

**NEW LIGHT ON WOMEN’S ORDINATION:
IDEOLOGY OR THEOLOGY
(A Background to the Seminary Book *Women In Ministry*)**

By

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*[NOTE: In recent discussions about women’s ordination, the book “WOMEN IN MINISTRY” by pro-ordination scholars at the Seminary at Andrews University is often cited as the best Seventh-day Adventist resource on the subject. Many are, however, not aware of the ideology that drives the book. This present article is chapter 11 of the author’s **Must We Be Silent**. The article will not only explain how the Seminary book came into being, but also the nature and reasons behind the new arguments that were constructed to justify women’s ordination. Those who desire a detailed response to WOMEN IN MINISTRY should obtain the book PROVE ALL THINGS, an excellent rebuttal by “Adventists Affirm”]*

Introduction

Regardless of one’s position on women’s ordination, this one fact is incontrovertible: Ordaining women as elders or pastors is new light which the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist church is being urged to embrace.¹ Until recently, Adventists have been unanimous in their view that no precedent for the practice of ordaining women can be found in Scripture, nor in the writings of Ellen G. White and the early Seventh-day Adventist church.²

By the 1970s, however, this established position began to be reversed in favor of ordaining women as elders and pastors.

This new trend was created by the converging interests of feminism, liberalism, church leaders’ desire to enjoy United States tax law benefits to ministers, questionable church policy revisions and *Church Manual* alterations allowing women to serve as elders, calculated attempts by some influential North American churches unilaterally to ordain women as pastors, the relative silence of leadership to this defiance of two General Conference session votes against women’s ordination, a well-orchestrated strategy by

¹ Christians must always welcome new light from God’s Word, as long as the proposed new light does not contradict an established biblical truth. For a careful summary of what Ellen G. White taught about “new light,” see P. Gerard Damsteegt, “New Light in the Last Days,” *Adventists Affirm* 10/1 (Spring 1996): 5-13.

² In my *Receiving the Word* (123-126), I have challenged revisionist reinterpretations of Adventist beliefs and practice of ministry (see also 138-140, notes 34-44 of my book).

influential thought leaders and pro-ordination groups to domesticate the practice in the church, and a determined effort by some church scholars to reinterpret the Bible and early Adventist history to justify the practice.

Despite the aggressive campaign, proponents have been unable to convince the world church of the biblical soundness of their arguments to ordain women as elders or pastors. Thus, on the two occasions that the issue has come up at General Conference sessions (Indianapolis, 1990, and Utrecht, 1995), the overwhelming majority of the church has voted "No" to requests to ordain women.

The book, *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives* (1998), prepared by an Ad Hoc Committee from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan, is supposed to offer the much desired justification for the new light of women's ordination.³

Women in Ministry deserves a careful evaluation because it captures the best biblical and historical arguments that Adventist proponents of women's ordination are capable of presenting. Because it provides readers with the key issues in the current Adventist debate over women's ordination, this chapter and the subsequent ones will focus on this book.

In this chapter I will explain (1) how *Women in Ministry* differs from a previously published pro-ordination volume, *The Welcome Table*, (2) why we must review this Seminary book, (3) how the book came into being, (4) why dissenting scholarly views were not welcome, (5) how the book fits into a well-orchestrated strategy to legislate and legitimize women's ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist church, and (4) the major conclusions of the work. In later chapters, I will offer an evaluation of the book's biblical and historical arguments.

Taking issue with the authors, some of whom I esteem as close friends, does not involve questioning their sincerity as well meaning Adventist scholars. Neither does it mean that whatever they have written in other areas is necessarily suspect or invalid.

What Is New About *Women in Ministry*?

Women in Ministry was published against a backdrop of an ongoing controversy in the church between liberals (Adventist scholars who believe in the use of modified versions of contemporary higher criticism) and conservatives (those who reject the liberal method).⁴ The Seminary Ad Hoc Committee on Hermeneutics and Ordination, the group responsible for producing the book, was a gathering of pro-ordination scholars who, though disagreeing on the appropriateness of the higher critical method, are nonetheless united in their view that women should be ordained as elders or pastors.

³ The generic phrase "women in ministry," employed as a title for the book, can be misleading. For, the authors' goal was not simply the ministry of women in the church (which has never been opposed by the Adventist church), but rather ordaining women as elders and pastors.

⁴ See my *Receiving the Word: How New Approaches to the Bible Impact Our Biblical Faith and Lifestyle* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Berean Books, 1996).

The first challenge that faced the committee was how to construct a theological justification for women's ordination without tripping the explosive hermeneutical land mine (the use of contemporary higher criticism) that for years a number of scholars at the Seminary have avoided handling and defusing. Another challenge was how to craft a justification for women's ordination that would appeal to a conservative Adventist church which shows no interest in liberal and feminist reinterpretations of Scripture.

After two years of regular meetings and "animated" discussions, "a spirit of camaraderie developed" among these scholars. With this spirit of friendship, "eventually all the chapters [of the book] were written, rewritten, and approved by the committee."⁵ Introducing the book at a special Seminary assembly on October 7, 1998, the chair of the Ad Hoc Committee stated that "no chapter was accepted until all members felt they could live with the document." Even though "each chapter was written by a different author and retains the writer's individual style," explains the book's editor, "careful readers will notice slight differences of opinions between chapters. Our agreement was on the big picture."⁶

The "big picture" that kept the pro-ordination committee together was its members' shared belief that the Bible is not against ordaining women *as elders or pastors*. Without doubt, theirs was a daunting task in pursuit of today's unity in diversity—*theological* unity (women's ordination) amidst *hermeneutical* diversity (conflicting approaches to the Bible). But the authors believe that they accomplished their mission: "We believe that the biblical, theological, and historical perspectives elaborated in this book affirm women in pastoral leadership."⁷

It must be noted that the publication of *Women in Ministry* is not the first time that a group of church scholars collaborated to produce a pro-ordination volume. In 1995, fourteen (14) pro-ordination thought leaders produced the 408-page book, *The Welcome Table: Setting a Table for Ordained Women*.⁸ This earlier work did not gain much credibility among thoughtful Adventists because its conclusions were based on revisionist interpretation of the Bible and Adventist history.⁹

5 Nancy Vyhmeister, "Prologue," in *Women in Ministry*, 2.

6 Ibid., 4.

7 Ibid., 5.

8 *The Welcome Table: Setting A Place for Ordained Women*, edited by Patricia A. Habada and Rebecca Frost Brillhart (Langley Park, Md.: TEAMPress, 1995). The "fourteen prominent SDA historians, theologians, and professionals" who contributed essays to the book are: Bert Haloviak, Kit Watts, Raymond F. Cottrell, Donna Jeane Haerich, David R. Larson, Fritz Guy, Edwin Zackrison, Halcyon Westphal Wilson, Sheryll Prinz-McMillan, Joyce Hanscom Lorntz, V. Norskov Olsen, Ralph Neall, Ginger Hanks Harwood, and Iris M. Yob.

9 In the previous chapter, I called attention to the fact that in *The Welcome Table* some of the authors argued that Bible passages (like Eph 5:22-33; Col 3:18-19; 1 Pet 3:1-7; 1 Cor 11:3, 11-12; 14:34-35; 1 Tim 2:11-14; 3:2; and Titus 1:6) which Adventists historically understood as having a bearing on male-female role relations in both the home and the church are the product of the Bible writers' faulty logic or mistaken rabbinic interpretations in vogue in their day. Reasoning along feminist and higher-

But unlike the authors of *The Welcome Table*, many of whom seem to put their liberal and feminist commitments above Scripture, the authors of *Women in Ministry* consciously underscore the claim that their approach to the Bible is different. They disavow the feminist and higher critical method of their ideological cousins.¹⁰ Whether the actual practice in the *Women in Ministry* book is consistent with the claim remains to be seen. Still, insofar as the authors claim to uphold the church's generally accepted approach to Scripture on this particular issue, I personally sense a far closer affinity with the authors of the Seminary book than with those of *The Welcome Table*.

The Seminary volume can be viewed as new only in the sense that, for the first time, a group of church scholars attempted to present *conservative* arguments to justify women's ordination. In other words, although *Women in Ministry* concludes with *The Welcome Table* that there is support in the Bible and the writings of Ellen White to ordain women as elders or pastors. However, the Seminary book presents new arguments and, in some instances articulates more carefully old arguments, to justify women's ordination.

I applaud the authors for making the best case possible for their positions, even though a careful study of their claims will show conclusively that the biblical and historical evidence does not support the ordination of women as elders or pastors.

Why Review *Women in Ministry*?

Why should one evaluate *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives* (1998)? After all, its authors describe the book as the product of two years of regular meetings which always began with “prayer, often several prayers—pleading with God for wisdom and understanding, love and firmness, but most of all for God’s leading that His will might be done in the meeting and in the book.” Why assess a work its writers already believe to be “a contribution to an ongoing dialog”?¹¹

critical lines, some of the writers maintained that the apostle Paul erred in his interpretation of Genesis 1-3 when he grounded his teaching of role distinctions between male and female in Creation and the Fall. They claimed that the apostle Paul’s statements were merely expressions of uninspired personal opinions—opinions that reflect his culture and hence do not apply to us. To these authors, Paul was “a man of his own time.” He occasionally glimpsed the ideal that Jesus established during His time on earth; yet he never fully arrived at “the gospel ideal” of “full equality” or complete role interchangeability in both the home and the church. For a brief evaluation of the pro-ordination arguments by some of the authors in *The Welcome Table*, see my *Receiving the Word*, chapter 5, part 2, 126-129.

¹⁰ See Vyhmeister, “Prologue,” in *Women in Ministry*, 3, 5, note 1. Observe, however, that contrary to the church’s official position in “The Methods of Bible Study” document (*Adventist Review*, January 22, 1987, pages 18-20), Robert M. Johnston (a *Women in Ministry* author), for example, has recently argued for the use of the historical-critical method. See his “The Case for a Balanced Hermeneutic,” *Ministry*, March 1999, 10-12.

¹¹ Quoted portions are from the prologue and epilogue of the book *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Vyhmeister (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1998), 2, 436.

Again, why should one take another look at a 438-page volume the editor claims has the support of the ministerial department of the General Conference?¹² And why re-examine a book that a respected scholar and General Conference vice-president has already acclaimed as a “deeply spiritual, highly reasoned, consistently logical approach to the issue of women’s ordination”?¹³

First, even a Spirit-guided scholarly contribution deserves careful evaluation. God’s inspired Word obliges every Christian to do so: “Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. *Prove all things; hold fast that which is good*” (1 Thess 5:19-21).

Second, the twenty authors of the book have invited those who disagree with the volume’s findings to engage them in a dialogue: “This volume represents the understanding of the Seminary Ad Hoc Committee on Hermeneutics and Ordination. We do not claim to speak for others, either at the Seminary or in church administration. Some may disagree with our findings. That is their privilege. We welcome their responses and invite them to dialogue.”¹⁴

Third, *Women in Ministry* is the latest attempt by a group of Seventh-day Adventist scholars to find biblical and historical justification for ordaining women *as elders or pastors*. Coming from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, the book will undoubtedly influence those members of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist church who look to the Seminary for sound biblical

¹² Nancy Vyhmeister, the editor of *Women in Ministry*, is quoted as making this comment during her October 1998 presentation at the meeting of the pro-ordination group Association of Adventist Women held in Loma Linda, California. For an account of her presentation, see Colleen Moore Tinker, “Seminary States Position in *Women in Ministry*,” *Adventist Today*, November-December 1998, 24, 10.

¹³ Calvin B. Rock, “Review of *Women in Ministry*,” *Adventist Review*, April 15, 1999, 29. Coming from “a general vice president of the General Conference . . . [and a holder of] doctoral degrees in ministry and Christian ethics,” the above statement is designed to be taken seriously by readers of *Adventist Review*. Dr. Rock chaired the business session at the 1995 Utrecht General Conference session. In his opinion, the pro-ordination book of the Seminary “offers a sterling challenge to those who see Scripture as forbidding women’s ordination. And it provides welcome data for those who support women’s ordination but who lack professional materials to bolster their belief and convincing insights for those who have not known quite how or what to decide” (ibid.). Our re-examination of the pro-ordination volume will put the above book review into a better perspective (see my later chapters in the present book).

¹⁴ Vyhmeister, “Prologue” in *Women in Ministry*, 5. Of the 20 scholars whose works are published in *Women in Ministry*, 15 were appointed by the Seminary Dean’s Council—a chair of the Ad Hoc Committee and editor of the book (Nancy Vyhmeister) and representatives from each of the six departments of the Seminary (Jo Ann Davidson, Richard Davidson, Walter Douglas, Jacques Doukhan, Roger Dudley, Jon Dybdahl, Denis Fortin, Robert Johnston, George Knight, Jerry Moon, Larry Richards, Russell Staples, Peter van Bemmelen, Randal Wisbey). Of the five remaining writers whose works appear in the book, two were Master of Divinity students (Michael Bernoi, Alicia Worley), and three others are Andrews University scholars, apparently invited because of their pro-ordination stance (Daniel Augsburg, Raoul Dederen, Keith Mattingly). Of the three scholars invited by the committee, the first two are retired (emeritus) Seminary professors and the last is a faculty member in the undergraduate religion department at Andrews University.

teaching, training, and guidance.¹⁵ It is this need for safe and discerning theological direction that may have prompted “several” North American Division leaders, shortly after the 1995 Utrecht General Conference session, to approach the Seminary faculty for answers to questions raised by their petition to the world body of Seventh-day Adventists for divisional ordinations.¹⁶

Fourth, the book provides a critical component in a carefully thought-out, step-by-step strategy to legislate, if not legitimize, the practice of women’s ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist church.¹⁷ One such effort is contained in a very significant document that was formally accepted at the October 9, 1997, North American Division year-end meeting. The document is the Division’s “President’s Commission on Women in Ministry—Report.”¹⁸

¹⁵ One favorable reviewer of the book writes: “It is both appropriate and timely for Seminary professors to lead the church in a study of the theology of women’s ordination as it relates to the mission of the Adventist Church. What does the Bible say about this? What is theologically sound? What does our Adventist heritage lead us to do now?” See Beverly Beem, “What If . . . Women in Ministry,” *Focus* [Andrews University alumni magazine], Winter 1999, 30. Beem is chair of the Department of English at Walla Walla College. In her opinion, the Seminary book presents such a “powerful argument” for women’s ordination that “to say that the ordination of women is contrary to Scripture or to the tradition of the Adventist Church means going against an impressive array of evidence otherwise” (ibid., 31). In later chapters, I will challenge what our pro-ordination reviewer describes as the Seminary authors’ “impressive array of evidence” for women’s ordination.

¹⁶ According to the editor of the book, “less than one month after the Utrecht vote [rejecting autonomy for Divisions regarding women’s ordination], several union presidents of the North American Division met with the faculty of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, still asking the same question: May a woman legitimately be ordained to pastoral ministry? If so, on what basis? If not, why not? What are the issues involved—hermeneutics? Bible and theology? custom and culture? history and tradition? pragmatism and missiological needs? And furthermore, how could all these facets of the issue be presented in a logical, coherent manner? Would the Seminary faculty please address these questions and provide answers?” (Vyhmeister, “Prologue,” in *Women in Ministry*, 1).

¹⁷ Though historically Seventh-day Adventists did not have women elders and pastors, many women have served the church well in positions of responsibility and outreach, from the local church to the General Conference level. They did so without ordination. However, for about thirty years a small but influential group of people has been working to move the Seventh-day Adventist church a little at a time to legislate the ordination of women as elders and pastors. In the course of their campaign, those pushing for women’s ordination have received endorsements from some church leaders who have effected a series of Annual Council policy revisions and *Church Manual* alterations, allowing for a change in the church’s longstanding policy regarding the ministry of ordained elders and pastors. For a brief history of how tax-benefit considerations led the church into redefinitions of Adventist practice of ministry, see [C. Mervyn Maxwell,] “A Very Surprising (and Interesting) History,” *Adventists Affirm* 12/3 (Fall 1998): 18-22 (included in this volume on 225-230); cf. Laurel Damsteegt, “Pushing the Brethren,” ibid., 24-27.

¹⁸ Among the 13 recommendations aimed at “affirming and encouraging women in ministry,” the document expresses an “urgent need to study and clarify the church’s understanding and application of biblical hermeneutics” and that “this should take the form of: (i) multiple articles in denominational periodicals” and (ii) “a hermeneutics conference by the NAD and/or the GC.” See Article XII of the North American Division “President’s Commission on Women in Ministry—Report.” The entire document, with an analysis, is found in *Adventists Affirm* 12/3 (Fall 1998): 5-17, and is included in this

Fifth, *Women in Ministry* contains some of the most creative arguments ever marshaled by church scholars to change the minds of a Bible-believing church that has twice overwhelmingly rejected the call to ordain women as pastors.¹⁹ We need to ascertain whether or not the arguments found in the volume will stand the test of biblical and historical scrutiny.

Sixth, the book is being promoted in certain quarters of the Adventist church as the official position of the Seminary and as the product of “sound Biblical and historical scholarship.”²⁰ Even if such statements are dismissed as unfounded, the fact still remains that some Adventists and non-Adventists will consider this work a model of thorough, profound Adventist scholarship on a divisive and controversial issue.²¹

volume Appendix D, 391-404. As I will attempt to show in the next section, the initial request to the Seminary faculty by “several” North American Division union presidents for a clarification of Adventist theology of ordination and for a clear understanding regarding valid Adventist hermeneutical principles was really a search for a scholarly work that would justify the ordination of women. Observe that the generic phrase “women in ministry,” employed by the Seminary’s Ad Hoc Committee on Hermeneutics and Ordination as a title for their book, is misleading. Like the North American Division President’s commission on “Women in Ministry,” the Seminary authors’ goal was not simply the ministry of women in the church (which has never been opposed by the Adventist church), but rather ordaining women as elders and pastors.

¹⁹ At the 1990 Indianapolis session of the General Conference, by a vote of 1173 to 377, the world field rejected the call to ordain women as pastors. Also, at the 1995 Utrecht session of the General Conference, by a vote of 1481 to 673, the worldwide church refused to grant the North American Division’s request to ordain women in its own territory. Despite the “spin” by pro-ordination advocates to the effect that the delegates at the two General Conference sessions didn’t quite understand what they were voting for, the fact remains that at these two world assemblies, the Bible-believing Seventh-day Adventist family, 90% of which lives outside the industrialized countries of North America, Europe, and Australia, made it clear that the arguments for women’s ordination are not biblically convincing.

²⁰ For example, Roger L. Dudley, the author of one of the chapters of the volume, recently stated: “It is important to note that *Women in Ministry* represents the official view of the Seminary and the position of virtually all of its faculty. Whatever the book may accomplish in the church at large, it is the hope of the [Seminary Ad Hoc] committee that it will demonstrate that the Seminary faculty stands for sound Biblical and historical scholarship on this contemporary and controversial issue” (see Roger L. Dudley, “[Letter to the Editor Regarding] *Women in Ministry*,” *Adventist Today*, January-February 1999, 6). Similarly, an article titled “Seminary States Position in *Women in Ministry*” quotes Nancy Vyhmeister, the editor of the Seminary book, as saying: “With the total support of the university and the seminary administration and with the support of about 90% of the seminary faculty [who are believed to favor women’s ordination], the book came out.” Nancy Vyhmeister made this comment at the annual convention of the Association of Adventist Women held in Loma Linda, California, in October 1998 (see Colleen Moore Tinker, “Seminary States Position in *Women in Ministry*,” *Adventist Today*, November-December, 1998). Apparently, it is the comment by the book’s editor that *Women in Ministry* enjoys the “total support of the university and the seminary administration” that has been misunderstood as an official Seminary endorsement of the book. But the chair of the Seminary Ad Hoc Committee and editor of the book has categorically repudiated such a claim (see Vyhmeister, “Prologue,” in *Women in Ministry*, 5).

²¹ Calvin Rock writes that “the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the broader Christian community, are indebted to the 20 authors of *Women in Ministry*” for “producing such a thoughtful, thorough treatment of the major aspects of the question ‘Should women be ordained as pastors in the

Seven, the book has been sent to church leaders around the world, ostensibly "to provide carefully researched information and foster dialogue."²² Also proponents of women's ordination distributed *Women in Ministry* to some delegates at the 2000 Toronto GC session. Before church leaders promote and use the book as the basis of informed decision-making in their respective fields, they must ensure that the volume is not fatally defective in biblical and historical scholarship.

Eight, in a recent book, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*, a work described as an "accurate history of Adventism," the author builds upon the conclusions of both *Women in Ministry* and *The Welcome Table*, and recommends them as volumes that accurately capture the views and practice of the early SDA church on the issue. Before we embrace the revised history found in these recommended works, we must carefully ascertain the factual basis for the claim that "there were female ministers in early Adventism."²³

These eight reasons offer the justification for the review of *Women in Ministry*. If the book's conclusions are proven to be valid, they should be incorporated into the Seventh-day Adventist church's Bible-based beliefs and lifestyle. And the church should be encouraged immediately to rectify its 150-year-old practice of ministry and ordination.²⁴ On the other hand, if the evidence and reasoning in the volume are found

Seventh-day Adventist Church?" In his estimation, the book employs "skillful exegesis of Scripture and careful examination of relevant E. G. White materials," showing why "liberating knowledge of contextual and linguistic backgrounds is absolutely vital in ecclesiastical debate" (Rock, "Review of *Women in Ministry*," *Adventist Review*, April 15, 1999, 29). Given the one-sided book reviews that have been presented in several Adventist publications, Doug Jones's editorial comment in *Focus* magazine is worth remembering: "The faculty in the Seminary are to be commended for their earnest and critical exploration of women and Christian ministry. . . . I encourage *Focus* readers to read *Women in Ministry* with care as an important step in achieving balance" (see Jones's editorial note to Malcolm Dwyer's letter to the editor, "Seeking Solid Backing," in *Focus*, Spring 1999, 5).

²² In an accompanying letter on the stationery of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, the rationale for the free distribution of the book to church leaders around the world is explained as follows: "Because of your position as a thought leader in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, you have been selected to receive a gift copy of this important study of the place of women in the church's ministry. The book is not intended to incite polemics on ordination, but to provide carefully researched information and foster dialogue. If you have questions or comments, feel free to direct them to the individual authors or to the editor of the book, all of them at Andrews University. May God bless your service in His cause."

²³ In making his claim that there were "female ministers in early Adventism," George R. Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1999), 104-107, cited *Women in Ministry*, 187-234, and *The Welcome Table*, 27-59. For a helpful corrective to the revisionist interpretation of Adventist history relative to the question of women's ordination, see *Prove All Things*, 231-312.

²⁴ Until very recently, the Seventh-day Adventist practice has limited ordination of *elders* and *pastors* to males alone. (Biblically speaking there is no distinction between elder and pastor.) However, through a series of Annual Council church policy revisions, a theologically and ethically-inconsistent practice has been instituted in recent times that allows women to be ordained as elders, but not as pastors. We must not miss the implication of this biblically- untenable practice. If women can be ordained as local

wanting biblically and historically, then the campaign during the past two or three decades by a few influential scholars and leaders to impose women's ordination on the church should be rejected as a tragic mistake and a misguided endeavor.

Before looking at the new light contained in *Women in Ministry*, it may be helpful to briefly mention how this pro-ordination book from the Seminary came into existence.

How the Book Came Into Being

The initial request for the book came from "several union presidents of the North American Division" who, before and during the 1995 Utrecht General Conference session, had urged the North American Division President that there be "no turning back" in their campaign for women's ordination.²⁵ When their petition was rejected by the world body at Utrecht, certain leaders in the North American Division began calling for "a clarification of the Adventist theology of ordination, *culminating in the ordination of women*," and for steps that would lead to "clear understanding and member education regarding valid Adventist hermeneutical principles [of biblical interpretation]."²⁶

Notice that the call for "a clarification of Adventist theology of ordination" was really a quest for a scholarly work that would "culminate in the ordination of women."

elders, it is equally valid for them to be ordained as pastors. But by the same token, if the practice of ordaining women as local elders is unbiblical, it is also unbiblical to ordain them as pastors. So the question really facing the church is this: Is ordaining women as *elders* biblical? If it is, we must continue the practice and extend it to include ordaining women as pastors. On the other hand, if ordaining women as local elders is not scriptural, we must *reconsider* previous church council actions in order to come into harmony with the Bible. In an earlier work, *Searching the Scriptures: Women's Ordination and the Call to Biblical Fidelity* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Adventists Affirm, 1995), I have argued for the latter option—namely for the church to reconsider previous church council actions in order to come into harmony with the Bible. This approach alone preserves the 150-year-old biblical practice of the Adventist church.

²⁵ See, for example, Alfred C. McClure, "NAD's President Speaks on Women's Ordination: Why Should Ordination be Gender Inclusive?" *Adventist Review* [North American Division edition], February 1995, 14-15; cf. Gary Patterson, "Let Divisions Decide When to Ordain Women," *Spectrum* 24/2 (April 1995), 36-42. For responses to the above view, see the articles by Ethel R. Nelson, "'No Turning Back' on Ordination?" and C. Mervyn Maxwell, "Response to NAD President's Request to Annual Council" in *Adventists Affirm* 9/1 (Spring 1995): 42-46, 30-37, 67; cf. Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Searching the Scriptures: Women's Ordination and the Call to Biblical Fidelity* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Adventists Affirm, 1995), 9-14, 88-90.

²⁶ After the rejection of the North American Division's petition at Utrecht, the Pacific Union Conference, one of the largest North American union conferences, took an action they considered to be a road map to eventually ordaining women. Among other things, the union executive committee passed a resolution calling upon the General Conference, through the North American Division, to initiate a process that leads to: (A) "a clarification of the Adventist theology of ordination, *culminating in the ordination of women*"; and (B) "action steps that leads to a clear understanding and member education regarding valid Adventist hermeneutical principles." The executive committee of the Pacific Union also released a document affirming the group's commitment to the goal of women's ordination and to working towards the day when it will be realized. See "Pacific Union Executive Committee Maps Course for Women," *Pacific Union Recorder*, October 2, 1995, 3, 11, emphasis mine.

The meaning of “valid Adventist hermeneutical principles” was later made explicit at the October 1995 Year-end meeting of the North American Division leaders to be an approach to Scripture that would ultimately justify their belief in the biblical correctness of women’s ordination.

At that October 1995 Year-end meeting in Battle Creek, just three months after the Utrecht vote, the North American leadership announced that a commission was being appointed to recommend ways to “expand the role of women in ministry,” recognize and deploy the gifts God has given to women, and “affirm women in pastoral and other spiritual ministries.”²⁷ In their *Statement of Commitment to Women in Gospel Ministry*, adopted on October 13, 1995, the Union presidents of North America also reaffirmed their belief “in the biblical rightness of women’s ordination” and pledged their support for a clarification of the church’s theology of ordination.²⁸

This brief background leads one to conclude that the initial request to the Seminary faculty by “several” of these union presidents for a clarification of the Adventist theology of ordination and for a clear understanding regarding valid Adventist hermeneutical principles was a search for a scholarly work that would justify the ordination of women. Some three months *before* the Seminary appointed its Ad Hoc Committee in January 1996 to study issues related to hermeneutics and ordination, some of the North American Division leaders were already convinced of the “biblical rightness of women’s ordination.”

Why was there a need for the Seminary to clarify the church’s principles for interpreting the Bible when the church already had done so—in the “Methods of Bible Study” document, approved by the church’s worldwide leaders in 1986 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil?²⁹ And why was there a need to clarify the church’s theology of ordination, when

²⁷ See the introduction to “President’s Commission on Women in Ministry—Report” reproduced in *Adventists Affirm* 12/3 (Fall 1998): 13 and in this volume on 399.

²⁸ “A Statement of Commitment to Women in Gospel Ministry from the North American Division Union Presidents,” October 13, 1995, emphasis mine. Two years after the North American Division President’s commission was appointed, its report was formally accepted on October 9, 1997. Among the specific recommendations for “gender inclusiveness in church organization” is an “urgent need to study and clarify the church’s understanding and application of biblical hermeneutics. This should take the form of: (i) multiple articles in denominational periodicals; (ii) a hermeneutics conference sponsored by the NAD and/or the GC.” See Article XII of the Report of the “President’s Commission on Women in Ministry.” The entire document is worth reading, if one is to capture the scope of the strategies to achieve a gender-inclusive ministry (see 399-404 in this volume).

²⁹ At the 1986 Annual Council meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, church leaders representing all the world fields of the Seventh-day Adventist church approved the report of the General Conference’s “Methods of Bible Study Committee” as representative of the church’s hermeneutical position. This document was published in the *Adventist Review*, January 22, 1987, pages 18-20, and reproduced as Appendix C in my *Receiving the Word*, 355-362. Generally, loyal Adventists embrace the 1986 “Methods of Bible Study” document as reflecting Adventism’s historic principles of interpretation. For a discussion of how Adventist scholars have reacted to the “Methods of Bible Study” document, see my *Receiving the Word*, 75-99. For more on the history of Adventist Bible interpretation, see C. Mervyn Maxwell, “A Brief History of Adventist Hermeneutics,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 4/2 (1993): 209-226;

the church already had articulated its position in the 1988 volume *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . : A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (142-150)³⁰ and our *Minister's Manual* (75-79 [1992 edition]; 83-86 [1997 edition])?³¹

The answer seems obvious. It wasn't because the church had no valid hermeneutical principles for interpreting the Bible, nor a sound theology of ordination. It already had these. Instead, some of the pro-ordination leaders wanted a theological validation of their stance on ordination. This was the only way they could justify earlier church policy revisions and *Church Manual* alterations in response to problems resulting from the North American Division's desire to enjoy United States income tax benefits.³²

Thus, in the production of the Seminary book *Women in Ministry*, the interests of pro-ordination leaders and that of pro-ordination scholars kissed each other. Or as the book's editor later explained, the North American Division leadership, feeling "let down" at Utrecht, wanted the Seminary to "*do something about it [the Utrecht vote].*"³³

Don F. Neufeld, "Biblical Interpretation in the Advent Movement," in *Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Gordon Hyde (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Research Institute, 1974), 109-15; George Reid, "Another Look At Adventist Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 2/1 (1991): 69-76.

³⁰ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . : A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, D.C.: Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988), esp. 142-150. Produced by some 194 Seventh-day Adventist thought leaders around the world, this "carefully researched" volume is to be received "as representative of . . . [what] Seventh-day Adventists around the globe cherish and proclaim," and as furnishing "reliable information on the beliefs of our [Seventh-day Adventist] church" (*ibid.*, vii, iv, v).

³¹ *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Handbook* (Silver Spring, Md.: Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1997), 83-86. The "Ordination Statement" in the *Minister's Handbook* sets forth Adventists' understanding of the nature, significance, qualifications, and the responsibility of ordination. A note attached to "Statement of Ordination" reads: "This section reproduces the statement on ministerial ordination prepared by the General Conference Ministerial Association and the GC Biblical Research Institute. The statement received broad input from the world field and went through numerous revisions. It purposely omits the gender issue in ministerial ordination, seeking rather to lay down basic principles by which all ministerial ordination issues can be measured" (*ibid.*, 83 [1997 edition]).

³² For more on the relationship between the issues of income-tax benefits and ordination, see [C. Mervyn Maxwell, editor] "A Very Surprising (and Interesting) History," *Adventists Affirm* 12/3 (Fall 1998): 18-23, appearing on 225-230 of *Prove All Things*; cf. *Receiving the Word*, 125-126; 140, notes 43 and 44.

³³ The editor of the unofficial magazine *Adventist Today* summarizes the circumstances leading to the production of the Seminary book, as narrated by Nancy Vyhmeister, chair of the Seminary Ad Hoc Committee and editor of the book, at the October 1998 meeting of the pro-ordination group Association of Adventist Women held in Loma Linda, California. On the circumstances leading to the feeling of "let down," Vyhmeister mentioned that in the wake of the Utrecht defeat of the North American Division petition for women's ordination, people from opposite ends of the ordination spectrum blamed or praised the Seminary for sending two representatives with opposing viewpoints. She, however, explained that the two professors who spoke at Utrecht (Raoul Dederen and P. Gerard Damsteegt) did not speak for the Seminary: "Those people were invited by 'someone else,' and they agreed to speak long before the seminary knew anything about it." When, therefore, less than a month after Utrecht "several" North

The conclusion is inescapable. After several years of unsuccessful attempts at *legislating the ideology* of women's ordination, the proponents decided that the time had come to try another strategy: the *proclamation of the theology* of women's ordination. Using one of the leading and most influential church institutions, the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, some of the North American Division leaders sought to shift their strategy of women's ordination *from ideology to theology*. The Seminary book *Women in Ministry* is the result of this strategy.

Dissenting Views Not Welcome

The Seminary volume was an attempt to justify theologically the ideology of women's ordination, not a quest for an open-minded investigation into what the Bible has to say on a divisive and controversial issue in the church. The Seminary committee's "dialogue" did not include Andrews University scholars opposed to women's ordination, some of whom, through their earlier published works, had demonstrated a grasp of the crucial issues in the debate.³⁴ Though twenty authors collaborated to produce the book, the Seminary Ad Hoc Committee allowed no other viewpoints in the book except those favoring women's ordination.³⁵

American leaders met with the Seminary faculty and told them, "you let us down [at Utrecht]; you're against women's ordination," reports *Adventist Today's* editor, "every representative of the seminary who was attending the meeting insisted that they were not against women's ordination. In fact, Nancy said, about 90% of the seminary faculty favor women's ordination." What follows is significant: "'Then do something about it,' one union president said. Dr. [Werner] Vyhmeister, dean of the seminary and Nancy's husband, agreed and said that the Dean's Council would decide what to do. The outcome of that decision was a fifteen-person committee which [was] formed to study the subject of hermeneutics and ordination" (see Colleen Moore Tinker, "Seminary States Position in *Women in Ministry*," *Adventist Today*, November-December, 1998, 24, 10; emphasis mine) "Doing something about Utrecht" is what the Seminary book is all about, rather than being a quest for an open-minded investigation of what the Bible actually teaches on the subject of women in ministry. Some North American leaders wanted the scholars at the Seminary to speak with one voice in favor of women's ordination.

³⁴ See, for example, Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Study on the Role of Women in the Church* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Biblical Perspectives, 1987); C. Raymond Holmes, *The Tip of An Iceberg: Biblical Authority, Biblical Interpretation, and the Ordination of Women in Ministry* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Adventists Affirm and Wakefield, Mich.: Pointer Publications, 1994); Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Searching the Scriptures: Women's Ordination and the Call to Biblical Fidelity* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Adventists Affirm, 1995). At the time they published their works, Samuele Bacchiocchi was a professor of church history and theology in the religion department of Andrews University; C. Raymond Holmes was the director of the Doctor of Ministry Program and professor of Worship and Preaching at the Theological Seminary; and Samuel Koranteng-Pipim was a Ph.D. candidate in systematic theology at the Theological Seminary, having served there as a contract teacher in theology and ethics (see also next note).

³⁵ Of the 20 authors who collaborated to produce the book, one was the Seminary professor who presented the pro-ordination view at Utrecht (Raoul Dederen); but the other Seminary faculty member who presented the opposing view at Utrecht was excluded (P. Gerard Damsteegt, the principal author of the church's *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*). *Women in Ministry* contains an article by an associate professor in the religion department at Andrews University (Keith Mattingly); but a well-known professor

Although dissenting scholarly views were not represented in the committee, readers are informed that during its two years of regular meetings, “sensitivity to the positions of others, both for and against women’s ordination was evident.”³⁶ Lamentably, this is typical of the manner in which the issue has been discussed even in official church publications.³⁷

Is it not ironic—and unfortunate—that the views of scholars upholding the long-established Seventh-day Adventist convictions on this question are not always welcome today in church publications and even in the book originating from the Seminary? Whose interest is served when, on *unresolved* theological issues, opposing views are excluded even when those views are still embraced by the overwhelming majority of the church through official action?

Promoters of *Women in Ministry* sometimes offer three major reasons for excluding dissenting scholarly views from the book published and financed by the Seminary. First, they argue that, until the publication of *Women in Ministry*, the church never had the chance of hearing the reasoned views of pro-ordination thought leaders. Some claim that unlike opponents of women’s ordination who allegedly defied a 1988 moratorium or ban by the General Conference president on publishing and distributing materials on the issue, proponents loyal to the church chose not to present and publicize their theological defense of women’s ordination, in compliance with the supposed moratorium. The alleged ban was apparently lifted in 1995 when “several” North

in the same department who had published an opposing view (*Women in the Church*) was left out (Samuele Bacchiocchi). Though not part of the initial committee of 15, other Seminary scholars, including a retired faculty member, were allowed to publish their views in the book (George Knight, Denis Fortin, and Daniel Augsburg); but another equally competent retired faculty member who had earlier challenged women’s ordination (in his *The Tip of An Iceberg*) was not invited to contribute a chapter (C. Raymond Holmes). Two Seminary students’ works appear in the book (Michael Bernoi and Alicia Worley); but not a single Seminary student opposing women’s ordination was included (at that time Samuel Koranteng-Pipim was a doctoral candidate and had authored the book *Searching the Scriptures*). It is clear that the Seminary Ad Hoc Committee decided that no other viewpoints should be known in the book except those favoring women’s ordination. The pro-ordination bias of the committee is also evidenced by the manner in which some cite the works and authors of non-ordination publications (see especially Randal Wisbey, “SDA Women in Ministry, 1970-1998,” *Women in Ministry*, 241, 245, 254 note 31).

³⁶ Vyhmeister, “Prologue,” 2.

³⁷ Space limitations will not permit me to document how, prior to Utrecht, official church publications presented mainly pro-ordination views in their pages. But one of the authors of *Women in Ministry*, despite his pro-ordination bias in chronicling the history of Seventh-day Adventist discussions of the issue, has correctly noted that prior to the 1995 Utrecht General Conference Session, “the *Adventist Review* and *Ministry* published articles dealing with ordination in which the editors took pro-ordination stands” (Randal R. Wisbey, “SDA Women in Ministry: 1970-1998,” in *Women in Ministry*, 246). For a recent attempt by editors of a church publication to discredit the works of those attempting to uphold the church’s official position, see the editorial comment preceding the article by P. Gerard Damsteegt, “Scripture Faces Current Issues,” *Ministry*, April 1999, 23. For a possible explanation of the pro-ordination bias in church publications, see Articles X and XII in the “[North American Division] President’s Commission on Women in Ministry—Report,” reproduced on 403-404 of the present volume.

American Division leaders met with some professors from Andrews University Theological Seminary and urged them to “do something about Utrecht.”³⁸

³⁸ In view of these oft-repeated claims by proponents of women’s ordination, the following questions deserve a brief response: (1) Was there a ban on publishing and distributing materials on women’s ordination between 1988 and 1995? (2) Were advocates of women’s ordination relatively silent during the period of the “moratorium” or “ban,” while opponents published two books (*The Tip of An Iceberg* [1994] and *Searching the Scriptures* [1995])? These are the facts: In May 1988, while awaiting the July 1989 meeting and recommendation of the “Role of Women Commission,” General Conference president Elder Neal C. Wilson appealed to all church members “to abstain from circulating books, pamphlets, letters, and tapes that stir up debate and often generate more confusion [on women’s ordination].” Proponents of women’s ordination often misinterpret this specific appeal by the General Conference president to mean a permanent moratorium or ban on publishing works on women’s ordination. They claim that out of loyalty to the General Conference president they honored his moratorium while those opposed undermined it by publishing and distributing their works. In making these claims, advocates are either unaware of or overlook the facts concerning the General Conference president’s appeal and the aggressive campaign mounted by pro-ordination entities. First of all, the president’s appeal was not a permanent “ban” or moratorium. Elder Wilson’s statement reads: “The 1985 General Conference session action called upon the church to prepare a recommendation by the time of the 1989 Annual Council, so a further meeting of the commission [the Commission on the Role of Women] will be held in July of 1989. Indeed, in such important matters we must at all costs avoid hasty action, and so we will set aside one week to pray together, listen to each other, discuss further papers that will be prepared, and—I hope—come together in a decision dictated by the Holy Spirit. *In the meantime*, I appeal to all members of the church, whatever their particular convictions on this matter, to avoid further controversy and argument. I request you to abstain from circulating books, pamphlets, letters, and tapes that stir up debate and often generate more confusion. I think it would be much better if we prayed and fasted, and studied the Bible and the writings of Ellen White for ourselves” (Neal C. Wilson, “Role of Women Commission Meets: The General Conference President Reports to the Church,” *Adventist Review*, May 12, 1988, 7, emphasis mine). Notice that the president’s appeal was not a permanent moratorium or “ban”; it was limited to the period between May 12, 1988 and July 1989 when the Commission was expected to present its theological findings. Even then, the appeal was directed against works that “stir up debate and often generate more confusion.” Second, if the moratorium did indeed exist as proponents of women’s ordination often claim, (1) then editors of church publications like *Adventist Review* and *Ministry* contravened it when they published several pro-ordination articles during the period between 1988 and 1995; (2) then the pro-ordination authors and some church institutions like Pacific Press, Review and Herald, Andrews University Press, and Loma Linda University Press broke the ban when they published and distributed pro-ordination books like Caleb Rosado’s *Broken Walls* (Pacific Press, 1989), and *Women, Church, God: A Socio-Biblical Study* (Loma Linda University Press, 1990), Josephine Benton’s *Called by God* (Blackberry Hill Publishers, 1990), V. Norskov Olsen’s *Myth and Truth: Church, Priesthood and Ordination* (Loma Linda University Press, 1990), Jennifer Knight’s, et al., *The Adventist Woman in the Secular World: Her Ministry and Her Church* (North Ryde, N.S.W., Australia, 1991), Rosa Taylor Banks’s, ed., *A Woman’s Place* (Review and Herald, 1992), Sakae Kubo’s *The God of Relationships* (Review and Herald, 1993), Patricia A. Habada and Rebecca Frost Brillhart’s, eds., *The Welcome Table* (TEAMPress, 1995), Lourdes Morales-Gudmundsson’s, ed., *Women and the Church: The Feminine Perspective* (Andrews University Press, 1995); (3) then certain authors of the Seminary book violated the alleged “moratorium” by publishing articles in favor of women’s ordination; see, for example, Richard M. Davidson’s “The Theology of Sexuality in the Beginning: Genesis 1-2” and “The Theology of Sexuality in the Beginning: Genesis 3,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 26 (1988); Nancy Vyhmeister, “Review of *The Tip of An Iceberg*,” *Ministry*, February 1995, 26-28; etc. Space limitations will not allow me to document the fact that during and after the alleged seven-year

Second, in the opinion of other proponents, the 1990 General Conference session vote was not a categorical No to women's ordination. Instead of a theological reason against the practice, proponents claim that the GC session simply cited pragmatic reasons—"the widespread lack of support" for it and "the possible risk of disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the Church" that could result had the church gone ahead *at that time* in ordaining women as pastors.³⁹

Third, some other proponents of women's ordination claim that the 1995 General Conference session addressed "only the procedural recommendation" of the North American Division, not "the theological appropriateness of women's ordination."⁴⁰

"moratorium," advocates of women's ordination, including a number of the Seminary authors of *Women in Ministry*, used a number of means to publicize their pro-ordination views. But in spite of their aggressive campaign, proponents failed to convince the world church of the soundness of their theological arguments for women's ordination. A pro-ordination scholar of ethics puts to rest the oft-repeated claim that until the publication of *Women in Ministry* proponents of women's ordination had been relatively silent. He correctly noted that, prior to the more than 2-to-1 defeat of the women's ordination request at Utrecht, "denominational leaders, with others, had backed ordination with speeches at Annual Council, the speech in Utrecht, and a special strategy committee. The Southeastern California Conference Gender Inclusiveness Commission and others had sent materials to all General Conference delegates. The *Adventist Review* had run special covers, issues, and features promoting women. . . . Some ordination proponents thought that they might win if they got enough materials to the delegates, but found themselves wrong" (Jim Walters, "General Conference Delegates Say NO on Women's Ordination," *Adventist Today*, July-August, 1995, 12-13).

³⁹ Observe, however, that the above pragmatic reasons—namely, "the widespread lack of support" for it and "the possible risk of disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the Church"—were the secondary reasons stated at the 1990 General Conference session against ordaining women as pastors. Despite the contrary claims of proponents, the primary reason given by those opposing the practice of ordaining women as pastors was that it was unbiblical and out of harmony with the writings of Ellen G. White. Thus, in the opinion of those opposed to women's ordination, to go ahead with a practice that lacked widespread *theological* support could result in "disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the Church." The following are the two recommendations from the "Role of Women Commission" that the 1989 Annual Council brought to the 1990 General Conference session: "1. While the Commission does not have a consensus as to whether or not the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen G. White explicitly advocate or deny the ordination of women to pastoral ministry, it concludes unanimously that these sources affirm a significant, wide ranging, and continuing ministry for women which is being expressed and will be evidenced in the varied and expanding gifts according to the infilling of the Holy Spirit. 2. Further, in view of the widespread lack of support for the ordination of women to the gospel ministry in the world Church and in view of the possible risk of disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the Church, we do not approve ordination of women to the gospel ministry." Notice that whereas the first reason is theological (lack of theological consensus) the second is pragmatic (lack of support and possible risks). By a vote of 1173 to 377, the world church voted against women's ordination. (See *Adventist Review*, July 13, 1990, 15.

⁴⁰ One pro-ordination reviewer of the Seminary book sums up the reason for *Women in Ministry* and how the book could be used to justify theologically a possible North American Division "push" of the issue at a future General Conference session: "So why this book? Why now? *Utrecht*. That is the answer given in the prologue to the book. One might think that after the 1995 General Conference session in Utrecht, the discussion would be over and that everyone would go home and quit talking about it. But that has not happened. How could it? The motion voted at Utrecht did not address the theological

The above justification for *Women in Ministry* is based on a creative reinterpretation of church actions on women's ordination (see the previous three endnotes). Yet, building upon these contestable arguments, advocates and promoters believe that a pro-ordination book from the Seminary would now create the much-needed consensus for women's ordination.

Perhaps the pro-ordination General Conference vice-president who chaired the women's ordination business session at Utrecht and who enthusiastically endorsed the book in *Adventist Review* may have spoken for many of the book's authors when he wrote: "Though unfortunately too late to inform prior [Utrecht] debate, my opinion is that *Women in Ministry* has the potential to be determinative in future [General Conference?] discussion." 41

If indeed the intent of the Seminary book is to provide theological reasons to overturn the worldwide decision at Utrecht, some major questions arise: Is it ever right for the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary to allow its prestige and resources to be hijacked for some ideological agenda rejected by the church? If, for instance, a General Conference session votes against homosexuality, can a group of pro-gay

appropriateness of women's ordination. It addressed only the procedural recommendation of the North American Division that the decision be made by each division. The increasing dissonance between theological understandings and church practice remained unresolved. . . . Now, it is both appropriate and timely for Seminary professors to lead the church in a study of the theology of women's ordination as it relates with the mission of the Adventist church" (Beverly Beem, "What If . . . Women in Ministry," *Focus*, Winter 1999, 30, emphasis hers). In response to the so-called procedural argument, a respected North American church leader has correctly noted: "Though the issue had been presented as a policy matter, whether to allow divisions to decide for themselves about ordination, most delegates knew that they were really voting on the biblical legitimacy of women's ordination. How could the world church make so fundamental a change unless it could find biblical support? How could it allow itself to be divided on something so essential to its unity and function? So as it had done five years earlier, the world church gave an emphatic No" (Jay Gallimore, "The Larger Issues," in *Prove All Things*, 343).

41 Calvin Rock, "Review of *Women in Ministry*," *Adventist Review*, April 15, 1999, 29, emphasis mine. Observe also that barely six months into the two years of regular meetings that went into producing the book, at least some of the Seminary Ad Hoc Committee members were already convinced that the 150-year-old practice of the Seventh-day Adventist church was wrong and needed to be changed. Before all the chapters of the pro-ordination book were written, the tentative thrust of the Seminary volume was to suggest that the "Adventist church structure, however legitimate, has not been, historically, an exact replica of biblical patterns of ministry. While accepting the decision of the Adventist church not to ordain women *at this time* as voted at the 1995 General Conference Session in Utrecht, *the book will attempt to provide data on which to base future decisions.*" See, Susan Walters, "Prospectus Revealed for Book on Ordination of Women," *Adventist Today*, March-April, 1997, 24, emphasis mine. Also, following the book's publication, a press release from the public relations office of Andrews University announcing the book-signing concluded: "Whether the book will signal a shift in the worldwide Adventist Church remains to be seen. In Utrecht, conservative factions from Latin America and Africa voted down the women's ordination question. The next General Conference session, to be held in Toronto, Canada, in the year 2000, *could be the site of another theological firestorm if the North American Church pushes the issue.*" See, Jack Stenger (Public Information Officer, Andrews University), "Andrews Professors Address Women's Ordination" Press Release, dated October 22, 1998, emphasis mine.

theologians in a church institution use the name and resources of the institution to advance their homosexual agenda?

This question is not about the biblical rightness of women's ordination, homosexuality, or any other issue. My point here is simply about the responsibility of the church's leading theological institution to the community of faith at large. What kind of precedent do we set when the Seminary begins to cave in to ideological pressure or "appeals" from some quarters of church leadership?

Also, the concern here is not about whether theologians may legitimately mass-distribute their published works; they have a right to do so. The issue being raised is simply this: Since the book's editor states in the prologue that the authors of *Women in Ministry* "do not claim to speak for others, either at the Seminary or in church administration," is it appropriate for the Seminary (or Andrews University, or any other church institution) to use its resources, name, and influence to promote some privately held opinions that are contrary to official church actions? Would the Seminary (or Andrews University, or some other church institution) do the same for other scholars holding opposing views on this question, and perhaps on another controversial issue like homosexuality?

The authors of *Women in Ministry* sincerely believe that the church made a great mistake at Utrecht, a mistake that they believe constitutes a hindrance to God's purpose and therefore needs to be ameliorated and/or corrected in order for the church to fulfill God's purpose. Does belief in the rightness of a cause justify the excluding of opposing views from a volume promoted and financed by the church's leading theological Seminary?

Women in Ministry would have escaped justifiable criticisms that the Seminary's name and resources are being (mis)used to promote the ideological agenda of women's ordination if it had allowed for opposing views. Since the authors "do not claim to speak for others, either at the seminary or in church administration,"⁴² would it not have been better for the pro-ordination scholars of the Seminary to have published and financed their private views independently (as other scholars both for and against ordination had previously done), instead of using the Seminary's prestige and resources to gain credibility for their one-sided view?

The book under review would also have gained much credibility and, as we shall later show, would have avoided some of its theological and historical shortcomings if it had allowed for challenges by opposing views.

A Well-Orchestrated Strategy

As we noted earlier, the initiative for *Women in Ministry* came from some leaders in the North American Division in response to pressure from a relatively small but influential group which has been pushing for women's ordination during the past thirty or more years.

⁴² Vyhmeister, "Prologue" in *Women in Ministry*, 5.

Initially, advocates convinced *church leaders* at the 1975 Spring Council meeting to approve the biblically-compromising practice of ordaining women as *local elders* in the North American Division if “the greatest discretion and caution” were exercised. Later, they succeeded in persuading *church leaders* at the Fall 1984 Annual Council meeting to reaffirm and expand the 1975 decision, voting to “advise each division that it is free to make provisions as it may deem necessary for the election and ordination of women as local elders.”⁴³

Thus, even though the 1975 provision departed from the New Testament model of church leadership which assigns to men, not women, the headship roles of elder or pastor, and even though the world church had not formally approved of the provision at a General Conference session, in 1984 ordination of women as *elders* was extended from North America to the world field.

Emboldened by their success in influencing church leaders to allow “women elders,” pro-ordination advocates proceeded then to urge the *world church* in General Conference session to ordain women as *pastors*, at least in divisions favorable to it. However, at the General Conference sessions both in 1990 (Indianapolis) and 1995 (Utrecht), the representatives of the world church overwhelmingly rejected the pleas to ordain women into the gospel ministry. The votes were 1173 to 377 (in 1990) and 1481 to 673 (in 1995).

In spite of these decisions, proponents of women’s ordination determined upon an all-out campaign, including unilateral ordinations in some influential North American churches and institutions. At the same time that these rebellious ordinations were taking place, advocates were also employing a tactic that had served their cause well in the past—namely, working through church leaders to legislate the unbiblical practice.

Without doubt, the most subtle, and yet most ambitious, effort by pro-ordinationists to overturn the worldwide decision is the proposal contained in the North American Division’s document “President’s Commission on Women in Ministry—Report.” The document was voted during the October 7-10, 1997 year-end meeting of the North American church leaders.⁴⁴ If fully implemented, it will allow women to occupy the highest headship positions of church leadership, including local church pastor, conference president, union president, division president, and even General Conference president.

I summarize below the major strategies which the document outlines, offering possible reasons behind some of its provisions. Readers familiar with what is going on will recognize that advocates are already energetically implementing these strategies in church publications, print and video media, schools, local churches, conferences and unions.

⁴³ Refer to the minutes of the General Conference Spring Meeting (April 1975) and the General Conference Annual Council (October 1984).

⁴⁴ The entire document, with helpful commentary, is reproduced as Appendix D in *Prove All Things*, 391-404.

1. To make “women pastors” a common fixture in the church, conferences are encouraged “to hire more women in pastoral positions”; they are also requested “to set realistic goals to increase the number of women in pastoral ministry in their field [*sic*] during the next three years [culminating in the year 2000—the year of the Toronto General Conference session]”;

2. To enlist young people and their parents and teachers in the pro-ordination campaign, Adventist colleges and universities in North America are encouraged “to recruit young women who sense a call to pastoral ministry to pursue ministerial studies”;

3. To get people used to the *concept* of women serving in same roles as men, “the NAD edition of the *Adventist Review* and other general church papers [are to] be asked to publish profiles of women serving in pastoral ministry several times a year”;

4. To ensure that church members become accustomed to *seeing* “women pastors,” the latter must be given “multiple exposures . . . in congregations throughout the NAD,” including the “use of print and video media” and “indirect portrayals of women with men in creative approaches to pastoral ministry”;

5. To legislate or make official the ordination of women in the Seventh-day Adventist church without risking another General Conference session defeat, the document encourages the world church “to modify the language” in relevant sections of the current *Church Manual* and North American Division working policy so that wherever the words “ordain” or “ordination” occur they will be replaced by “ordain/commission” or “ordination/commissioning”; this modification makes “commissioning” the functional equivalent of “ordination.”

6. To implement modifications suggested in the *Church Manual* and North American Division Working Policy, unions and local conferences are encouraged “to promptly conduct commissioning services for those women who are eligible”;

7. To skillfully quiet opposition to women’s ordination/“commissioning” at both the local and higher levels of the church, “the Ministerial Association and/or any appropriate structure” should appoint “an ‘ombudsman’—a person with insight in the system and denominational policies who can provide feedback and guidance when women in ministry encounter conflict with employing organizations, as well as provide mediation if necessary”;

8. To ensure that pro-ordination views are constantly carried in materials produced by the church, “more of the advocacy for women in ministry [should] be channeled through the union papers and other media of mass distribution”; “preparation and dissemination of educational materials in multiple media designed to raise awareness about women in pastoral ministry and the role of women in the church” should be carried out;

9. To silence or censor views opposing women’s ordination, “the Church Resources Consortium [should] monitor and audit all NAD-produced and endorsed materials for compliance with a gender-inclusive model for ministry”;

10. To make dissenting church members feel as though *they* are out of harmony with the Bible or the official Seventh-day Adventist position, “the division president

[should] issue a clear call to the church for gender-inclusiveness at all levels of the church—boards, committees, pastoral assignments, etc.”

11. To ensure the eventual possibility for all conference, union or division pastors to be guided by a “woman pastor,” the North American Division is urged to “move with a sense of urgency to include a woman with ministerial background as ministerial secretary or an associate ministerial secretary”;

12. To give biblical and historical justification for the women’s ordination agenda, there should be “(i) multiple articles in denominational periodicals” and “(ii) a hermeneutics conference by the NAD and/or the GC” to “clarify” the church’s understanding of biblical interpretation towards the “goals for gender inclusiveness in church organization.”

Actually, most of these strategies had been in operation for many years prior to the voting of the document. Advocates had employed them as they had worked through church leaders in their campaign for ordaining women as *elders*. But now, for the first time, the document puts these strategies clearly into print.

Of the twelve strategies listed above, the last one seems to be the most daunting. This is because an overwhelming majority of Seventh-day Adventists in North America and other parts of the world are theological conservatives—Bible-believers. As such they will strongly oppose the pro-ordination campaign, unless advocates are able to come up with ways to interpret the Bible (hermeneutics) to justify the ordaining of women as elders or pastors. This is one reason why some North American leaders approached the Seminary, urging it to “do something about Utrecht.”

The rest is now history. As requested, the Seminary’s “Ad Hoc Committee on Hermeneutics and Ordination” has carried out its assignment, producing the book *Women in Ministry*. And consistent with the strategies already outlined in the North American Division’s “President’s Commission on Women in Ministry—Report,” the book has been one-sidedly promoted in church publications and widely distributed around the world. Its producers and promoters believe that they have offered the long awaited reasons for the new light urging women’s ordination.

The new light in *Women in Ministry*

As we mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, until recently, Adventists have been unanimous in their view that no precedent for the practice of ordaining women can be found in Scripture, nor in the writings of Ellen G. White and the early Seventh-day Adventist church⁴⁵

Thus, in order for anyone to overthrow what has been understood as the universal consensus of the Old Testament, New Testament, and early Seventh-day Adventist belief, and thus succeed in introducing new light in the church, they must come up with compelling reasons for women’s ordination.

⁴⁵ In my *Receiving the Word* (123-126), I have challenged revisionist reinterpretations of Adventist beliefs and practice of ministry (see also 138-140, notes 34-44 of my book).

The *Women in Ministry's* writers believe they have done exactly that: “Our conclusion is that ordination and women can go together, that ‘women in pastoral leadership’ is not an oxymoron, but a manifestation of God’s grace in the church.” Or as the prologue states: “We believe that the biblical, theological, and historical perspectives elaborated in this book affirm women in pastoral leadership.”⁴⁶

Perceptive readers of *Women in Ministry* will notice slight variations in the views of the authors regarding the above conclusions. A majority of the writers are fully convinced that the New Testament “affirms new roles for women in the church that do not preclude women’s ordination to ministry” or that it “never” prohibits women from taking “positions of leadership, including headship positions over men.”⁴⁷

But a minority is more modest: “It is time for the Adventist Church to calmly admit that the Scriptures are silent on the matter and that we have no direct word from the Lord either in Scripture or in the writings of Ellen White. This is an opportunity therefore for the exercise of prayerful study and sound judgment. It is our responsibility to seek divine guidance and make a decision as best we can in the light of the Adventist understanding of the church and its mission.”⁴⁸

Despite the slight differences among the convinced voices (“there are compelling reasons to ordain women”) and the cautious voices (“there are no compelling reasons not to ordain”), the two years of animated discussions, writing, rewriting, careful editing, cross-referencing, and approval by all members of the committee has produced a work in which there seem to be ten basic lines of argument for the ordination of women as elders or pastors. I suggest the following as the essential contours of the biblical and historical arguments advanced by *Women in Ministry*:⁴⁹

(1) Genesis 1-3 teaches that God did not institute headship and submission or male-female role distinctions *at creation*. Adam and Eve enjoyed full equality of “shared leadership” or “shared headship.” Male headship and female submission were introduced by God *after the Fall*; even then, this was a non-ideal arrangement designed only for the governance of the home, not the church or covenant community.

(2) New Testament teaching on headship and submission (Eph 5:21-33; Col 3:18-19; 1 Pet 3:1-7) suggests that today Christians should aim at reaching the creation ideal of

⁴⁶ Vyhmeister, *Women in Ministry*, 436, 5.

⁴⁷ See the following authors in *Women in Ministry*: Richard M. Davidson, 283, 284; Jo Ann Davidson, 179; cf. Nancy Vyhmeister, 350; Robert M. Johnston, 52-53; Peter van Bemmelen, 306-307; Jacques Doukhan, 39; Daniel Augsburg, 96; Keith Mattingly, 71-72; Randal Wisbey, 251; Denis Fortin, 127-129; Michael Bernoi, 229; Alicia Worley, 370-372; Walter B. T. Douglas, 394; Roger L. Dudley, 414-415.

⁴⁸ Russell Staples, in *Women in Ministry*, 251. Jon L. Dybdahl also writes: “Let us be honest. There is no clear specific biblical statement on the issue. No verse gives permission to ordain women, and no passage specifically forbids it” (430); cf. Raoul Dederen, 22-23; Jerry Moon, 204; George Knight, 111-112; W. Larry Richards, 327-328.

⁴⁹ Source references from *Women in Ministry* for each of the following points will be provided in my evaluation of the book (see chapters 11-16 of *Must We Be Silent?*).

“total equality,” understood to mean the obliteration of any gender-based role differentiation.

(3) A careful study of the Bible reveals that there was actually at least one “woman priest” in the Old Testament. God Himself ordained Eve as a priest alongside Adam when, after the Fall, He dressed both as priests in the garden of Eden using animal skins. Prophetesses Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah exercised headship or leadership roles over men.

(4) The Bible also reveals that there were actually “women apostles and leaders” in the New Testament. Junia (Rom 16:7), for example, was an outstanding “female apostle,” and Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2) was a “female minister.”

(5) The New Testament teaching of “the priesthood of all believers” suggests that women may be ordained as elders or pastors.

(6) When correctly understood, biblical texts (like 1 Tim 2:11ff., 1 Cor 14:34ff., etc.) which seem to preclude women from headship responsibilities in the home as husbands and fathers and in the church as elders or pastors are temporary restrictions that applied only to specific situations during New Testament times.

(7) Careful study of early Seventh-day Adventist history reveals that women actually served as pastors in those days and were issued ministerial certificates. Ellen G. White apparently endorsed the call of such women to the gospel ministry.

(8) The 1881 General Conference session voted to ordain women. This vote, however, was apparently ignored or killed by the all-male General Conference Committee (comprised of George I. Butler, Stephen Haskell, and Uriah Smith).

(9) A landmark statement in 1895 by Ellen G. White called for ordaining women to the gospel ministry. This statement could have spurred on the male brethren who were reluctant to implement the alleged 1881 General Conference decision.

(10) Ellen G. White was herself ordained and was issued ministerial credentials.

In subsequent chapters I will argue that the above assertions are based on speculative and questionable reinterpretations of Scripture as well as misleading and erroneous claims regarding Adventist history. Yet on the basis of such “biblical, theological, and historical” evidence, *Women in Ministry* seeks to convince readers of the new light of ordaining women *as elders or pastors*.

But there is also a moral-ethical argument. Emphasizing the ethical necessity of ordaining women as elders or pastors, some of the *Women in Ministry* authors argue that “it is morally reprehensible to hold back from women the one thing that formally recognizes their work within the church.” “It is imperative” that the church act “with justice, with mercy, and with courage on behalf of its women.” The failure of the church to act ethically, or a delay on its part to do so, will compel “the forces of history” (such as the churches in North America which unilaterally engaged in “congregational ordinations”) to drag the church along.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Randal R. Wisbey, “SDA Women in Ministry: 1970-1998,” *Women in Ministry*, 251. For my response to the unilateral post-Utrecht ordinations, see my “How the Holy Spirit Leads the Church,” *Adventists Affirm* 12/3 (Fall 1998): 28-35.

Moreover, we are told, unless the new light of women's ordination is implemented, the witness of the church will not only be discredited in countries where it is wrong to discriminate against women, but it will make God "look bad." Thus, the church's rejection of women's ordination will be an affront to the character of God, even as slavery was in the nineteenth century.⁵¹ As we saw in the previous chapter, this new revelation that is to eradicate the gender caste discrimination in the church is built on egalitarian feminism's ideology of full equality, not Galatians 3:28 as alleged by *Women in Ministry*.

If the reader is not yet convinced by *Women in Ministry's* biblical, theological, historical, and moral or ethical arguments, there is one final argument: We must listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit as He calls upon us today to change our patterns of ministry in response to the pragmatic needs of a growing church. Writes the editor in her summation chapter:

"If circumcision, based on divine [Old Testament] mandate, could be changed [by the apostles, elders, and believers, together with the Holy Spirit, at the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15], how much more could patterns of ministry [ordaining women as elders and pastors], which lack a clear 'Thus says the Lord,' be modified to suit the needs of a growing church?"⁵²

Because my later chapters of *Must We Be Silent* evaluate the contents of the book, for now I will simply make the following comments in response to the "moral imperative" argument and the appeal to the Holy Spirit's leading to meet the pragmatic needs of a growing church: (1) For believing Christians, there is a "moral imperative" always to trust and obey biblical truth. Whenever they are compelled to believe and practice error, that imperative is not moral—it is coercion. (2) The Holy Spirit cannot lead believers today into new truths or new light that contradict those already established in His inspired Word.

Therefore, *Women in Ministry's* arguments concerning ethics and the Holy Spirit can only be sustained if the book's biblical, theological, and historical arguments are compelling enough to overthrow the historic understanding of Seventh-day Adventists that ordaining women is an unbiblical practice.

Conclusion

"Doing something about Utrecht" is what *Women in Ministry* is all about. It is an attempt by well-meaning scholars to provide a much-desired biblical and historical justification for the ordination of women as elders and pastors. Their motives are noble. But are their conclusions biblical?

⁵¹ Roger L. Dudley, "The Ordination of Women in Light of the Character of God," in *Women in Ministry*, 400, 413-414; Walter B. T. Douglas, "The Distance and the Difference: Reflections on Issues of Slavery and Women's Ordination in Adventism," *ibid.*, 379-398; Nancy Vyhmeister, "Epilogue," *ibid.*, 434-435.

⁵² Vyhmeister, "Epilogue," in *Women in Ministry*, 436.

While a majority of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist church has twice voted against women's ordination, a majority of scholars at the Seminary is believed to favor the practice. How should a theological institution of the church conduct itself when the scholarly opinion conflicts with the churchly decision? Should an ideological majority at the Seminary exclude opposing views on theological questions they contend are *unresolved*?

The authors of *Women in Ministry* “do not claim to speak for the others, either at the Seminary or in church administration.” Yet the resources, name, and influence of the Seminary at Andrews University have been employed to publish and promote their privately held opinions. Is this appropriate? Should a church institution allow its prestige or resources to be used by *some* church leaders (or even some influential individuals or ideological organizations) to promote controversial views that run contrary to positions taken by the worldwide church?

These questions bring into focus the role we must accord to the opinions of scholars, the voice of the majority, political pressure from some church leaders, and the decisions of church councils, whenever we are called upon to decide on unresolved theological issues.

Ellen G. White reminded us that “God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms. The *opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils*, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, *the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these* should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain ‘Thus said the Lord’ in its support” (*The Great Controversy*, 595, emphasis mine).

Heeding the above counsel, in subsequent chapters of *Must We Be Silent?* I will attempt to evaluate the biblical and historical evidence marshaled by *Women in Ministry* in support of ordaining women as elders or pastors. As I mentioned earlier, if the book's conclusions are proven to be valid, they should be incorporated into the Seventh-day Adventist church's Bible-based beliefs and lifestyle. And the church should be encouraged immediately to rectify its 150-year-old practice of ministry and ordination.

On the other hand, if the evidence and reasoning in the volume are found wanting biblically and historically, then the campaign during the past two or three decades by a few influential scholars and leaders to impose women's ordination on the worldwide church should be rejected as a tragic mistake and a misguided endeavor. Only as we “prove all things,” examining “whether those things are so,” can we fully decide whether the determined effort to introduce this new light in the church is inspired by biblical theology or political ideology.

NOTE: For a detailed response to *Women in Ministry*, refer to the “Adventists Affirm” book *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry*.