

The Meaning and Purpose of Ordination

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Introduction

The New Testament teaches that the act of ordination, as such, does not confer any special grace or holiness upon the one ordained. Ordination does not bestow some special magical powers of the Holy Spirit; neither does it confer upon the elder or pastor some special character which sets the person apart as a priest.

Before Paul's ordination, he already possessed the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17; 13:3). The same can be said of the seven deacons (Acts 6:3-6; cf. 1 Tim 4:14). Though Christ is the true High Priest (Heb 4:15; 7:24-25; 8:1), all believers in Him constitute a "holy priesthood," a "royal priesthood," and are called to be "kings and priests unto God" (1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6).

What the Issue Is. Thus ordination, per se, does not make anyone spiritual, holy or Spirit filled. Why then is ordination necessary? Can women legitimately be ordained to perform the leadership functions of elders or pastors?

The Necessity of Ordination

The New Testament attaches special importance to ordination. Paul wrote that the reason he left Titus in Crete was that Titus might "set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in *every city*" (Titus 1:5). Again in Asia Minor, Paul and Barnabas "ordained them elders in *every church*" (Acts 14:23). Evidently elders were to be ordained in all the New Testament churches.

Writing to the many churches that were "scattered abroad," the apostle James urged the sick to "call for the *elders* of the church" (James 1:1; 5:14). In his letter to "the strangers [converted Gentiles] scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia," the apostle Peter wrote, "The *elders* which are among you I exhort" (1 Pet 1:1; 5:1).

Apparently ordination of ministers was essential to the existence of the church. Though ministers were to be ordained in every church and city, their ordination was to be done with great caution and discretion. Paul counseled Timothy, himself an ordained minister, to "lay hands suddenly on no man" (1 Tim 5:22).

The Meaning of Ordination

We know that ordination, per se, does not make anyone spiritual, holy or Spirit filled. Yet the Bible teaches that it is essential to the well-being of the organized church. The question then is: What is the meaning of ordination?

Several Greek words in the New Testament are translated "ordain" (KJV); they convey such meanings as to "choose," "appoint," or "set apart."¹ Based on these Greek words, we understand ordination to be the act of the church in choosing, appointing, and setting apart through the laying on of hands certain individuals to perform specific functions on behalf of the church.

By ordination, elders and ministers are authoritatively commissioned to declare the gospel of salvation.² Through ordination, setting one apart by the laying on of hands, the church authorizes elders or pastors to counteract false teaching and teachers (1 Tim 1:3; 4:1; Titus 1:9, 10) and to safeguard the sound doctrine that has been entrusted to the church's keeping.³ As official representatives of the church, ordained elders organize churches and ensure the spiritual well-being of the church (cf. Acts 6).

Our Seventh-day Adventists *Minister's Manual* (1997) rightly recognizes that "Seventh-day Adventists do not believe that ordination is sacramental in the sense of conferring some indelible character or special powers or the ability to formulate right doctrine. It adds "no new grace or virtual qualification" (p. 85).

Ordination, an act of commission, acknowledges God's call, sets the individual apart, and appoints that person to serve the church in a special capacity. Ordination endorses the individuals thus set apart as authorized representatives of the church. By this act, the church delegates its authority to its ministers to proclaim the gospel publicly, to administer its ordinances, to organize new congregations, and, within the parameters

¹ Several Greek words in the New Testament are translated "ordain" (KJV); they convey such meanings as to "choose," "appoint," or "set apart." For example, Jesus "ordained (*poieo*) twelve" (Mark 3:14); Paul himself was "ordained (*tithemi*) a preacher and an apostle" (1 Tim 2:7; cf., 4:14; 5:22); Titus was urged to "ordain (*kathistemi*) elders in every city" (Titus 1:5). Each of these three Greek words carries the sense of "appoint," "place," or "establish." Another word used in the New Testament for the act of ordination is *cheirotoneo*, which can mean "to stretch forth the hand," or "elect" or "appoint." Thus Paul and Barnabas "ordained them elders in every church" (Acts 14:23); and when Titus was appointed by the churches to travel with Paul to Jerusalem, we are told that he was "chosen of the churches" (2 Cor 8:19). The compound form of the word, *procheirotoneo*, appears in Acts 10:41, where it describes God's prior appointment of the apostles.

² In Romans 10:14-15, having stated that faith comes through the hearing of the word proclaimed by the preacher, Paul asked rhetorically, "How shall they preach except they be *sent*?" The church has to *send* or commission someone to proclaim the message authoritatively. Again, writing to Timothy, Paul declared, "The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same *commit* to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2 Tim 2:2). A person possessing ability to teach, who is faithful to Christ, and who meets the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 may be commissioned authoritatively to perform the duties of elder or pastor. This was the practice in the New Testament church. Apart from the twelve apostles who were chosen and ordained by Christ Himself, all others apparently were ordained by elders of the church. For a person to be an elder or minister, then, the church must express its approval by recognizing and commissioning that individual for the ministerial task. Even Paul had to be ordained by the church after he received his call from Christ (Acts 13:1-3).

³ In his pastoral epistles, Paul frequently referred to the "sound words" (1 Tim 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13; cf. 2 Tim 2:15), or "the faith" (1 Tim 3:9; 4:1, 6; 5:8; 6:10, 12, 21; 2 Tim 3:8; 4:7; Titus 1:13; 2:2), or "that which has been entrusted" (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:12, 14), and "sound teaching/doctrine" (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1; cf. 1 Tim 4:6, 16; 6:1, 3; 2 Tim 2:2; Titus 2:10).

established by God's Word, to give direction to the believers (Matt. 16:19; Heb. 13:17) (see *Minister's Manual*, pages 84-85).

By means of ordination, "the church sets its seal upon the work of God performed through its ministers and their lay associates. In ordination, the church publicly invokes God's blessing upon the persons He has chosen and devoted to this special work of ministry" (ibid., 85).

Ellen White's Understanding

Ellen G. White captured the biblical meaning and importance of ordination: "The biblical background of the rite indicates that it was an acknowledged form of designation to an appointed office and a recognition of one's authority in that office" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 162).

Concerning Paul and Barnabas, Ellen White wrote:

"Before being sent forth as missionaries to the heathen world, these apostles were solemnly dedicated to God by fasting and prayer and the laying on of hands. *Thus they were authorized by the church, not only to teach the truth, but to perform the rite of baptism and to organize churches, being invested with full ecclesiastical authority*" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 161, emphasis added).

"God foresaw the difficulties that His servants would be called to meet, and, in order that their work should be above challenge, He instructed the church by revelation to set them apart publicly to the work of the ministry. *Their ordination was a public recognition of their divine appointment to bear to the Gentiles the glad tidings of the gospel*" (ibid., 161, emphasis added).

Ellen White's understanding that ordination, setting one apart by the laying on of hands, is the church's *recognition* and authoritative *commissioning* of individuals to perform certain functions for the church suggests that, within the guidelines set by Scripture, both men and women may be set apart by the laying on of hands to perform certain functions.

Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. *They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands.* In some cases they will need to counsel with the church officers or the minister; but if they are devoted women, maintaining a vital connection with God, they will be a power for good in the church" (Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 9, 1895, p. 434).

Though this statement has often been taken out of context and misused to claim Ellen White's support for ordaining women as elders or pastors of the church,⁴ it does illustrate the

⁴ Evidence that this statement may not be applied to ordination of women as pastors or elders may be found within the passage itself. (1) This is a part-time ministry, not a calling to a lifework. "Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time" (2) The work is not that of a minister or a church officer. "In some cases they

legitimacy of the church recognizing and commissioning chosen individuals through an act of consecration/dedication ("laying on of hands") to perform designated functions. Within the guidelines of Scripture, the church may do this for both men and women.

The Key Issue in the Adventist Debate

Since both male and female, through an act of dedication (the laying on of hands), can be commissioned *to perform certain specific functions*, the debate over women's ordination is not whether women can or cannot be ordained in this sense. The Bible, confirmed by the Spirit of Prophecy, suggests that both men and women may be commissioned to do certain assigned tasks on behalf of the church.

The key issue to be addressed is whether, among the varied ministries of the church, women may legitimately be commissioned through ordination to perform the leadership functions of elders or pastors. These include the authoritative teaching functions of the elder or pastor, organizing churches, baptism of believers and the spiritual oversight of the flock. Addressing this question will require a careful study of the Scriptures to understand what the Bible teaches about role relationships between men and women in both the home and the church.

In short, the issue in the Adventist debate over women's ordination is not about ordination *per se*, but ordination *to what function*. Specifically, can the church commission (ordain) a person (e.g. a woman) to the headship/leadership office of husband or father (in the home) or elder or pastor (in the church)? The issue is not about women in ministry, but rather women in what kind of soul-winning ministry. The issue is not whether women *can perform* the headship responsibilities of husbands or elders/pastors, but rather whether the Bible *permits* them to do so.

Underlying the above question are some crucial theological and hermeneutical issues. These have been addressed in my book *Searching the Scriptures: Women's Ordination and the Call to Biblical Fidelity* ([click here to book LINK](#)), as well as in my work *Must We Be Silent?* ([click here for a link to www.drpipim.org](#)).

will need to counsel with the church officers or the minister." Evidently this work is not that of an elder or minister. (3) It was a ministry different from what we were already doing. The portion quoted here is followed immediately by, "This is another means of strengthening and building up the church. We need to branch out more in our methods of labor." (4) It appears in an article entitled, "The Duty of the Minister and the People," which called upon ministers to allow and encourage the church members to use their talents for the Lord. The last sentence of the quoted paragraph reflects this thrust: "Place the burdens upon men and women of the church, that they may grow by reason of the exercise, and thus become effective agents in the hand of the Lord for the enlightenment of those who sit in darkness." This is the only statement from Mrs. White addressing laying on of hands for women. The statement and its context clearly indicate that these women were being dedicated to a specific lay ministry.