

WOMEN'S ORDINATION: IS THE CHURCH FREE TO ACT?

by Ty Gibson | June 19, 2015

The God of the Bible is a delegator, not a micromanager. He entrusts His children with decision-making power. God is not a control freak, but rather a freedom lover.

Adam and Eve were given “dominion” over the world God had made for them ([Genesis 1:26-27](#)).

Perceiving the grave and glorious arrangement, David proclaimed,

“The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord’s; but the earth He has given to the children of men” ([Psalm 115:16](#)).

That’s delegation language.

God is love. Therefore, God has engineered a world in which the highest form of freedom is manifested in righteous self-governance. It is from this foundational reality that God empowers His people to act and is glorified by their freedom when it is responsibly exercised.

PEOPLE THINK AND LAY PLANS

The management of Israel was more than Moses could handle. Jethro, his father-in-law, came along and said, “Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you” ([Exodus 18:19](#)). Then he suggested an organizational system that involved appointing leaders over groups of 1000, groups of 100, groups of 50, and groups of 10 ([Exodus 18:13-27](#)). Moses apparently liked the idea. Jethro’s organizational structure was implemented, and God was fine with it. The thing about this account that is so remarkable in its simplicity is that Jethro used his brain to think up a sensible plan of organization that would meet the need at hand, and he was confident that God would like his plan.

Here is the crucial point to grasp at this point: the Bible *describes* what Jethro and Moses did, but it does not *prescribe* what they did for all of time and eternity.

“...IT SEEMED GOOD TO THE HOLY SPIRIT, AND TO US.”

Hundreds of years later, New Testament church members saw a need for organizational structure in their situation. So they came up with the “deacon” system ([Acts 6:1-7](#)). They appear to have made it up on the spot, and, once again, God was fine with it. Somebody could have said, “Wait just a minute! Where is this deacon system in the Bible? Ah ha, it’s not there, so we can’t do it. We need to go by the Bible, and the Bible says Moses appointed leaders over 1000s, over 100s, over 50s, and over 10s. We need to be faithful to Scripture.”

But nobody said any such thing because they were so fired up about getting the job done that God had given them to do—communicating the gospel to the world posthaste.

Were they disobeying the Old Testament system created by Jethro and Moses? No. In principle, they were doing the same thing Jethro and Moses did—using their brains to come up with an organizational system—although, in form, their system was different than the one Jethro and Moses came up with. They simply had a need for an organizational structure, so they created one.

When the New Testament church was faced with the problem of certain individuals insisting that new converts from the Gentile world be circumcised in obedience to the Bible, a group of brethren we call “the Jerusalem Council”—another organizational innovation that the church came up with—simply thought and prayed and studied the situation through, and decided not to do the circumcision thing anymore, while leaving those who insisted on circumcision to continue with it. And notice how they came to their decision: “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us” ([Acts 15:28](#)).

That’s collaboration language.

“ALL MEANS WHICH, ACCORDING TO SOUND JUDGMENT, WILL ADVANCE THE CAUSE OF TRUTH, AND ARE NOT FORBIDDEN BY PLAIN SCRIPTURE DECLARATIONS, SHOULD BE EMPLOYED”

Fast forward to our time. Our pioneers formulated an organizational system that includes Conferences, Unions and Divisions. Actually, they borrowed most of this from other Protestant churches that came up with systems out of necessity when they emerged from Catholicism. But none of it's in the Bible. Why, then, did our pioneers feel free to create such an "unbiblical" organizational system?

Because while it's not expressly biblical, neither is it *unbiblical*!

Actually, when one thinks about it, it occurs to us that the system our Advent pioneers came up with is in harmony with the Bible in the higher sense that the God of the Bible empowers His people to think, to act, to create, and to execute the mission He has given them with the freedom to figure things out without being told every step to take.

When some people, who felt confined by the Bible's descriptions of what others had done, criticized our pioneers for certain steps they took to implement "unbiblical" systems, James White had this to say:

"If it be asked, Where are your plain texts of Scripture for holding church property legally? we reply, The Bible does not furnish any; neither does it say that we should have a weekly paper, a steam printing-press, that we should publish books, build places of worship, and send out tents. Jesus says, 'Let your light so shine before men,' etc.; but He does not give all the particulars how this shall be done. The church is left to move forward in the great work, praying for divine guidance, acting upon the most efficient plans for its accomplishment. We believe it safe to be governed by the following RULE: All means which, according to sound judgment, will advance the cause of truth, and are not forbidden by plain Scripture declarations, should be employed" (James White, *Review and Herald*, April 26, 1860).

Astounding!

And remarkably sensible!

If we take the Bible seriously, and discern in it the gracious God we're dealing with, we will soon conclude that God is happy for His people to think beyond, but not contrary to, Scripture. And get this: Jesus pledged Himself to serve the plans His people might come up with to advance His Kingdom:

“Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” ([Matthew 18:18](#)).

God would be pleased for us to implement the principles of Scripture to come up with creative plans that are nowhere mentioned in the Bible, in order to advance the gospel. He has opened the door for us to come up with systems that will serve our circumstances and needs.

God, the delegator!

God, the empowerer!

God, the cooperative partner!

What an incredible God!

ECCLESIASTICAL FREEDOM

This is what some Adventist scholars mean when they tell us that women’s ordination is a matter of *ecclesiology* rather than *theology*. In other words, since the Bible expresses no definitive command either for or against women’s ordination, the church is free to do what it deems best in the matter for the advancement of the gospel. If the church assesses its situation and decides that more people can be won to Christ by having women pastors, since there is no moral principle violated in doing so, and since there is nothing in the Bible that tells us not to, the church is free to do so.

The tenor of Scripture, and particularly the picture of God’s character painted in its sacred pages, would lead us to believe that the church is free to think and act within the broad parameters of the law and the gospel. We have every reason to believe that God is delighted when we read His word, assimilate its principles, and come up with ways and means to expand those principles into a myriad of effective forms of evangelistic outreach and service.

God doesn’t want robots or slaves. He is looking for creative partners who are so passionate about Him and His gospel that they willing to think up new things, take risks, and push forward into untried methods!

There can be no question, for those who are familiar with our own history as a people, that our pioneers were people just like this. James White was nearly always at the vanguard of innovation and out-of-the-box thinking. His wife, Ellen White, was unambiguously in support of this...well...pioneering spirit. They were, after all, *pioneers!* And what's a pioneer? "A person who is among the first to reach and develop a new area of knowledge or activity."

True, we've never had ordained women pastors before. But now we live in a world with many millions of people that would be responsive to the gospel if they were to encounter it, say, through a female pastor. So why not give the world that additional point of contact with Jesus? The Bible nowhere says we can't. Our own modern prophet nowhere says we shouldn't. So why not exercise our God-ordained freedom and do it wherever we see that it would be to the advantage of God's cause on earth?

As previously mentioned, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has Conferences, Unions and Divisions. None of this is in the Bible. But that's fine. The principle of *order* is in the Bible, and that principle can take on various shapes. In our particular situation, an organizational structure took shape that includes Conferences, Unions and Divisions. And it works well. But there is nothing holy or sacred about the particular arrangement or form of our system.

THE CHURCH IS FREE TO ACT, AND GOD IS HAPPY WITH OUR FREEDOM AND THE CREATIVE SOLUTIONS WE COME UP WITH TO THE REAL-WORLD PROBLEMS WE FACE.

Take ordination itself, for example. Nowhere in Scripture can we find explicit justification for our particular method of or criterion for pastoral ordination. By "ordain" we basically mean something like, "This person has met certain educational and professional standards." Now let's be clear: that is not what was being said or done when elders or deacons were ordained in the apostolic church.

What, then, was going on when the apostolic church ordained someone? Something like this: "We, as the church, see the fruit and anointing of the Spirit in this person. We believe and pray that God will prosper them in their mission to take the gospel to the world."

But there's more. And don't miss this part, because nobody seems to be talking about it: in order to be ordained as a globally-recognized pastor in the Seventh-day Adventist church, you have to

be *an employee*. Let that register. Our particular method and mode of ordination, when it comes to a globally-recognized pastor, is basically an educational, professional, and career-based attainment *within an employing organization* called the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Again, this is only tangentially related to what was happening in the apostolic church. And yet we do it.

Do you see the point? What we call “ordination” in our modern ecclesiastical context means one sort of thing, but it certainly doesn’t look much like what was happening in the apostolic church. Does that make our modern system bad? No, not necessarily. It just makes it what it is: our particular system. The fact that we have used a quasi-biblical word—“ordination”—to describe a modern mode of operation, creates an unusual situation in which many well-meaning, modern Seventh-day Adventists assume they’re standing up for a biblical model of “ordination” when, in reality, very little about our version of “ordination” is biblical at all!

But, it’s working, for the most part, and that’s a good thing. Praise God!

So, this is the question I’m posing: is the church free to do as it deems best for the advancement of the gospel as long as it operates within the principles of righteousness?

Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!

Our inclination is for God to give us rigid parameters and dictates, while God’s inclination is to give us freedom to assess our situation and act out intelligent plans. The church is free to act, and God is happy with our freedom and the creative solutions we come up with to the real-world problems we face.

But this brings us to the theological core of what we’re dealing with as a people.

PICTURE OF GOD

As always, it all boils down to our picture of God. Do we perceive God as a God whose essential character is love, from which arises the agile glory of freedom, from which arises the fluid necessity of human beings thinking through their situation and acting within the principles and spirit of the gospel? Or do we see God as one who issues narrow rules with which He simply

demands compliance, and if He says nothing on a topic, He would have us do nothing? Is God's ultimate will that we would be people of righteous self-governance or of mechanical exactitude?

What we see in Scripture is that wherever the gospel is not rightly understood and experienced, human beings are more comfortable operating within narrow parameters of restriction.

AND SO, WE PACE THE OPEN CAGE, ASKING QUESTIONS LIKE, *WHAT ARE WE ALLOWED TO DO AND WHAT ARE WE NOT ALLOWED TO DO?*

Think of Israel wandering in the desert while Canaan was just over yonder (Numbers 14).

Think of the Pharisees, straining gnats and swallowing camels in the presence of the Lord of liberty (Matthew 23).

Think of the pro-circumcision party in Acts, determined that everyone comply with their "biblical" demands (Acts 16).

Think of the church at Galatia, invaded by the Judaizers who were spying out their liberty in Christ and trying to bring them into bondage ([Galatians 2:4](#)).

All of us, by nature, are children of bondage (Galatians 4). We are inclined to live in one form of slavery or another in order to evade the grave responsibility entailed in our freedom ([Galatians 5:1-6](#)). And so, we pace the open cage, asking questions like, *What are we allowed to do and what are we not allowed to do?*, rather than asking questions like, *How can we most effectively apply the principles of truth and righteousness for the advancement of God's kingdom, to reach as many people as possible, as fast as possible, with the knowledge of God's beautiful love for them?*

What we as a people need more than anything else is a holy flood of gospel preaching, a deluge of insight to God's grace, a downpour of God's love upon our hearts. We need a collective, corporate re-baptism in Holy Ghost power, a theological immersion in the life-giving truth of Christ's righteousness. We need to be revolutionized and radicalized and reorganized by the free and freeing gift of His righteousness.

“Our churches are dying for the want of teaching on the subject of righteousness by faith in Christ, and on kindred truths” (Ellen White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 301).

“The thought that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, not because of any merit on our part, but as a free gift from God, is a precious thought. The enemy of God and man is not willing that this truth should be clearly presented; for he knows that if the people receive it fully, his power will be broken” (Ellen White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 161).

Our crippling sense of restriction is a symptom of what Ellen White called “the rut of legal religion” (Letter 10a, April 6, 1892, to Stephen Haskell). We’ve been stuck in that “rut” for more than a hundred years. In December of 1888, thinking back to the Minneapolis General Conference Session of that year, Ellen White mused with sadness:

“What power must we have from God that icy hearts, having only a legal religion, should see the better things provided for them—Christ and His righteousness!” (*1888 Materials*, p. 229).

Here she discerned the two forces that were at odds within Adventism: *legal religion* versus *Christ and His righteousness*.

To the degree that the gospel is understood and internalized, the inclination to grant freedom to others will flower in the soul. Conversely, to the degree that the gospel is not understood and internalized, the inclination to enforce one’s religious perspectives will increase. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” ([2 Corinthians 3:17](#)). And where the Spirit of the Lord is not, there is [restriction and control](#).

The core principle that lies at the heart of the Third Angel’s Message is freedom of conscience and religious liberty. In all matters that pertain to God, the soul must remain free and mobile under the transformative influence of God’s grace as it works from within outward.

It was for this reason that the pioneers of the Advent Movement were resistant to the formulation of a creed by which fellow believers could be judged faithful or unfaithful. As the movement matured and developed, it became apparent that it was acceptable and advantageous to identify a basic set of foundational beliefs that define Seventh-day Adventists’ theology. But even then, we have deliberately chosen *not* to regard these fundamental beliefs as a creed. The point of establishing a set of fundamental beliefs is to set forth definable theological parameters that allow for the maximum amount of freedom, thus creating an environment conducive to personal study, growth, and evangelistic explosion.

Too much detailed fine-tuning will turn the living body of Christ into a lifeless, mechanical robot!

VOTE LIBERTY

With [the current women's ordination debate](#), the Seventh-day Adventist Church has come to what appears to be a crossroads at which our basic ecclesiastical self-understanding will move in one of two directions: toward the core principle of liberty that is inherent to the gospel or toward the core principle of control that is inherent to our world's [fallen religious systems](#). Frankly, the matter of whether women are ordained within the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a small matter compared to whether the tendency to restrict and control wins the day in the upcoming vote.

Someone recently said to me, "If the church allows each Division to decide whether or not to ordain women, then we would be letting everyone do 'what is right in their own eyes,' and we shouldn't allow that, should we?"

AND WHERE THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS NOT, THERE IS RESTRICTION AND CONTROL.

My response was, "Sure we should, with regards to everything except heresy and sin."

He looked shocked for a split second, and then common sense took over and he said, "Huh, yeah, that make sense. So I guess we don't need rules about everything, do we?"

"Nope," I said, "what we need is the pure gospel of God's free grace and the infilling of the Holy Spirit, under the influence of which we will fall deeply in love with the Savior and desire to do only those things that will spread His fame the world over."

Of course there are lines that the corporate body cannot allow its members to cross while remaining in membership: things like sexual sin, theft, murder and apostasy from the fundamental doctrinal truths of Scripture. But beyond the agreed upon parameters of what constitutes a baseline doctrinal orthodoxy and moral practice, the church should not engage itself in dictating how its members live out and communicate their faith. Once the basic substance of

the church's belief and practice is defined, the exact form that substance takes on should be left to the creative, beautiful, individual expression inherent in human diversity.

And within the realm of church policy, when faced with a decision to vote in favor of restriction or liberty with regards to matters that do not involve heresy or sin, the Christian should always vote in favor of liberty!

As gospel believers we should be leaning into liberty, giving all the room possible for the people of God to act under the influence of God's free Spirit. We should stand uncompromisingly clear in opposition to things like murder, sexual immorality, theft, domestic abuse, greed, oppression, arrogance, and gossip, and we should refrain from dictating universal rules to restrict those who sense God's calling upon them to ministry.

Let this register deeply: there are those among us who feel called to gospel ministry in a professional capacity, who are eager to devote their lives to preaching evangelistic meetings, planting and pastoring churches, studying Scripture and sharing what they discover, ministering to the addicted and oppressed, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, equipping and empowering the saints, and more besides. They are passionate to baptize in the name of Jesus and spread the knowledge His lovely character...and we are considering voting that they cannot be set apart to this calling by their own church's official recognizing mechanism of ordination.

But think this through carefully. Even if you believe that it is not ideal for women to be ordained to the gospel ministry, surely you can see that it is far less ideal to lose the confidence of many women, men, and young adults who find that they can only perceive a rule against women's ordination as unnecessarily restrictive and hurtful to the cause of God. Surely, in the absence of an express biblical proscription or prescription about "ordination," it is better to be largehearted and gracious, to extend affirmation to our sisters, rather than vote down their sense of calling. On this matter, I believe Scripture bears out that the church is free to act.

Will we?