—and in particular the question of whether God created men and women as equals. Those favoring ordaining women argue God did and that the headship/leadership of men over women was instituted only after the Fall, and that it applies only to husbands and wives in the home.² Those on the other side claim that God established male headship over women from the very beginning.³ As an extension of that divine ideal, the headship of men over women also applies to life within the church. Therefore, on the basis of the creation order, it is claimed that women are not only unsuited to serve as senior pastors,⁴ but in the minds of some, they should not even serve as local elders.⁵

With little hope of resolving the current theological impasse, and with neither side at all pleased with the status quo, the situation we face as a church

¹Carl P. Cosaert, "Paul, Women, and the Ephesian Church: An Examination of 1 Timothy 2:8-15" (paper presented at the Theology of Ordination Study Committee. Baltimore, MD, July 23, 2013).

²E.g., Richard M. Davidson, "Should Women Be Ordained as Pastors? Old Testament Considerations" (paper presented at the Theology of Ordination Study Committee. Baltimore, MD, July 24, 2013).

³E.g., Paul S. Ratsara and Daniel K. Bediako, "Man and Woman in Genesis 1-3: Ontological Equality and Role Differentiation" (paper presented at the Theology of Ordination Study Committee. Baltimore, MD, July 24, 2013); P. Gerard Damsteegt, "Headship, Gender, and Ordination in the Writings of Ellen G. White" (paper presented at the Theology of Ordination Study Committee. Baltimore, MD, July 23, 2013).

⁴Ingo Sorke, "Adam, Where Are You? On Gender Relations" (paper presented at the Theology of Ordination Study Committee. Baltimore, MD, July 23, 2013), 37.

⁵Damsteegt, 33. Stephen Bohr, "A Study of 1 Peter 2:9, 10 and Galatians 3:28" (paper presented at the Theology of Ordination Study Committee. Baltimore, MD, July 23, 2013), 76.

appears rather hopeless. At the same time, however, I am reminded that it is in the midst of seemingly impossible situations that God often works in mighty ways. As I began to think about how God might work in this situation, I decided to start looking for examples of how He worked in the past (1 Cor 10:11). My hope was to find a comparable situation that might prove helpful in resolving our current dilemma. I quickly discovered, however, that although Scripture is full of stories about God's divine intervention, not all of them apply equally to our current situation. For example, while God overcame all odds to deliver Hezekiah from the Assyrians surrounding Jerusalem (2 Kgs 18-19), just as He had delivered the children of Israel from the Egyptians at the Red Sea (Exod 14), I'm not convinced that either of these stories is similar enough to our current situation for valid lessons to be drawn. Our challenge is not from outside, but division from within.

Others have suggested that the mutiny of Korah during the Exodus serves as an appropriate analogy (Num 16).⁶ While this analogy certainly includes the issue of leadership, it falters on several points. First, it assumes an equivalency between the temple and the church. This is certainly not the case, at least in Protestantism. The temple was a place where sacrifices were offered and where God dwelt. As such, the ministry of the earthly temple ceased with the death and resurrection of Jesus. The ministry of the church is far more comparable to a Jewish synagogue—a place for worship, teaching, and community. Secondly, ministry within the temple was limited not only to Jewish men, but only men from the tribe of the Levites, with the further qualification that only the sons of Aaron could serve as priests. Those distinctions are no longer valid. Moreover, the only solution this model proposes would be divine intervention leading to the destruction of those seen on the wrong side of the issue—hardly a constructive framework for moving forward today (Num 16:31-35).

A more promising analogy is the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, since there we find a division within the church. The issue faced at the Jerusalem Council was whether circumcision was a prerequisite to faith in Jesus. Although the issue was internal, it centered on the fundamental teaching of the church—the gospel. Those who argued circumcision was necessary were ultimately claiming that belief in Jesus was not sufficient for salvation. In response to this claim, the Council declared that salvation is rooted in faith in Christ alone. Faith in Jesus did not need to be supplemented with circumcision. To the extent that either side in the issue of women's ordination seeks to make their position an issue of salvation, the Council in Jerusalem serves as a warning not to add anything to the gospel message. I am not saying that the issue of ordination is not an important issue. Clearly it is. Nor am I saying that

⁶Stephen Bohr, "Mutiny in the Camp: Korah's Rebellion" (*Great Apostasies of the Bible* 6; Fresno Central SDA Church: Secrets Unsealed, accessed October 7, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3cdAj3xoYz4>; John Witcombe, "None Dare Call it Rebellion," *OrdinationTruth.com* (2013), accessed October 7, 2013, <http://ordinationtruth.com/featured/none-dare-call-it-rebellion>; Ronald W. Pierce, "Male/Female Leadership and Korah's Revolt: An Analogy?," *JETS* 30 (1987), 3-10.

obedience to the word of God is not important. Obedience to Christ is of utmost importance. What I mean is that I do not think ordination is a salvation issue. I find it hard to believe that we would claim that a person would be damned for the position they take on the issue of ordination. If we do, then we need to consider seriously our position in light of the Acts 15 decision against circumcision.

As helpful as the Jerusalem Council is for our current situation, I think there is still a better analogy, one that more fully parallels the situation we find ourselves in as a denomination. As it turns out, that analogy is actually related to one of the issues that came of the decision reached in Acts 15, though it might sound rather odd at first. I am referring to the question among the believers in Corinth over whether Christians should eat food that had been offered to idols. While this analogy does not address the issue of leadership, it does deal directly with a situation in which different opinions had the potential of destroying the unity of the early church in Corinth—as well as the unity of the larger sisterhood of churches. And unlike the issue of circumcision in Acts 15, where one side was in the right and the other wrong, the issue of food offered to idols was not so cut and dried. It was a situation where both sides needed to adjust their perspective. For these reasons, Paul's reaction to the problem in Corinth has the potential for providing us with some helpful insights on how we might address the theological stalemate we face today as a world church with the issue of the ordination of women.

Before drawing implications for our situation today, I'll first "flesh" out the subject by briefly considering the issue of idol meat and the early church, and then Paul's reaction to the division among believers on it in Corinth.

Idol Meat and the Jerusalem Council

The expansion of the missionary focus of the early church to include Gentiles into the body of Christ was anything but easy. The earliest Christians were Jews who saw themselves as followers of a Jewish Messiah. Although they had reoriented their practice of Judaism on the person of Jesus, they made no distinction between what we might call Jewish culture and theological belief. The earliest Christians were not opposed to the inclusion of Gentiles as followers of Jesus, but for them it meant that Gentiles had to become Jews. The influence of purity laws and the belief that contact with Gentiles made a person ritually impure made the association with uncircumcised Gentiles unthinkable to some. It was Peter's disregard for these purity concerns that outraged a group of Jewish Christians when they learned that the apostle had shared a meal with a Roman centurion, let alone that he had also baptized him (Acts 11:1-3).

As the number of uncircumcised Gentile converts increased rapidly in connection with the missionary activities of the apostle Paul, the situation finally reached a breaking point. After the influence of a group of Jewish believers had shattered the blessing of fellowship between Jewish and Gentile

Christians around a common meal in Syrian Antioch (Gal 2:11-14),⁷ a council was called in Jerusalem to settle the issue of whether Gentiles had to be circumcised in order to be full-fledged members of the Christian church (Acts 15:1-29). Although strong opinions were expressed on both sides, the testimony of the apostles Peter and Paul ultimately prevailed. It was decided that Gentiles did not need to submit to circumcision in order to be Christians—they could be Christian without becoming Jewish, a conclusion the Spirit was already confirming through the presence of Spirit-filled Gentiles.

In considering what other issues might hinder the fellowship of Jewish and Gentile believers, the Council ruled that while Gentile believers need not become Jewish, they should abstain from four practices that were seen as a source of defilement.⁸ Drawing upon the laws in Leviticus 17 and 18 that addressed the behavior of foreigners living among Israel,⁹ Gentile Christians were asked to abstain (Gr. *apechō*, “avoid contact”) from: (1) things polluted by idols, understood primarily as a reference to idol meat¹⁰ (cf. 15:29; 21:25); (2) sexual immorality, a reference to the illicit sexual relations outlined in Lev 18, and by application probably temple prostitution; (3) eating things

⁷I advocate here the belief that the Southern Galatian theory best explains the situation between Acts and Paul’s letter to the Galatians. For the arguments associated with this view, see e.g., Ben Witherington, *Grace in Galatia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 8-20; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 3-18.

⁸There are several interesting textual variants associated with the so-called apostolic decree. The textual dilemma surrounds whether the decree contained three or four stipulations, and if only three, which of the four should be eliminated—a few witnesses omit the reference to sexual immorality (*porneia*; p⁴⁵), while others omit the reference to eating strangled meat (*pniktos*; Codex D) and even add a negative form of the Golden Rule. As the different readings suggest, the confusion centered on whether the decree was intended to be entirely ceremonial, ethical, or a mixture of the two. Although the evidence for the latter two readings appears to date back as far as the first half of the second century, the strength of the textual evidence and the textual critical principle that the most difficult reading is to be preferred overwhelmingly indicates the quadrilateral form of the decree is most likely the initial reading. Carl P. Cosaert, “A Quadrilateral Or Trilateral Decision? The Textual Variants of the Apostolic Decree” (unpublished manuscript, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002); Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed. (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1994), 379-383.

⁹Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 109; Darrell Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 505-07; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 273.

¹⁰The noun *aligēma* (“pollution”) occurs only here. The fact that idol meat is in mind can be seen in the noun’s verbal form (*aligēin*) in the LXX, where it occurs five times in relation to matters of food (Dan 1:8; Mal 1:7 (x2), 12; Sir 40:29). This is confirmed with the specific use of the word *eidōlothyton* (“offered to a cultic image/idol”) in the other two accounts of the decree in Acts 15:29 and 21:25. Johnson, 266.

strangled, that is meat not properly drained of blood;¹¹ and (4) eating blood (Acts 15:20). The list is repeated with minor variation in Acts 15:29 and 21:25. As leading missionaries to the Gentiles, Paul and Barnabas were commissioned with taking the news of this decision to the Jewish and Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (Acts 15:23-25).

Although much could be said about the ruling, two items are particularly significant for our consideration. First, the purpose of the fourfold Jerusalem proscription was not to produce some kind of a creed, but a practical attempt to preserve the fellowship and unity of the church. As Richard Davidson notes, its concern was not “primarily theological but more sociological in nature.”¹² As such the decree does not outline what the church was to believe, but what the church was to be—an inclusive body of Jews and Gentiles united together in their devotion to Jesus. This is evident in James’ interpretation of Amos 9:11-12 LXX as a prophecy about the exaltation of Christ, the seed of David, and the establishment of His people. The passage in Amos states that Jews would not be the only ones included in God’s eschatological restoration of David’s kingdom, but that it would also include Gentiles who would be welcomed just as they were—solely upon the basis of God’s grace.¹³

The concern for the unity of the church is also evident in that three of the four proscriptions involve dietary practices associated with food eaten among Gentiles, and particularly in connection with rites and feasts in pagan temples: idol meat, things strangled, and blood.¹⁴ The association of these activities with idolatry would have inhibited Jews from fellowshiping with their Gentile brothers and sisters around a common meal. This would have been a significant problem among early Christian churches in eastern cities like Antioch, where a minority of Gentile believers interacted with a larger number of Jewish believers. Preserving the ability of Jews and Gentiles to eat together was clearly an important aspect behind this ruling. Table fellowship not only contributed to the unity of the church, but it also served as a visible manifestation of the message of the gospel—the message of reconciliation (Eph 2:1-22).¹⁵

¹¹E.g., Philo, *Special Laws* 4:122-123.

¹²Richard Davidson, “Which Torah Laws Should Gentile Christians Obey? The Relationship Between Leviticus 17–18 and Acts 15” (paper, Evangelical Theological Society 59th Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA, Nov. 15, 2007). I am particularly thankful to Richard Davidson for providing me with a revised and expanded edition of his paper, which is now coauthored with Erick Mendieta. This citation is from page four of that manuscript.

¹³David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 432; N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 45; John Stott, *The Spirit, The Church, and The World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 247-250; Bock, 503-505.

¹⁴Bock, 506.

¹⁵Bradley Blue, “Food Offered to Idols and Jewish Food Laws,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 307.

The second item of significance for our consideration is that the prohibition against eating idol meat is not explicitly mentioned in Leviticus 17 or 18. The actual prohibition in Leviticus is against sacrificing to demons or idols—thus a prohibition against idolatry.¹⁶ This suggests that the ruling should not be seen as coming directly out of a strict application of Lev 17 and 18 to the Gentile believers, but in this particular instance a more general application in harmony with the ethos of the text.¹⁷ Although idol meat is not explicitly mentioned in Leviticus, the association of it with idolatry would have been easily made in the minds of Jewish believers—just as sexual immorality was also associated with pagan temples.

Here it is important to remember that pagan temples functioned both as a place of worship, which meant sacrifice, and a sort of restaurant. After dedicating and sacrificing an animal to a temple's god or goddess, a portion of the sacrificial meat would often be cooked and then served to the worshipper and his family as part of a celebratory meal in one of the many banqueting rooms within a temple complex.¹⁸ Such celebrations were notorious for leading to other forms of unseemly behavior, particularly sexual immorality. With few public spaces large enough to accommodate significant events, temples were a popular place to gather for celebratory events involving a meal. An invitation to one such meal survives from ancient Corinth: "Heraias asks you to dine in the dining room of the Sarapeum at a banquet of the Lord Sarapis tomorrow, namely the 11th, from the 9th hour."¹⁹

Surplus temple meat would also be sold in the local market place to the general public. Since meat was a delicacy in the ancient world, most of the meat in a Gentile market would be meat that had been originally offered as part of a sacrifice. With such strong connections to idolatry, it is little wonder that the Jewish Christians who formed the Jerusalem Council would have associated eating idol meat as a source of impurity that would have hindered full fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers.

While the ruling in Acts 15 certainly sought to maintain the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers, the prohibition against eating idol meat was

¹⁶Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 243-244.

¹⁷Bock, 506-507; Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 464-465. This does not undermine the perspective linking Acts 15 and Lev 17 and 18; it merely demonstrates the association of eating idol meat with idolatry in the mind of the early church.

¹⁸Evidence of this can be seen in the discovery of at least 36 dining rooms in connection to the temple to Demeter in Corinth. Though it was not functioning in Paul's day, it illustrates what sort of facilities would have been found in other Corinthian temples in the first century. See Nancy Bookidis, Julie Hansen, Lynn Snyder, and Paul Goldberg, "Dining in the Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Corinth," *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 68 (1999), 1-54.

¹⁹Cited in, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 164.

not universally accepted among some largely Gentile congregations. Evidence that eating idol meat was a controversial topic among believers can be seen in the fact that the practice is condemned in the church elsewhere in the New Testament, as well as in other Christian writings on into the second century.²⁰ If it were not a problem in the church, it certainly would not need to be condemned. In his letters to the believers in Pergamum and Thyatira, John the Revelator rebukes the church for tolerating the practice of partaking of idol meat (Rev 2:14, 20). A warning against eating idol meat is also found in the Christian writing known as the Didache: “Now concerning food, bear what you are able, but in any case keep strictly away from meat sacrificed to idols, for it involves the worship of dead gods.”²¹

It is important to note that in both of these instances, the practice of eating idol meat is not prohibited in itself. The Didache condemns it because of its connection to false worship, while it is linked with sexual immortality in Revelation.

The clearest evidence we have of the controversial nature of the issue of idol meat among believers, however, is among Gentile Christians in the city of Corinth.

Idol Meat and the Corinthians

Although founded by the apostle Paul during his second missionary journey, and under his tutelage for 18 months, the largely Gentile church in Corinth quickly lost its way after his departure. During his later ministry in Ephesus, news reached the apostle that the church in Corinth had splintered into factions with disagreements on a number of different issues. The issue of idol meat was one of those problems dividing the church. One group within the church had absolutely no qualms about the legitimacy of eating idol meat, while others were seriously opposed to it. The fact that Paul spends three chapters discussing the issue illustrates that he recognized that this was more than just a minor rift. It was a major issue that had the potential to split the church.

On one side of the issue was a group of Gentile believers who not only saw no problem in eating meat that had been part of a sacrifice offered in a pagan temple, but who also saw nothing wrong with even eating the meat in a pagan temple. What was the problem, they reasoned? The pagan gods were not real, after all—every Christian should know that (cf. 1 Cor 8:1, 4). Moreover, Paul had not barred Christians from fellowshiping with non-believers. So what was the harm in attending a wedding feast or funeral for

²⁰For an excellent account of the issue of food offered to idols within the first three centuries of the church in relation to Paul's discussion of the issue in Corinth, see John Brunt, “Rejected, Ignored, or Misunderstood? The Fate of Paul's Approach to the Problem of Food Offered to Idols in Early Christianity,” *NTS* 31 (1985), 113-24.

²¹*Did* 6:3 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3d ed.; ed. and trans. Michael Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).

a friend that was held in a pagan temple, as they regularly were, or from participating in social or business activities that would have required joining in a meal being hosted at one of the many temples in Corinth? It was not as if they were actually acknowledging the lordship of these so-called gods. They knew better than that. Their overall mentality toward the issue can be seen in the statement: “Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better of if we do” (1 Cor 8:8). Overly confident in their own wisdom, these individuals not only looked down upon those with different opinions as spiritually naïve, but they also appear to have been trying to educate them by belittling their opinion and pressuring them against their conscience to join them in the freedom of “eating in an idol’s temple” (1 Cor 8:10).²²

At the same time, another group of Gentile believers were extremely uncomfortable with this practice. Although these individuals had come out of idolatry and now believed in the existence of only one almighty God, the draw to the old way of life made them extremely uncomfortable with having anything to do with the pagan cult. Regardless of the arguments of others, they wanted nothing to do with meat offered to idols, whether it was eaten in a temple or even bought in a local market. Paul therefore refers to these individuals as the “weak,” since “their conscience would not allow them to eat meat sacrificed to gods that, to use Paul’s words, the ‘strong’ knew did not exist (1 Cor 8:4-6).”²³ The practice of their opponents, however, put the “weak” in a difficult position. They not only had to deal with the theological pressure from their fellow Christians within the church on this issue, but they also faced the social pressure from outside the church as they struggled to explain why they refused to join in public celebrations at pagan temples, while other Christians had no problem in doing so. As is often the case in these sorts of interpersonal problems, the “weak” appear to have responded by condemning the “strong” for claiming the freedom to eat idol meat (1 Cor 10:29-30).

Paul’s Response to the Corinthians

What is fascinating about Paul’s response to this difference of opinion among the Corinthian believers on the issue of idol meat is the way he goes about solving it, or should I say the way he does not solve it. In the eyes of some, Paul’s response in Corinth should have been relatively simple. The Jerusalem Conference had made a clear ruling on this issue. They had asked that Gentiles no longer partake of food offered to idols. All Paul needed to do was to apply the ruling in Acts 15 to the situation in Corinth. He could have simply said the following: “Now concerning food offered to idols: we all know that the church already has a position on this subject. Official church policy requires that Gentiles abstain from food that has been sacrificed to idols. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.

²²Murphy-O’Connor, 569-560.

²³Larry Richards, *1 Corinthians* (Nampa, ID: 1997), 145.

Therefore, make sure you are in conformity on this issue so your actions may give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.”

Yet, surprisingly, Paul’s response is nothing like this at all. Although the apostolic ruling addressed this very issue, Paul does not even mention it. And instead of giving what would have been a rather straightforward response of three or four sentences, Paul launches into a complicated and lengthy explanation that spans three entire chapters (8-10).

Paul’s failure to mention the Jerusalem Council’s ruling on idol meat was certainly not due to any lapse of memory on his part. The decision of the Council was huge in regards to circumcision—Paul would not have forgotten it. Moreover, along with Barnabas, he had been commissioned to announce the ruling to the Gentile believers in the East (Acts 15:22-26). His actions, I believe, were deliberate. Under the influence of the Spirit, Paul realized that if he simply evoked official church policy, he would have undermined the very cause that had prompted the Council’s decision in the first place—preserving the fellowship and unity of the church. Paul had to find a way to preserve the unity of the church, but to also uphold the principle behind the ruling itself.

It is also clear that the believers in Corinth needed far more than just another rule. The church had deeper issues that needed to be addressed. They were not struggling due to a lack of information, but the failure to see how that information should affect the way they lived the Christian life. He had to find a way not simply to say no, but to help the Corinthians develop a more mature level of obedience in response to the work of Christ.

Paul goes about this in a masterful way. In addition to refusing to apply a rule in a sort of mechanical fashion, the apostle also refused to take sides on the issue. Since his argument spans three chapters, it is often easy to miss this point. At first glance, his appeal to the “strong” in chapter 8 to discontinue eating meat in an idol’s temple for the sake of others appears to place Paul in the camp of those opposed to idol meat. His warning against idolatry in chapter 10 also gives the same appearance. Although it is true that idols have no real existence, he warns the “strong” that idolatrous practices are connected to demonic activity (10:19-20). So while idol meat may not be harmful in and of itself, Christians cannot eat idol meat in connection with pagan worship without being negatively influenced (10:21-22).

Yet right when it looks as if Paul has completely taken the side of the “weak,” he turns around and says that believers should “eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience” (10:25). If you buy meat, you don’t have to look at the label. Paul’s point here is not clean or unclean meat, but temple meat. His concern, as Witherington notes, “is clearly one of venue rather than menu.”²⁴ This certainly was not the position of the weak. Not only does Paul not see a problem with Christians purchasing and eating meat offered in the meat market, wherever it comes from; he adds that when invited to the house of an unbeliever they should also eat what is served to them without worrying about whether it had been

²⁴Witherington, *Acts*, 466.

offered to an idol or not (10:27).²⁵ Evidence that some of the more affluent Corinthian believers would likely encounter just this sort of situation can be seen in Plutarch's (c. 46–120) account of a sumptuous meal served in the affluent home of a certain Ariston near Corinth:

Ariston's cook made a hit with the dinner guests not only because of his general skill, but because the cock he set before the diners, though it had just been slaughtered as a sacrifice to Heracles, was as tender as if it had been a day old.²⁶

The fact that the “weak” would not have supported Paul's position can be seen in the exception Paul makes in regards to eating at the home of an unbeliever. “But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—I do not mean your conscience, but his” (10:28-29a).

Since abstaining from eating was for the sake of the individual pointing out that the food had been offered in sacrifice, it seems unlikely that the “someone” Paul has in mind is a pagan—whether the host or another guest. After all, the host was the one who planned the dinner, and seeing idol meat on the menu would not have posed a problem of conscience for a non-Christian guest.²⁷ It is far more likely that the informant Paul has in mind is a Christian who belongs to the “weak” within the church—either a slave serving the food within the household of the unbelieving host, or perhaps another Christian guest.²⁸ Worried about the consumption of idol meat, this sort of fellow Christian would have felt compelled to whisper some word of warning into the ear of another Christian guest.

In making this exception, Paul refused to place himself in either camp. Those opposed to idol meat would be opposed to it in any case, while those in

²⁵It is interesting to note that Paul does not refer to meat purchased in the marketplace with the same terminology used earlier. He uses the more pejorative word *eidolōthyton* (“idol meat”) to refer to meat sacrificed and eaten in an idol's temple (8:1, 4, 7, 10; 10:19), but the somewhat more gentle term *hierothyton* (“sacrificial meat”) to refer to temple meat eaten in an individual's home (10:28).

²⁶Plutarch, *Quaest. Conv.* 6.10.1 (Hoffleit, LCL).

²⁷Archibald T. Robertson and Alfred. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC; 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914), 221-222; C. F. G. Heinrici, *Das erste Sendschreiben des Apostel Paulus an die Korinther* (Berlin: Hertz, 1880), 287-288.

²⁸Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 787; Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 177; David Horrell, “Theological Principle or Christological Praxis? Pauline Ethics In 1 Corinthians 8.1-11.1,” *JSNT* 67 (1997): 103; J. Weiss, *Der Briefe an die Korinther* (NTD 7; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968), 264-265. Although others argue that the “someone” is an unbeliever (e.g., David Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 495), in the end the point is still the same. Paul is not opposed to Christians eating idol meat in itself. His concern is about the venue within which it is eaten.

favor of it certainly did not think that their freedom to eat had to be limited by the fears of fellow believers whom they looked upon as spiritually immature. If Paul had taken either side in the argument, instead of helping the situation, he would have merely added fuel to the fire. By trying to stay above the fray, Paul was able to attempt to foster a spirit of unity, rather than encouraging the “us” versus “them” mentality that was already crippling the church.

Finally, in addition to refusing to apply a rule and take sides on the issue, Paul also set out to solve the problem by attempting to reframe the issue from focusing on the boundaries of Christian freedom to the issue of love. Some of the Corinthians had embraced their freedom in Christ to the exclusion of concern for their fellow believers. These individuals felt it was their right to partake of food offered to idols. They knew better than others. Paul, however, wanted them to look at the issue from a larger perspective than just themselves. He wanted the “strong” to consider the issue from the standpoint of unity. How would their actions affect the body as a whole? What impact would their actions have on the spiritual life of others within the community of faith? Paul attempts to refocus the issue on love in each of the places where he anticipates push-back from the Corinthians (cf. 8:8-13; 10:27-29). Moreover, Paul does not merely command these Corinthians to surrender their rights; in chapter 9 he models how his own ministry was not based on getting what rightfully belonged to him, whether familial or financial rights (9:5-12a), but in living a life of self-denial for the benefit of others (9:12b, 15-23).

Although Paul focuses entirely on his response to the “strong” in 1 Cor 8-10, his implied response to the “weak” is also one of mutual acceptance.²⁹ This is evident in Paul’s fuller discussion of food issues dividing the “weak” and the “strong” in Rom 14:1–15:13, although idol meat is not explicitly mentioned. “Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats” (Rom 14:3). Thus the solution to the problem of idol meat in Corinth is not in Paul’s declaration that one side is the winner and the other the loser—after all, both sides had valid points. The solution was in both sides realizing the validity of aspects of the other’s perspective, and learning to live together in unity—a unity not based in uniformity, but one that allowed for diversity in perspective in areas not in opposition to the gospel message itself.

Reflections on the Ordination of Women

What connections or lessons might Paul’s counsel to the division among the believers in Corinth over the issue of idol meat have for us in regard to the division within our own church on the issue of women’s ordination? As I’ve reflected on this, the following observations may be of some value.

First, for the sake of unity, we should be careful to avoid allowing or encouraging a “rush to judgment” on the issue of ordination by attempting to enforce our own sort of apostolic ruling—in this case either some church policy, or perhaps the actions of the 1990 or 1995 General Conference

²⁹Hays, 178.

Sessions regarding ordination. As Paul certainly realized in Corinth, evoking official policy when major issues of unity are involved is often interpreted as nothing more than a political power play that almost always results in further division rather than unity. Where there are strong feelings on issues that are not part of the core beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the better decision is to encourage dialogue that allows people's opinions to be heard on the issue.

In this regard, the General Conference has shown considerable wisdom in establishing division-wide study committees and the larger General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) to encourage dialogue on ordination that allows people's opinions and voices to be heard. In a church that is run more and more by committees and enacted policies, it is easy to bypass this process in favor of just enforcing policy. Administrators are often interested in keeping issues as simple and clear as possible, and often have little patience for the ways in which they feel theologians tend to "complicate" issues. Yet this is exactly what the apostle Paul did in Corinth. Instead of merely quoting the apostolic ruling, he complicated the issue by dedicating three entire chapters to discussing it. Paul did not complicate the issue just because he was a theologian, but because when church unity is at stake, simple answers are never satisfactory. Although individuals on both sides of the issue would prefer it, a quick decision would leave one side feeling that their perspective was not given a fair hearing.

Secondly, it would be wise to also follow Paul's lead in making sure that while arguing for one side or the other on ordination, we do not lose sight of the priority of love. For Paul the issue of idol meat was not merely a doctrinal matter; it was also about people and the way they were treated. In our case, we should not forget that in discussing the ordination of women we are ultimately talking about a group of fellow believers in the advent movement who feel called by God to do a work of ministry—many of whom are currently holding positions of leadership. If we approach ordination in a mechanical fashion, as if these women did not exist, whether we favor ordination or not, we are guilty of making the same mistake both sides made in Corinth: failure to care genuinely for their fellow believers. The "strong" were guilty of this by arguing their position with absolutely no thought about the believers who were affected by their actions, while the "weak" did the same thing by attributing the worst to the actions of the "strong" (10:30). Maligning our opponents or belittling their perspectives only leads to division.

Redefining the issue of women's ordination around love does not necessarily mean that one side has to entirely surrender their position on this issue. When Paul says, "If food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble," he is condemning the "strong" for trying to force the "weak" to eat idol meat against their conscience. Although Paul himself sees no problem in idol meat itself (10:25-27), he realizes that forcing another person whose conscience is not clear on the issue is actually making that person commit what they feel is an act of sin. In our case, the equivalent to this would be attempting to force a woman to be ordained when

her own conscience was not clear on the issue. Another example would be forcing one or more of our world divisions to follow the lead of the North American Division on the issue of women's ordination, or for that matter, in forcing the North American Division and others not to ordain women because some world divisions oppose it.

N. T. Wright's comments on this point are strongly worded, but worth noting:

This isn't an excuse for people with small minds and badly educated consciences to prevent the rest of the church doing things that are harmless in themselves. Sometimes people from a very narrow background, full of rules and restrictions which have nothing to do with the gospel itself and everything to do with a particular social subculture, try to insist that all other good Christians should join them in their tight little world. But in a case like that the rule-bound Christians are in no danger of being "led astray." They are quite sure of their own correctness.³⁰

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, is recognizing that a lack of agreement on some issues does not necessarily mean the unity of the church is at risk. Or to put it another way, unity does not necessarily require uniformity.

Due to Paul's lengthy and complicated response to the issue of idol meat in Corinth, the point is often missed that Paul's failure to condemn the practice of eating idol meat outright was actually not in harmony with the literal reading of the Jerusalem Council's decision prohibiting eating food offered to idols. As such, the church in Corinth was actually not in harmony with the "official policy" of the world church.

Surprisingly, Paul does not seem concerned about this reality. His lack of concern for following the exact letter of the apostolic ruling does not betray an attitude of rebelliousness nor a desire to separate from the larger church body. If it did, Paul certainly would not have reminded the Corinthians at the end of his letter of the importance of contributing to the financial collection he was gathering as a show of unity and support for the Jewish believers in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-3). In the same way that Paul did not feel his actions in Corinth were opposed to the greater unity of the early church, so we should avoid labeling the decisions of those unions who have voted to ordain without regard to gender as acts of "defiance," "rebellion," or "apostasy."³¹ Such harsh terminology is itself certainly not conducive for prompting the very unity these critics claim to champion. While we may not agree with the decision unions or conferences have made in relation to ordination, they certainly have not ceased from adhering to the central teachings of Adventism, nor have they ceased supporting the world church financially. In fact, in each case, they

³⁰N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 103.

³¹OrdinationTruth.com, "Netherlands Union Renews Rebellion Against General Conference." July 7, 2013. Accessed November 15, 2013. <http://ordinationtruth.com/2013/07/07/netherlands-union-renews-rebellion-against-general-conference/>.

have sought the guidance of the Spirit as they have moved forward under the direction of their individual constituencies.

Although we might find Paul's actions in Corinth troubling to a certain extent, I believe Paul's actions were motivated by two convictions.

First, Paul's utmost concern was clearly for the unity of the local church in Corinth. Like any pastor, his primary responsibility was the situation of the church at hand. The greater unity of the worldwide church would have meant nothing without the local unity of the church under his jurisdiction. After all, in the broadest sense, unity was the ultimate concern of the fourfold ruling of the Jerusalem Council. Since the issue of eating idol meat itself was not central to the message of the gospel, Paul did not feel compelled to risk damaging the work of a struggling church in Europe over the issue.

While I personally wish that the various union conferences that have acted to ordain without regard to gender could have waited until after the Theology of Ordination Study Committee had completed its task, I believe that, like Paul, they too felt their actions were necessary to best further the cause of God in their local field, which, after all, should be their primary concern.

Secondly, Paul likely felt that although his position on idol meat was not in harmony with the literal reading of the decree of the Jerusalem Council, it certainly was in harmony with the spirit of the ruling. The concern with idol meat was ultimately a concern about the dangers of idolatry. While Jewish believers tended to link the two together, the two were not necessarily one and the same. After all, even the passages in Lev 17 and 18 that formed the basis of the apostolic ruling did not specifically condemn idol meat; it was idolatry that was prohibited (Lev 17:7-9). In the situation in Corinth, Paul had clearly condemned the practice of participating in social events that involved attending pagan temples. While the Jewish believers in Jerusalem questioned some of Paul's actions (Acts 21:20-21), Paul certainly did not believe that local variance in aspects of church practice in Corinth was opposed to the larger unity of the church.

If Corinth could differ from other churches on the issue of idol meat and still be united with the larger body of Christ—perhaps we need not fear that recognizing the right of local unions to establish their own ordination policies in regard to gender will undermine the unity of the world church. After all, on this issue at least, unions do seem to be the Pauline equivalent of a local church, since each is responsible for maintaining the unity of the church in its own region and in its own way. Besides, the unity of the church has not been hindered by the decades-long practice of allowing each of the world divisions to determine whether General Conference policy allowing local women elders is implemented in their field.

Does this address all our issues? No, I'm sure it doesn't. No analogy is perfect. But I do think Paul's response to the situation in Corinth shows us a path forward. As such it deserves our careful consideration as we seek to preserve the unity of the Advent movement as it encompasses an ever-growing number of believers and cultures around the world.