

Elder Damsteegt Speaks — The Truth About Women's Ordination

Elder P. Gerard Damsteegt, Professor of Church History at Andrews University, presented a powerful 20-minute message at the 1995 Utrecht General Conference Session.

It is clear, it is concise, it is to the point.

You will deeply appreciate it, and will want to share it with your friends.

It is a privilege for me, brothers and sisters, to address you at this awesome occasion. Let us pray. Lord, send Your Spirit. Touch our hearts. And whatever we do, may it be to Your glory, and may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord and Saviour, our Redeemer. Amen.

Let me first of all state that I strongly support the involvement of women in God's work. Women have unique gifts needed to finish the work. They can reach people men can never reach.

Even though I cannot agree with the North American Division request, I truly and deeply sympathize with them. What is the dilemma the church is facing? Some years ago the Annual Council voted that women ordained as elders can perform all the duties of ordained ministers. Yet they cannot be ordained as ministers. And of course the result is a very unhappy church of unfairness, discrimination, and injustice. How can we now together solve this dilemma and yet preserve the unity of the church?

Two options were cited by the NAD president. The first was to begin ordaining women as elders. The second was to request that each division have

the freedom to ordain women as ministers. The NAD leadership has strongly chosen the second option. They sincerely believe that this is the way to preserve unity. Why can't I support this request? Simply because the request conflicts with three of our Biblical doctrines: the doctrine of the church, the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures, and the doctrine of the unity in the body of Christ.

In order to understand this fully, we have to see the full implications of this request. It's simply a matter of laying on of hands. There is good counsel in the Spirit of Prophecy that women be ordained for a special work, and they could do a tremendous work. But the issue is: ordination or what? That's the issue.

And so the present request, if approved, presents a major change in the structure of church leadership. It rejects the generally held Seventh-day Adventist view that the Bible teaches clear differences in function between men and women within the church. It assumes that the Bible allows women to occupy positions of spiritual headship in the church, such as head of the local church, conference president, union president, and General Conference president.

What is the test of our doctrine and practice? The Bible clearly reveals in Isaiah 8:20: "To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." Now we, as Adventists, are very fortunate, because about 100 years ago, in 1888, we had a conference with lots of tensions. And there the Lord revealed that the Bible must be our stan-

dard for every doctrine and practice. It is the Word of the living God that is to decide all controversies, including the one this afternoon. And so we are dealing with a significant practice, the practice of appointing ministerial leadership in Christ's church. So therefore, friends, we are on good terms. God's Word must be our focus. We are a Bible church.

The statement is often made that the Bible doesn't say anything about it and that we can just go ahead! Does the Bible speak to the question of the right of women to occupy positions of leadership with full ecclesiastical authority? And that is a phrase that the Spirit of Prophecy associates with ordination.

Let me refer to the history of our church. Early Adventists were strongly reform-minded, and they supported reform movements, such as the abolition of slavery, women's rights, and temperance. But there is one reform movement that was opposed. Ellen White rejected the women's rights movement. Why? The prophet warned that those who felt called out to join the movement in favor of women's rights might as well have severed all connection with the third angel's message. The Spirit, the Scriptures, are plain upon the relations and rights of men and women. So does the Bible address this issue? Very clearly it does.

And so now let us look at our three major doctrines. First of all, the request conflicts with the doctrine of the church. What does the Bible teach on the relationship between men and women? Genesis clearly reveals that in nature men and women are created in the image of God. Second, Jesus reveals that before God we're all exceedingly precious. God shows no partiality because we're one in Christ Jesus. Therefore, friends, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female. On this we all agree. However, are men and women the same in every sense? It is clear that the Bible teaches that all have the same value and standing before God, but that they are different in their functional roles. And the North American request overlooks this fundamental Bible teaching. First Timothy and Titus clearly present this teaching, which directly addresses our situation.

Let us look at the message of the first book of Timothy, chapter 1, because it is a timeless message for the church. Timothy was instructed to teach no other doctrine, nor give heed to fables

that cause disputes rather than godly edification. And so the Lord provided counsel concerning how to rescue churches from division and heresy. Inspiration gave Timothy a plan, not only for the first century, but for the church until the Lord returns. Inspiration says again that these instructions are put forth so that we may know how we ought to behave in the church of the living God.

Let us analyze in this book the principles of authority in the church. Early Christians encountered something similar to what we are facing today. In certain places women interpreted the freedom of the gospel as a freedom to exercise the spiritual headship role in the church. Paul's response was swift: "I do not permit a woman to have authority over a man." What does the Bible teach, in specifically those chapters, about God's great plan for spiritual headship? There are three major Biblical arguments. First of all, we look at Christ's creation order before the Fall. Paul bases his first theological reason on Christ's creation order. Adam was formed first, then Eve. It's interesting that Jesus' actions here had nothing to do with culture specifically.

Second, Christ's order after the Fall. His second theological reason is based on the order of sin. Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Again, brothers and sisters, it has nothing to do with a specific culture.

Finally, Christ's order after the cross. These role distinctions in the Old Testament that Jesus instituted are not canceled by His redemptive work. God's Word proclaims clearly in Corinthians that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. Thus priestly headship of the man in the home and in the church is still in effect during the Christian Era.

Now let us look at the qualifications for an elder or overseer. What are the requirements for spiritual headship? Immediately after the admonition that women do not have the spiritual authority in the church Paul immediately points to who has the authority—namely, the elder of the church. What are the characteristics? An elder must be blameless. Second, he must be the husband of one wife. It doesn't say spouse of a husband! He is to be the male gender. Here the Greek word for husband is *aner*, which is always a man, never a woman. So to appoint a woman as an elder based on the Bible is un-Biblical. Third, and

this supports the whole argument, the elder must be one who rules his house well, having his children in submission with all reverence. Why? If a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God? Home leadership qualifies for spiritual headship in the church. This is not a cultural custom, but a divinely ordained principle (“as unto the Lord”). And so, what is now the line of authority in the doctrine of the church? Remember what we have voted as fundamental belief 11, that the church derives its authority from Christ, who is the incarnate Word, and from the Scriptures, which are the written Word. So the authority structure is based on the Bible. How does it work? It’s very simple.

Christ is head of the church delegates; His authority to the leaders of the church is in harmony with the Bible. Then in harmony with His order of creation, Jesus assigns the position of an elder or overseer to a man, not to a woman. Any change in this divine plan for His church will result in the derailment of a mission-driven church.

My second reservation is that the request violates the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. Remember that in this doctrine it says that “the Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of his will” and “the test of experience.” Frequently people tell me that Paul was biased in his culture. The real question is, friends, Can we trust the Bible writers? Yes, because God is the author of the Bible, and therefore the Bible is “the infallible authority as a rule of faith and practice.” It’s not affected by human prejudice or human pride. The Bible therefore is trustworthy and unbiased.

Now the question is How do we interpret the Bible? Simply: “The Word of God is infallible; accept it as it reads.” We have had plenty of counsel about the danger of modifying God’s instructions. “The very beginning of the great apostasy was in seeking to supplement the authority of God by that of the church. Rome began by enjoining what God had not forbidden, and she ended by forbidding what He had explicitly enjoined.” What we need as Seventh-day Adventists, friends, is submission to the Word of God, not reinterpretation. You know, friends, we are a part of the remnant church, and the remnant church is a movement at the end of time that is still to reveal the characteristics of the New Testament church, even in the authority structure of church leadership.

My third reservation is that the request de-

stroys the doctrine of unity in the body of Christ. Our doctrine says simply, “Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope,” and results in one witness to all. Did you see the connection between the revelation of Jesus in the Scriptures and the result of approving the request? What is it? It allows the use of two conflicting Biblical methods for Seventh-day Adventists. One method follows the New Testament, the Protestant Reformers, the Adventist pioneers, including Ellen White. This approach favors the plain meaning of the Bible in its regulations for church leadership. The other method sets the stage for the approach of the fallen churches of Babylon since 1844. This new approach to the Bible is strongly influenced by the trends of today’s culture. Male spiritual headship is not politically correct.

What are the effects of those two conflicting methods of Biblical interpretation? It establishes two conflicting theologies of church leadership. Ordination will not have worldwide validity any longer, and some fields will not recognize the leadership in other fields. Approving leads toward division, not unity; toward national churches, not a world church; and ultimately to congregationalism. For unity, Seventh-day Adventists must follow the Word of God.

What will I do? If this assembly approves this proposal, remember that God calls for unity in Christ. I will stay with the church. Where else shall I go? The messenger of the Lord says, “Stay with the ship; it will go through.” It may be damaged, but I will stay with the ship. There is no better place. And you know the future for Bible-believing Seventh-day Adventists is great. Let me share with you a promise in the *Great Controversy*: “The Lord will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible and the Bible only as the standard of doctrine and the basis of all reform. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils . . . the voice of the majority—not one or all of these things should be regarded as evidence for or against points of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept we should demand a plain ‘Thus saith the Lord’ in its support.”

What about all the arguments that we constantly hear? Yes, it is good for unity, so therefore approve it. Friends, unity cannot be kept by a policy contrary to Scripture. It brings confusion and drives people to independent ministries.

Second, some will proclaim, "I had a call from the Lord. The Lord told me to lead out in the church and take charge of the whole church." Remember, not every call or gift comes from God. "Test the spirits to see whether they are of God."

What about the argument of fairness and justice? Remember, the Bible is our standard to judge what is fair and just. We must follow the Bible, not the standards of society.

And so in summary, why can I not support this request? Because it is out of harmony with three Seventh-day Adventist doctrines. First of all, it conflicts with the doctrine of the church by instituting an unscriptural structure. Second, it violates the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures by not accepting Scripture as it plainly reads. And third, it destroys the doctrine of the unity of the body of Christ by introducing an un-Biblical practice that

nullifies the worldwide validity of ordination.

Remember, friends, that we have always considered ourselves the continuity of the Protestant Reformation. Is this still so today? When Luther, the great Reformer, was confronted with a choice between human opinions and the Bible, he said, "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture I cannot and will not" change my views. From a humble beginning Seventh-day Adventists have had the same conviction. Will they still continue as successors of the Protestant Reformation and bring us to a grand and glorious climax? The actions of this afternoon will certainly reveal the true spirit of our church. May God help us is my prayer.

—*The above address was quoted in full in the July 7, 1995 issue of the Adventist Review, pp. 25-26.*

It is not difficult to locate what the Bible says on any given topic. Look up the references in any category you may be interested in—and see what it says. (Although there are some negatives here, if you would look in the Bible under "men," you would find far more.) You will not find women's ordination.

What does it say about Women? You will find most of it in the following list:

At Creation and the Fall: Gen 1:27; 2:18, 21-24; 3:1-16; 2 Cor 11:3; 1 Tim 2:12-15; Gen 3:15.

Relation to Worship Services: Ex 15:20-21; 38:8; 1 Sam 2:22; 1 Chron 25:5-6; Ezra 2:65; Neh 7:67; Ex 35:22; 38:8; Deut 31:12; Josh 8:35; 1 Cor 14:34; 1 Tim 2:11-12.

Religious Activities among Early Christians: Acts 1:14; 12:12-13; 1 Cor 11:5; 14:34; 1 Tim 2:11; Acts 16:14-15; 17:4, 12, 34.

Household Activities: Gen 18:6; Prov 31:15-19; Matt 24:41;

Ex 35:25-26; 1 Sam 2:19; Prov 31:19-24; Acts 9:39; Ruth 2:8; Song 1:6; Gen 24:11, 13-14, 19-20; 29:9; Ex 2:16; Isa 27:11; Ezek 26:6, 8; Matt 26:69; Jn 18:16-17; Acts 12:13-14.

Clothing and Adornment: Gen 24:65; Deut 22:5; 1 Cor 11:5-15; 1 Tim 2:9-10; 1 Pet 3:3-4; Isa 3:16-23; Jer 2:32.

Queens: Isa 3:12; 2 Kg 11:1-16; 2 Chron 22:2-3, 10-12; 1 Kg 10:1-13; Acts 8:27; Neh 2:6; Esther.

Poets and Singers: Ex 15:21; Judg 5; 1 Sam 2:1-10; Lk 1:42-45; Lk 1:46-55; 1 Chron 25:5-6; Ezra 2:65; Neh 7:67.

Prophets: Ex 15:20-21; Mic 6:4; Judg 4:4-5; 2 Kg 22:14-20; 2 Chron 34:22-28; Neh 6:14; Lk 2:36-38; Acts 21:9; Ezek 13:17-23.

Business, Property Rights, inheritance: Prov 31:14-18, 24; Num 27:1-11; 36; Josh 17:3-6; Job 42:15; Ruth 4:3-9.

First: Gen 3:6; Mk 15:46-47; 16:1-6; Lk 23:27-28, 49, 55-56; 24:1-10; Mk 16:9; Jn 20:14-18.

Various Personalities: 2 Sam 1:26; Isa 49:15; Lam 4:10; Judg 11:34; 21:21; Jer 31:13; Zech

9:17; Gen 24:17; 2 Sam 20:16-22; Isa 19:16; Jer 50:37; 51:30; Nah 3:13.

Marriage, Vows, and Offspring: Gen 3:16; Isa 49:15; Lam 4:10; Gen 24:3-4; Ex 22:17; Judg 11:37; Ps 78:63; Isa 4:1; Num 30:3-16; 5:12-31; Esth 1:20-22; 1 Tim 5:14.

Honorable: Ruth 3:11; Prov 11:16, 22; 12:4; 14:1; 18:22; 31:10-30; 1 Tim 2:9; 3:11; 5:2-10; Tit 2:3-5.

Dishonorable: Prov 19:13-14; 21:9, 19; 25:24; 27:15-16; 30:21-23; Eccl 7:26-28; Isa 3:16-24; 32:9-11; Ezek 13:17-23; 1 Tim 5:12-13; Isa 32:9-11; Jer 2:32; Prov 6:24-29, 32-35; 7:6-27; Eccl 7:26; 2 Tim 3:6; Jer 7:18; Ezek 13:17, 23; Num 31:15-16; 1 Kg 21:8, 25; Neh 13:26; 2 Kg 23:7; Rom 1:26; 2 Kg 9:30-37; Jer 44:15-19, 25; Ezek 8:14; Hos 4:13-14;

In Relation to Man: Gen 3:16; 24:3-4; 34:6; Ex 22:17; 1 Cor 11:3, 9; 1 Cor 14:34-35; 1 Tim 2:10-15.

Miscellaneous: Gen 24:6-7; 31:33; Esth 2:9, 11; 1 Pet 3:7.