

Higher Criticism and the Resistance to Women's Ordination: Unmasking the Issue

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A close look at the dynamics of the debate over women's ordination as it arose in the latter half of the 20th century reveals that the most influential leaders in Seventh-day Adventism were not in a war against women's ordination per se. They were in a larger culture war that for the second time had enveloped American society - a war against liberalism and liberal religion.¹ A hallmark of liberal religion is higher critical methodology of biblical interpretation. Major institutional leaders perceive this interpretive methodology to be a threat to the very foundations of Seventh-day Adventism. Because the women's movement was a major contender in the culture war of 20th century, women's ordination became in the minds of many a signifier of this major enemy of the church - higher criticism. Thus in the struggle to preserve the foundational doctrines of the church, women's ordination became collateral damage.

This paper argues that the debate over women's ordination has been caught in the crossfire between liberal and conservative religion. It highlights two contending interpretive approaches to demonstrate that interpretive methodology has never been the real issue, but became a viable talking point in the quest to block the ordination of women which by the 1980s had taken on symbolic weight as the enemy of the denomination. The aim of the paper is to call attention to a real issue beneath the surface issue that is women's ordination. Hopefully this may serve as an important step towards resolving this protracted conflict.

In 1973 the Biblical Research Institute (BRI) of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists² convened the Camp Mohaven Conference with the expressed purpose of steering the denomination towards the ordination of women. At this conference the General Conference *ad hoc* committee on the role of women in the church, comprising thirteen men and fourteen women from North America met to review twenty-nine papers on the issue. A glowing argument for Gender mutuality based on Genesis 1-3³ opened the Camp Mohaven document and set the pace for the conversation for the ordination of women. Director of the BRI Gordon Hyde stated that he was "an advocate for new opportunities and wider authority for women in the church."⁴

¹ This too was precisely the case in 1881 and Ellen White herself stood the risk of falling as a casualty in that war.

² The BRI is the section of the world Church responsible for providing the biblical perspective from which the denomination may approach the major issues that arise.

³ Gerhard Hasel, "Man and Woman in Genesis 1-3," in *The Role of Women in the Church*, with an Introduction and Overview by Gordon M. Hyde (Washington, D.C.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists), 1984, 10-27.

⁴ Gordon Hyde, "The Mohaven Council: Where it all began," *Adventists Affirm*, Fall 1989, 43

While, as Hyde admits, there were papers at Camp Mohaven that argued against the ordination of women,⁵ the resulting document, *The Role of Women in the Church*, appeared with only twelve of the twenty nine papers reviewed by the committee, all presenting biblical arguments for the ordination of women. The committee recommended that women be ordained as local elders,⁶ that those in theological training be hired as “associates in pastoral care,” and that a pilot program should be established immediately leading to ordination of women in 1975.⁷

However, by the onset of the 1980s the conversation took a radical turn. The same powers that lead the way towards women’s ordination joined the movement against it. These are conservative Adventists who consistently maintained the only method of interpretation accepted by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Why then did they go back to the same Bible with the same conservative approach and come back with arguments to oppose the ordination of women? There has to be something else at work here. Careful observation of the titles of two opposing arguments by the same author who opened the Camp Mohaven document demonstrates at face value how the conversation about ordination of women shifted. The opening paper of the Camp Mohaven Document, is titled “Man and Woman in Genesis 1-3,” and makes a compelling argument for gender mutuality. In 1988 and 1999 respectively the same author’s papers stridently opposing women’s ordination carry the titles “Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics, and the Role of Women,”⁸ and “Biblical Authority and Feminist Interpretation.”⁹ These papers display a progressive shift of concerns from the need for a gender balanced ministry to interpretive methodology to the specific concern over the feminist threat. Indeed two popular books against women’s ordination published in 1994 and 1995 in anticipation of the Utrecht General Conference session took incisive aim at the feminist agenda and the interpretive methodology associated with it.¹⁰

Liberal Modernity, Biblical Interpretation, and Seventh-day Adventist Identity

The official Biblical interpretive stance of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (See Appendix) does not of necessity place it in opposition to women’s ordination. The Camp Mohaven document demonstrates that. However, in any struggle the most socio-politically vulnerable becomes the scapegoat. The issue of women’s ordination stood in the middle of a fight to protect the church against a major icon of liberal religion, namely higher criticism, also called historical critical method of biblical interpretation. A closer look at the competing approaches to scripture

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The position of an ordained local elder is a voluntary lay position unlike the ordained pastor who is employed by the denominations and has full clergy rights. The question of women’s ordination in this study refers to the granting of full clergy rights that entail full rights to congregational leadership.

⁷ Kit Watts, “The Long and Winding Road for Adventist Women’s Ordination: 35 Years and Counting,” *Spectrum* 31:3 (Summer 2003): 56.

⁸ Hasel, Unpublished Manuscript, prepared for the Commission on the Role of Women, March 1988.

⁹ _____, *Adventist Affirm*, Fall 1989, 12-23.

¹⁰ See Raymond C. Holmes, *The Tip of an Iceberg: Biblical Authority, Biblical Interpretation, and the Ordination of Women in Ministry* (Wakefield, MI: Pointer Publications, 1994); and Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Searching the Scriptures: Women’s Ordination and the Call to Biblical Fidelity* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 1995).

as they appear in the debate is helpful in understanding the deeper issue beneath this surface issue of women's ordination.

Inerrancy

The Seventh-day Adventist approach to scripture places it among that group of Christian denominations called "biblically inerrant denominations."¹¹ The term inerrant or inerrancy often brings to mind ideas of verbal inspiration - God speaks directly to the authors of the Bible and therefore it can have no error. If God speaks then the text is ahistorical and thus must be applied literally without regard to socio-historical context. This is the original use of the term inerrancy and this use is rooted in fundamentalism. This however is not the meaning of the term "biblically inerrant" as it refers to Seventh-day Adventism and many other Protestant denominations. This term refers "more broadly to those denominations with an intellectual commitment to the basic consistency and authority of the Bible."¹² This principle of inerrancy operates on two basic axioms. The first is that the Bible is the authoritative source of every aspect of human life. The second asserts that it can contain no internal contradictions. Thus in the face of ambiguity, the interpreter wrestles to find meaning based on the assumption that there is internal harmony.

As it relates to women's ordination, biblically inerrant denominations stand over against sacramental denominations. Besides Roman Catholicism, this latter group also includes Episcopalian, Eastern Orthodox, and to a lesser extent, Lutheran churches. In these denominations, those who oppose women's ordination argue that for the sacramental act of changing bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ to be efficacious, the agent must resemble Christ. Maleness (unmarried male in the case of Roman Catholicism), they argue, is the essential factor in that representation. On the other hand, biblically inerrant denominations commit to the word rather than to the sacrament. For these, the sacrament has been consummated in the sacrifice of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. Of such, the ministry is prophetic - mediation of the word, rather than priestly - mediation of the sacrament. This makes it possible for Seventh-day Adventism to affirm a woman - Ellen G. White - as its greatest source of authority outside of scripture. Biblically inerrant denominations are therefore less resistant¹³ to women's ordination. Why then is Seventh-day Adventism among those who continue to resist women's ordination? A look at the church's relationship with inerrancy may take us a step closer to the answer.

¹¹ Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 84.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Non-sacramental denominations began ordaining women in 1918. None of the sacramental denominations began ordaining women before 1970. (The American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church of America began to ordain women in 1970; and the Episcopalian Church began the same in 1976.

Inerrancy and Fundamentalism

Again, this broad use of the term inerrant must be distinguished from its original use which is rooted in its alliance with fundamentalism. Fundamentalism carries with it a cultural symbolism of resistance to modernity. In order to carry forth its ideological agenda, Fundamentalism tends to stress (to the point of distortion) the second axiom on which the protestant principle operates, namely that the Bible can contain *no internal contradictions*. It overlooks *internal* thus stressing that it contains *no contradictions*. As such the approach tends to universalize *selected* practices in the world from which the Bible arose (such as male dominance) that reinforce the cultural status quo. Any attempt to contextualize these *selected* cultural practices is met with statements such as “God does not change.” The term *selected* indicates that not even fundamentalists are able to consistently universalize the cultural practices of Bible times. Indeed many tried to hold on to slavery and the flagrant racial discrimination and injustice that resulted from that, but that has proven too formidable a foe.

Seventh-day Adventism and Fundamentalism

Seventh-day Adventism has succeeded thus far in its resistance to women’s ordination largely because of its alliance with the fundamentalist movement. This alliance has been forged by a few on behalf of the many who merely follow without fully knowing.

By the beginning of the 1980s as in the 19th century the Seventh-day Adventist Church was pulled into the fundamentalist movement within Protestantism. This movement defines itself in opposition to the world of liberal religions. Because gender equality is such a defining core of the modern liberal agenda, resisting women’s ordination became a way to symbolize anti-liberalism within the religious world. A minority within the Seventh-day Adventist theological academe had so much power, precisely because it aligned itself with the larger anti-liberal inerrantist world. It calls upon the power of the anti-liberal inerrantist movement to define and defend Seventh-day Adventist separatism and exclusive claims to truth.

Higher Criticism

For some of the Church’s theologians and leaders, higher critical method of biblical interpretation poses a serious threat to the very identity and survival of Seventh-day Adventism as the true church of Bible prophecy.

Higher Criticism refers to a method of literary analysis of the Bible to determine their type, source, history and original intent. At the most basic level higher criticism does not assume that there is consistency in the Bible, or that the accounts are *necessarily* literal. However, its basic anti-supernaturalist assumption needs not accompany any use of higher critical tools. For example, a higher critical analysis of the Genesis account of creation renders the story a myth (referring to the type of literature). The term “myth” in literary analysis does not mean “untrue.” Rather, it means that there is an essential truth that the story conveys. The truth of the story is not in the details (which may be themselves symbolic rather than literal), but in the message that the story conveys. Myth in higher critical methodology is a vehicle of truth. Thus the Genesis

story from this interpretive standpoint is not a literal scientific account of origins, but a theological thematic account. This is to say that the perfect act of creation by the Creator may be true, but the precise scientific how is not present in the story, neither was a scientific account the intent of the author.

It is quite clear therefore that higher critical methodology tends to disrupt the basic dogmatic assumptions of Seventh-day Adventism. The denomination invests its defining doctrines, including the doctrine of the Seventh-day Sabbath in an assumption of biblical authority and a literal interpretation of certain biblical accounts such as the literal six days creation.

The Problem of Association

The nagging question remains. Why should women's ordination become a casualty here when the major defenders before or at the heated 1995 General Conference session never used higher critical methodology to defend it? Higher critical methodology is nowhere to be found in the Camp Mohaven document: *The Role of Women in the Church*. As Mark Chaves argues:

...the strong association that we observe today between a denomination's commitment to biblical inerrancy and its official resistance to women's ordination cannot be explained entirely as a matter of intellectual consistency. Biblical inerrancy does not cause resistance to women's ordination as a matter of logical deduction. The association is very much a cultural association, and it begs for a sociological explanation.¹⁴

As noted above, in both the culture wars of the 19th and 20th centuries, a major contender was the women's movement. Chaves argues that the rise of the women's movement changed the meaning of women's ordination and its "symbolic significance."¹⁵ For Seventh-day Adventist the symbolism goes even deeper because major feminists and feminist sympathizers of the 20th century used the tools of higher criticism to defend women's ordination and critique the patriarchal heritage of the Bible. Women's ordination consequently took on symbolic weight as the enemy of the denomination. It became a perceived threat to the authority of Scripture and the very identity of the Church. Such perception is a matter of association – association first with liberalism, and second with higher criticism – the perceived archenemy of Seventh-day Adventism. The debate over women's ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is thus a cultural-ideological war between perceived liberal and conservative camps fighting over an issue that is really not the issue, and the Bible serves as weapon rather than a means of instruction.

The Real Battle

The resistance to higher criticism by major opponents of women's ordination did not necessarily begin with the women's movement. Rather, it coincided with a period of rigorous challenges to

¹⁴ Chaves, 92

¹⁵ Ibid, 10

traditional Adventist beliefs and practices, chief of which are the foundational Sanctuary Doctrine,¹⁶ the inspiration and authority of Ellen G. White¹⁷ and the literal six day creation on which the doctrine of the Sabbath hangs. The cultural and intellectual climate of the sixties served as a precursor to those challenges. The Association of Adventist Forums¹⁸ appears to be the representative body in Adventism that engaged the denomination in closer scrutiny of its beliefs and practices. In a statement regarding its formation, the Association of Adventist Forums states:

During the uproar of the 1960s the younger generation questioned everything. It focused its attention on such major issues as the Vietnam War, civil rights, traditional morality, and ecology. Patriotism, rules, and values were no longer taken for granted. Seventh-day Adventist students were no exception. As more and more church members began to attend non-Adventist universities and colleges they applied critical thinking learned in their studies to other topics - including their church's beliefs and practices - that meant much to them.¹⁹

The Church's initial response to the concerns regarding higher criticism came in the form of a symposium on biblical hermeneutics conducted by the Biblical Research Institute in 1974. This was only a year after the institute convened the Camp Mohaven Conference with the goal of women's ordination. A significant result of the symposium was a published document edited by BRI director Gordon Hyde titled, *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*.²⁰ In the preface of this

¹⁶ This major crisis resulted from the study of Desmond Ford in 1980. A major problem that Ford has with the doctrine is that there is no biblical basis for the "year-day principle" on which the doctrine recones 2,300 day in Daniel 8:14 to be 2,300 years. Ford's arguments reveal that the texts of Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6 that Adventists use to prove the year-day principle are taken out of context. He argues that the 2,300 evenings and mornings met their original fulfillment when Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple in Jerusalem. He however proposes the "apotelesmatic" principle as a solution to the damage this may cause to the doctrine. This principle assumes a twofold application of prophesy, one primary and contextual, and one secondary. He therefore expresses his belief in the 1844 event that gave rise to Adventism as part of the Divine providence. 2) Based on a contextual interpretation of Hebrews 9, the high priest's ministry in the holy of holies symbolizes the whole period from the cross to the return of Christ, not a period that began in 1844. Thus he argues that the Adventist doctrine of an "investigative judgment" that began in 1844 is not biblical. (See Desmond Ford, Daniel 8:14 and the Day of Atonement," *Spectrum* 11:2 (Nov. 1980): 30-36

¹⁷ See Walter Rea, *The White Lie* (Turlock, CA: M&R Publications, 1982). The publication questioned the divine inspiration of Ellen White because of her alleged extensive plagiarism. The church drew upon higher critical methodology (source criticism) to respond to the allegations.

¹⁸ The Association of Adventist Forums is an umbrella organization of diverse discussion groups throughout the world – a result of the gathering of Seventh-day Adventist graduate students to discuss current issues affecting the church, and to closely examine the churches traditional beliefs and practices. While many Adventist believe this organization to be the "liberal" wing of the church, it has sought to avoid this label. In 1968 the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists officially endorsed the association in *Adventist Review*. The Journal of the Association of Adventist Forums is *Spectrum*. This journal provides the richest source of published information concerning the ethical, doctrinal, theological and ecclesiological issues that have affected the Seventh-day Adventist church since the 1960s, and is an excellent reference for issues that have affected the church throughout its history.

¹⁹ <http://www.spectrummagazine.org/aaf/index/html>

²⁰ Gordon Hyde, ed., *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics* (Washington D.C: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974).

document, Hyde notes that while Seventh-day Adventists have been historically a “people of the Book” and have “accepted its authority in the tradition of the Protestant Reformation, holding to the principle of *sola scriptura* and allowing the scripture to be its own interpreter, “recent generation of the Church in their quest for advanced education have had increasing exposure to the presuppositions and methodologies that have challenged the protestant principle.”²¹ As the hermeneutical crisis mounted, a conference held in Rio de Janeiro in 1976 resulted in *Methods of Bible Study* the church’s official statement on biblical interpretive methodology.

The issue of women’s ordination stood in direct crossfire of this intellectual conflict that continues to foment, and it has taken on symbolic weight in the minds of many as the enemy of the denomination. This explains why the debate over women’s ordination morphed into arguments about interpretive methodology. This is the context of Hasel’s regression and the resulting papers, “Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics, and the Role of Women,” and “Biblical Authority and Feminist Interpretation.” The arguments over biblical interpretation result mostly from an anxiety over the survival of Seventh-day Adventism, and women’s ordination became the scapegoat in the process because the feminist movement stood in the midst of the culture war of the 1980s. Resistance to women’s ordination therefore became a symbol of denominational loyalty. Thus the very organ of the church, the Biblical Research Institute, which initiated and organized the push towards ordination of women, enabled the campaign against it as part of a larger effort to protect the Church from liberalism and liberal religion. Women’s ordination was a tangible and winnable foe in a battle over hermeneutics that the Church would not soon win. At the point that the most influential leaders of the denomination had the power to educate and lead the world constituency regarding women’s ordination, it turned around and used a largely uninformed constituency to push an agenda which was not the real agenda.

Summary and Conclusion

In the effort to protect the church from liberal religion, the top leaders of the denomination abandoned a decided effort to lead the world church towards the most significant affirmation of gender equality – women’s ordination. Women’s ordination was not the denomination’s enemy, but it became the scapegoat in a monumental conflict that posed a mortal threat to Seventh-day Adventism as we know it. Is there a wrong here that the church must right? It may help to return to the starting point of the hermeneutical conflict to find out what really happened in the case of women’s ordination.

²¹ Ibid., iv.