

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE

ELLEN WHITE
AND THE ROLE
OF WOMEN IN
THE CHURCH



WILLIAM FAGAL

Ellen White and the Role of Women in the Church

Ellen G. White

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Overview

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About the Author

Ellen G. White (1827-1915) is considered the most widely translated American author, her works having been published in more than 160 languages. She wrote more than 100,000 pages on a wide variety of spiritual and practical topics. Guided by the Holy Spirit, she exalted Jesus and pointed to the Scriptures as the basis of one's faith.

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by William Fagal

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In accord with historic Protestant teaching, Seventh-day Adventists give priority to the Bible as the rule of faith and practice for the Christian. They also believe that God has given a prophetic witness to the church in the life and work of Ellen G. White (1827-1915). This witness was not to supersede the Bible nor to be an addition to the canon of Scripture, but to call attention to the truths of Scripture and to make their application plain. In light of its belief in the prophetic role of Ellen White, the church takes her writings seriously, viewing them as a source of “comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction.”¹

What was Mrs. White’s stance in regard to the ordination of women? The interest within the Adventist church in the matter of whether to change church polity to include women among those eligible for ordination has prompted some to search Mrs. White’s writings for indications for or against the issue. Not surprisingly, the variety of ideas and opinions about what the church should do have been accompanied by differing constructions of what her position was.

Since most of the work on this matter has endeavored to find support for women’s ordination in Mrs. White’s writings or in her involvement in certain matters of the Adventist Church’s history, the purpose of this study is to examine the validity of such claims as have come to my attention and to present briefly what Ellen White taught regarding the ministry of women in the church. In so doing I will not document the sources of the claims to be examined. Addressing the issues raised is more important than identifying the individuals who have articulated the various views, some of whom are my personal friends, and all of whom have my respect. Our mutual interest is best served simply in learning what is truth and following it. In areas where we may come to differing conclusions, Christian courtesy will lead us to guard the feelings and reputations of those whose positions we may regard to be in error.

¹Endnotes “Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists,” Number 17: The Gift of Prophecy, in *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook 1986* (Washington, D.C.: 1986), p. 7.

Part 1 : Ellen White’s Statements

1. The 1895 “Ordination” Statement

The nearest that Ellen White came to calling explicitly for women to be ordained is in the following statement, published in 1895:

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. This is another means of strengthening and building up the church. We need to branch out more in our methods of labor. Not a hand should be bound, not a soul discouraged, not a voice should be hushed; let every individual labor, privately or publicly, to help forward this grand work. 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. ¹

[2]

This statement clearly calls for a setting apart to a special work. On the basis of the counsel that these women “be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands,” we might even venture to use the term “ordination.” But ordination to what? Note the elements of her statement.

¹Advent Review and Sabbath Herald (hereinafter Review and Herald or simply Review) 72, 28 (July 9, 1895):434.

1. This ministry is part-time. “Women who can devote some of their time...” Therefore, from the start, it does not seem to be referring to pastoral ministry.

2. The work is something other than what the church was already doing. “This is another means of strengthening and building up the church. We need to branch out more in our methods of labor.”

3. It may not even involve holding a church office in the usual sense of the term. The women should be “appointed.” The clause, “In some cases they will need to counsel with the church officers² or minister,” may be construed as placing them in a category other than that of church officer, although this is by no means certain. Yet it is clear that they are not equated with “the minister,” nor are they being regarded as the officers whose responsibility it is to lead the local congregation.

So was Mrs. White here calling for an ordained woman ministry? If one uses the term “ministry” in its broad sense of service, yes. But she has clearly distinguished this “ordained ministry” from that of the pastor or the leading church officers. To say that this statement supports ordaining women to positions of congregational leadership or ecclesiastical authority is, it seems to me, simply not supported by the elements of the statement itself.

The Context of the Statement. The article in which the statement is contained, entitled “The Duty of the Minister and the People,” is a call for involvement of the laity in the work of the church, which ministers and conference officers were apparently undervaluing and discouraging. Its purpose is not to change the structure of the pastoral ministry, but rather to change its emphasis from one in which most of the burdens are seized and carried by the minister, to one in which the laity is active and motivated in the work of the church. A candid reading of the entire article will make this clear, especially

²The assertion, advanced by some, that “church officers” here refers to conference officials is unlikely in view of Ellen White’s use twice in this article of the term “conference officers” to refer to this group and her corresponding single use of “officers of the church” to refer to the local church leaders. She seems to have been able to avoid ambiguity on this point.

the following portion, which even refers to one of the duties of the women appointees mentioned:

[3]

The minister's work is the lay member's work as well. Heart should be bound to heart. Let all press forward, shoulder to shoulder. Is not every true follower of Christ open to receive his teachings? And should not all have an opportunity to learn of Christ's methods by practical experience? Why not put them to work visiting the sick and assisting in other ways, and thus keep the church in a workable condition? All would thus be kept in close touch with the minister's plans, so that he could call for their assistance at any moment, and they would be able to labor intelligently with him. All should be laborers together with God, and then the minister can feel that he has helpers in whom it is safe to trust. The minister can hasten this desirable end by showing that he *has* confidence in the workers by setting them to work.³

2. "Ordination" of Women Physicians

Since Mrs. White said that women should train as physicians,⁴ and in another statement she calls for an "ordination" of physicians who are engaged in missionary work and soul-winning, some have felt that here we would find her authorization for ordaining women. The latter statement reads as follows:

The work of the true medical missionary is largely a spiritual work. It includes prayer and the laying on of hands; he therefore should be as sacredly set apart for his work as is the minister of the gospel. Those who are selected to act the part of missionary physicians, are to be set apart as such. This will strengthen them against the temptation to withdraw from the sanitarium work to

³The Review and Herald, 72, 28 (July 9, 1895): 433, emphasis original.

⁴See, for instance, Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry*, 140 (Mountain View, California, 1932).

engage in private practice. No selfish motive should be allowed to draw the worker from his post of duty. We are living in a time of solemn responsibilities; a time when consecrated work is to be done. Let us seek the Lord diligently and understandingly. ⁵

Does Ellen White here call for physicians to be ordained as ministers? Were that her intention, she could have said it much more directly: “he therefore should be set apart as a minister.” But her wording, as I understand it, is more circuitous simply because she intends something else. He is to be *as* sacredly set apart as is the minister. The missionary physician is to be set apart as *such*. As what? As a *missionary physician*. That is made even clearer by the motivation for doing it—to strengthen him against the temptation to leave the sanitarium work to engage in private practice. Ordaining physicians as ministers would not be likely to have a bearing on that, but ordaining them as missionary physicians would.

In speaking of the spiritual nature of the work of a true medical missionary, Mrs. White says this work “involves prayer and the laying on of hands.” No one would argue that she was here saying that the work of the medical missionary involved ordaining people to the gospel ministry, or even ordaining elders. Quite clearly she is here speaking of prayer for the sick. This statement is an indication that the expression “prayer and the laying on of hands” may refer to more than one thing, not simply to ordination to the gospel ministry.

So again we return to the important question to ask when considering these statements of Ellen White: when she called for ordination, it was ordination *to what*? This statement will not support the assertion that she called for women to be included in the ordained pastoral ministry.

3. Women in the Gospel Ministry

[4]

Ellen White was clear that women can and should “labor in the gospel ministry.” Her statement, as it appears in *Evangelism*, reads, “There are women who should labor in the gospel ministry. In many respects they would do more good than the ministers who neglect

⁵Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, 546 (Washington, D. C., 1946) ([Manuscript 5, 1908](#)).

to visit the flock of God.”⁶ Women who do such labor, especially full-time, were to be paid fairly for their work from the tithe. “The tithe should go to those who labor in word and doctrine, be they men or women.”⁷ She added, “Seventh-day Adventists are not in any way to belittle woman’s work.”⁸

From statements such as these, some have concluded that Mrs. White called for elimination of any role distinction between men and women in the ministry of the Adventist Church. They infer that, since she clearly urged fairness in the treatment of women workers, this should be understood to include ordination to the gospel ministry irrespective of gender.

Did Mrs. White intend that such a use be made of her statements? In the absence of a statement from her addressing the issue directly, absolute proof may be beyond us. But we can gather evidence from her statements that may help us to determine more precisely what she was and was not saying.

Personal Ministry. First, we must let Mrs. White tell us what kind of work she is talking about when she says, “There are women who should labor in the gospel ministry.”⁹ The statement comes from [Manuscript 43a, 1898](#) (Manuscript Release #330), which opens with this paragraph:

Some matters have been presented to me in regard to the laborers who are seeking to do all in their power to win souls to Jesus Christ. The ministers are paid for their work, and this is well. And if the Lord gives the wife as well as the husband the burden of labor, and if she devotes her time and her strength to visiting from family to family, opening the Scriptures to them, although the hands of ordination have not been laid upon her, she is accomplishing a work that is in the line of ministry. Should her labors be counted as nought, and her husband’s salary be no more than that of the

⁶Evangelism, 472.

⁷Evangelism, 492; see also p. 491 for fairness in pay.

⁸Evangelism, 492-493.

⁹Evangelism, 472.

servant of God whose wife does not give herself to the work, but remains at home to care for her family? ¹⁰

The subject under discussion is the pay of ministers' wives, and the kind of work they are doing is described: visiting homes and opening the Scriptures to the families. Further, Mrs. White dismisses the matter of ordination as irrelevant to the issue, rather than seeing it as a remedy to the injustice regarding pay. Her point is simply that these ministers' wives, who are functioning as what we would call Bible Instructors, are "accomplishing a work that is in the line of ministry," and they should be paid for it.

Later in the same document she again refers to this visitation-oriented work these women were doing and includes an implied rebuke to the ministers who were not doing it. [5]

If women do the work that is not the most agreeable to many of those who labor in word and doctrine, and if their works testify that they are accomplishing a work that has been manifestly neglected, should not such labor be looked upon as being as rich in results as the work of the ordained ministers? Should it not command the hire of the laborer? ¹¹

It is in this setting that Mrs. White's statement, "There are women who should labor in the gospel ministry," appears. The sentence that follows it again underscores the nature of the work she envisioned for these women: "In many respects they would do more good than the ministers who neglect to visit the flock of God." Immediately she adds, "Husband and wife may unite in this work, and when it is possible, they should. The way is open for consecrated women." ¹²

¹⁰She protests such practices through much of the manuscript. More of what she says here may be seen in [Evangelism](#), 492.3-493.2, though the material is credited to other, later books and manuscripts of Mrs. White.

¹¹[Evangelism](#), 493, credited there to [Manuscript 142, 1903](#), but appearing also also in [Manuscript 43a, 1898](#) (Manuscript Release #330).

¹²Manuscript Release #330, p. 3 ([Manuscript 43a, 1898](#)). Manuscript Releases are available from the Ellen G. White Estate, 6840 Eastern Avenue, NW, Washington, D. C. 20012.

So it seems that she is not calling for women to have role-interchangeability with men, but rather a complementary ministry that focuses on personal work. Her statements seem primarily to deal with ministers' wives, encouraging a husband-wife ministry. She noted the lack of ordination for the woman, but gave no indication that she was calling for that status to change. On the other hand, she left no doubt that the status of the pay issue should change:

This question is not for men to settle. The Lord has settled it. You are to do your duty to the women who labor in the gospel, whose work testifies that they are essential to carry the truth into families. Their work is just the work that must be done. In many respects a woman can impart knowledge to her sisters that a man cannot. The cause would suffer great loss without this kind of labor. Again and again the Lord has shown me that women teachers are just as greatly needed to do the work to which He has appointed them as are men. They should not be compelled by the sentiments and rules of others to depend upon donations for their payment, any more than should the ministers. ¹³

In another place Mrs. White talked about the same problem, and named some of the women she was concerned for as well as describing their work:

There are ministers' wives, Srs. Start, Haskell, Wilson and Robinson, who have been devoted, earnest, whole-souled workers, giving Bible readings and praying with families, helping along by personal efforts just as successfully as their husbands. These women give their whole time, and are told that they receive nothing for their labors because their husbands receive wages...I will feel it my duty to create a fund from my tithe money, to pay these women who are accomplishing just as essential work as the ministers are doing, and this tithe I will reserve for work in the same line as that of minis-

[6]

¹³*Ibid.*

ters, hunting for souls, fishing for souls...These sisters are giving their time to educating those newly come to the faith ...¹⁴

As nearly as I can tell, this is the kind of “gospel ministry” that Ellen White envisioned women doing. In all the places that I have seen where she defines or describes gospel ministry for women, she does so in terms of this personal work, especially directed toward other women and families. She seems to have been thinking especially, though perhaps not exclusively, about the wives of ministers and their opportunities for service. She believes that the ordained ministers should also “visit the flock of God,” but she sees in women a special suitability to this work.

4. Women as Pastors to the Flock

In the above statement from 1898, in which Ellen White says “There are women who should labor in the gospel ministry,” she describes that labor as we would the work of a Bible Instructor. She associated this work with care for (visiting) “the flock of God.” This statement may provide a key to a clearer understanding of a statement published two years later:

All who desire an opportunity for true ministry, and who will give themselves unreservedly to God, will find in the canvassing work opportunities to speak upon many things pertaining to the future, immortal life. The experience thus gained will be of the greatest value to those who are fitting themselves for the ministry. It is the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit of God that prepares workers, both men and women, to become pastors to the flock of God. ¹⁵

The remainder of the paragraph describes the benefits of character and experience that will come to those who engage in the canvassing work.

¹⁴Manuscript Release #959, pp. 1-2 ([Letter 137, 1898](#)).

¹⁵Ellen G. White, [Testimonies for the Church 6:322](#) (hereinafter Testimonies) (Mountain View, California, 1948).

Some hold that Ellen White is here calling for women, under the preparation of the Holy Spirit, to become gospel ministers in the commonly-accepted sense of the term today, that is, the conference-employed, perhaps even ordained, leader of a local congregation. But is that how she used the term “pastor” in this passage?

First, though “pastor” may be our common term, it was not Ellen White’s. Her common term was “minister.” Our laserdisc concordance of the published writings of Mrs. White shows that her usages of “minister,” “ministers,” “minister’s,” etc. (which include uses as verbs), outnumber use of similar words built around “pastor” by more than 50 to 1. Even so, by far the majority of her uses of these “pastor” terms simply designates the minister at the head of the congregation.

But in some passages we find evidence of other meanings. In such statements the term “pastor” is often used in connection with “the flock.” The references show concern for nurture of God’s people, as a shepherd might show tender personal care for each individual sheep. One such reference where Mrs. White makes this nurturing connotation explicit is in the following account, written from Australia in 1892:

[7] Elder H used to live here and preach to the people, but he was not a shepherd of the flock. He would tell the poor sheep that he would rather be horse whipped than visit. He neglected personal labor, therefore pastoral work was not done in the church and its borders...Had the preacher done the work of a pastor, a much larger number would now be rejoicing in the truth ¹⁶

Other examples of this specialized usage of “pastor” may be cited briefly. In referring to ministers who have educated themselves as debaters, Mrs. White said, “In many respects men trained in this kind of school unfitted themselves to become pastors of the sheep and lambs.” ¹⁷ Speaking of ministers who devote excessive time to reading and writing, she says, “The duties of a pastor are often

¹⁶Manuscript Release 760:5-6 (from “Experiences in Australia,” p. 53, written in Adelaide, Australia, Oct. 11, 1892).

¹⁷Manuscript Release 760:10 (Manuscript 24, 1888).

shamelessly neglected because the minister lacks strength to sacrifice his personal inclinations for seclusion and study. The pastor should visit from house to house among his flock, teaching, conversing, and praying with each family, and looking out for the welfare of their souls.”¹⁸

Her concern for personal care for the flock is expressed again this way: “Responsibilities must be laid upon the members of the church. The missionary spirit should be awakened as never before, and workers should be appointed as needed, who will act as pastors to the flock, putting forth personal effort to bring the church up to that condition where spiritual life and activity will be seen in all her borders.”¹⁹ In each instance here the concept of “pastor” is associated with personal work for the flock of God, even when it is done by “members of the church” rather than the minister. One who visits families, teaching them and praying with them, showing personal care and interest, is doing pastoral work.

Second, the work of the Adventist minister in Ellen White’s time was quite different from the work of the “pastor” as we know it today. The ministers were largely evangelists, raising up a church in a place, getting it established, and then moving on to another place. The idea of a settled ministry whose duties were primarily with those who were already believers is a fairly recent innovation in the Adventist Church, developing in the 1930’s, 40’s, and especially 50’s.²⁰ In the setting of such an itinerant ministry, Mrs. White’s term, “pastors to the flock of God,” at times denotes not so much an office as a function, performed in personal ministry to the sheep of Jesus’ flock.

¹⁸Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, 337 (Washington, D. C., 1948).

¹⁹*Testimonies for the Church* 5:723.

²⁰Ken Corkum, “The Role of the Seventh-day Adventist Minister in Public Evangelism,” D.Min. Dissertation (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University, 1986), pp. 98-101. For unequivocal statements by A. G. Daniells and George Starr regarding the non-settled nature of ministerial work during Mrs. White’s lifetime, see Corkum, pp. 32 and 90. Other related statements by Daniells, Mrs. White, and others may be found in Corkum, especially pp. 50-91.

This is why canvassing is such a good preparation for ministry. It gets the worker out visiting in homes, doing personal labor, seeking to bring the lost sheep into the Lord's flock, or (we might say pastoring the flock of God). It is a work that both men and women can and should do. But such a work does not *necessarily* involve appointment to the headship role of a congregation or ordination to the gospel ministry.

[8] Third, in a parallel passage a few pages later in the same book, Ellen White explicitly shows that her endorsement of canvassing as preparation for the ministry is based on its orientation toward personal ministry in the home:

Some men whom God was calling to the work of the ministry have entered the field as canvassers. I have been instructed that this is an excellent preparation if their object is to disseminate light, to bring the truths of God's word directly to the home circle. In conversation the way will often be opened for them to speak of the religion of the Bible. If the work is entered upon as it should be, families will be visited, the workers will manifest Christian tenderness and love for souls, and great good will be the result. This will be an excellent experience for any who have the ministry in view.

Those who are fitting for the ministry can engage in no other occupation that will give them so large an experience as will the canvassing work. ²¹

This personal work in the home, which is at the heart of the canvassing work, is the very method of labor for which Mrs. White said women were especially fitted and in which they could do a work "in the line of ministry" that men could not do.

Fourth, elsewhere in this same volume Ellen White discusses the need for more ministers to be trained and enter the field. If at this time she had intended to open the regular ministerial option for women, one might well expect her to say so. But note the references to gender in the following statement:

²¹Testimonies for the Church 6:334.

There is an urgent demand for laborers in the gospel field. Young men are needed for this work; God calls for them. Their education is of primary importance in our colleges, and in no case should it be ignored or regarded as a secondary matter. It is entirely wrong for teachers, by suggesting other occupations, to discourage young men who might be qualified to do acceptable work in the ministry. Those who present hindrances to prevent young men from fitting themselves for this work are counterworking the plans of God, and they will have to give an account of their course. There is among us more than an average of men of ability. If their capabilities were brought into use, we should have twenty ministers where we now have one. ²²

This view is reinforced later in the same volume where Section Seven, “Calls to Service,” opens with an article entitled, “Young Men in the Ministry.” ²³ Among numerous calls there for “men” and “young men” to enter the ministry, there is no mention of women being urged to join the ranks of the ministers, mention which we might well expect if it had been Mrs. White’s intention earlier in the volume to indicate that women as well as men were to prepare for the regular gospel ministry.

So in the statement with which this section opened, in which Mrs. White said that “the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit...prepares workers, both men and women, to become pastors to the flock of God,” was she calling for women as well as men to be pastors in today’s sense of the term? Her use of the term “pastor” to describe a function as well as an office and her recognition that the two did not always go together leave open an alternative interpretation—that “pastors to the flock of God” designates those who exercise a personal ministry of visitation and instruction in the home. If one chooses to adopt the alternative explanation, then the statement is harmonious with other statements Mrs. White makes about the kind of work women are especially qualified to do, fulfilling a role that is complementary to that of men. It also harmonizes with her

[9]

²²Testimonies for the Church 6:135.

²³Testimonies for the Church 6:411-416.

specifically male-directed calls for ministerial workers in the same volume of the *Testimonies*. If on the other hand one chooses to say that this passage does call for women to serve in the office of pastor, then one must account for the singularity of this statement—there are no other, different statements that make the same point in an unequivocal manner.

5. Women Engaged in the Ministry

Some have thought a passage from [Testimonies for the Church 8:229-230](#) provided such a different, confirming statement about women serving as ministers in the same capacity as men: “Young men and young women who should be engaged in the ministry, in Bible work, and in the canvassing work should not be bound down to mechanical employment.” The context is a call for our institutions to train the young people for evangelistic work. Here it seems that “the ministry” is distinguished from “Bible work,” a distinction that seems somewhat blurred in other major statements.

One could argue that in this statement Mrs. White is urging both young men and women to go into all three lines of labor. But that is not necessarily the case. The statement may be understood simply to be urging young people to go into whatever line of evangelistic work is suitable to them, without trying to specify what is appropriate to each gender. To make such a distinction clear is difficult without the sentence becoming wordy and ungainly. And one should note that the burden of the message is not to change church polity to make room for women to serve in the same capacities as men, but rather to encourage the employment of both men and women in soul-winning work rather than in manual labor.

6. “Address the Crowd Whenever You Can.”

This injunction, published in [Evangelism, 473](#), in a section the compilers entitled “Women in Public Ministry,” was directed to Mrs. S. M. I. Henry, who had already been granted a ministerial license the previous year. It has been taken by some as Mrs. White’s encouragement for women to seek a preaching ministry, which today is equated with being an ordained minister of the church.

Is Ellen White here promoting the employment of women as ministers in the usual sense of the term? No. The context is clearly a concern for the women of the church to be instructed how to be servants of Jesus. The statement comes from a letter from Mrs. White, published in Mrs. Henry's column in the *Review*.²⁴ In the paragraph right before the passage quoted in *Evangelism*, she writes of her concern for the sisters: "If we can, my sister, we should speak often to our sisters, and *lead* them in the place of saying 'Go.' Lead them to do as we should do: to feel as we should feel, a strong and abiding perception of the value of the human soul. We are learners that we may be teachers. This idea must be imprinted in the mind of every church-member" (emphasis hers). The concern for the sisters is explicit again two paragraphs after the *Evangelism* passage: "Teach our sisters that every day the question is to be, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do this day?"

To what work was Mrs. White specifically encouraging Mrs. Henry? The first three paragraphs of the letter make it plain: [10]

The work you are doing to help our sisters feel their individual accountability to God is a good and necessary work. Long has it been neglected; but when this work has been laid out in clear lines, simple and definite, we may expect that the essential duties of the home, instead of being neglected, will be done much more intelligently. The Lord would ever have us urge upon those who do not understand, the worth of the human soul.

If we can arrange, as you are now working, to have regularly organized companies intelligently instructed in regard to the part they should act as servants of the Master, our churches will have life and vitality such as have been so long needed.

Christ our Saviour appreciated the excellency of the soul. Our sisters have generally a very hard time, with their increasing families and their unappreciated trials. I have so longed for women who could be educators to help them to arise from their discouragement, and

²⁴The *Review and Herald*, 76, 19 (May 9, 1899):293.

to feel that they could do work for the Lord. And this effort is bringing rays of sunshine into their lives, and is being reflected upon the hearts of others. God will bless you, and all who shall unite with you, in this grand work. ²⁵

Teaching Ministry. It seems that Mrs. Henry's work was to encourage the establishment of regularly organized companies, presumably of women, and to instruct them in how to serve Christ. This would add life and vitality to the churches. In addition, Mrs. White encouraged her to "address the crowd whenever you can." This would have included the Adventist pulpits, though it seems it was not limited to them. The article on Mrs. Henry in the *SDA Encyclopedianotes*,

In 1898 she conceived a plan for what she called "woman ministry." Lecturing on the role of the mother in the moral education of society, she stressed this from coast to coast in the United States and Canada. She also presented her plan to SDA congregations. A. W. Spalding remarked later that in the work instituted in the SDA Church by Mrs. Henry came "the first semblance of an organized effort to train parents and to give help in their problems". ²⁶

Ellen White was not encouraging Mrs. Henry to aspire to a pulpit ministry, nor to become a pastor in the usual sense of that term. She was counseling her to continue in her teaching ministry, to use every opportunity that might come her way (including pulpit invitations) to promote her view of "woman ministry" (and, for that matter, laywork irrespective of gender), a view that would strengthen the home and family life and help women see the value and beauty in serving Christ, even within their traditional roles.

When Ellen White herself published the material she had written to Mrs. Henry, she did not publish the entire letter, but reworked

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, revised edition, ed. Don F. Neufeld, et al. (Washington, D.C., 1976), pp. 581-582.

portions of it for general use. She published it in [Testimonies for the Church 6:114-116](#), under the title, “Women to Be Gospel Workers.” And the section where Mrs. White said, “Address the crowd whenever you can,” does not appear there.

Part 2 : Historical Arguments

Interest has been shown recently in certain historical matters surrounding the ministry of Ellen White. It would be well to examine these carefully.

1. Was Ellen White Ordained?

There is no record of Ellen White ever having been ordained by the laying on of human hands. Yet from 1871 until her death she was granted “ministerial credentials” by various organizations of the church. The certificate that was used said, “Ordained Minister.” Three of her credential certificates from the mid 1880’s are still in our possession. It is interesting to note that on one of them (1885) the word “ordained” is neatly struck out. On the 1887 certificate, the next one we have, it is not.

Had she been ordained in the interim? Some have seemed to imply that such might have been the case. But if so, that leaves open the question why she had been voted the credentials of an ordained minister for the previous fifteen years. In those years, as well as in the years following, her name simply appears in the listings of those being voted ministerial credentials. The difference between the 1885 certificate with “ordained” crossed out and the one following it from 1887, where “ordained” was allowed to stand, cannot be significant, because on a still-earlier certificate from 1883 (which we also have) the word “ordained” has not been struck out.

No one would argue that the crossing out of “ordained” in 1885 represented a change of status for her, that she had been “unordained” in that year. Rather, the crossing out of “ordained” highlights the awkwardness of giving credentials to a prophet. No such special category of credentials from the church exists. So the church utilized what it had, giving its highest credentials without an ordination ceremony having been carried out. In actuality, the prophet needed

no human credentials. She functioned for more than twenty-five years (prior to 1871) without any.

A Clear Indication. But the question whether she had been ordained or not is settled definitively by her own hand. In 1909 she filled out a “Biographical Information Blank” for the General Conference records. On the blank for Item 19, which asks, “If ordained, state when, where, and by whom,” she has simply inscribed an X. This is the same response she makes to Item 26, which asks, “If remarried, give date, and to whom.” In this way she indicated that she had never remarried, nor had she ever been ordained. She was not here denying that God had chosen and equipped her, but she was responding to the obvious intent of the question, indicating that there had never been an ordination ceremony carried out for her. ¹

2. Licensing of Woman Ministers

Until recently it had been largely forgotten that a number of women carried a ministerial license from the Seventh-day Adventist Church during the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. Most of these were the wives of ordained ministers, and most of them apparently were engaged in the kind of personal labor (a Bible Instructor kind of work) that Ellen White described in passages such as those we have already cited. In general, they do not seem to have served as the leaders of churches or even, very often, as public speakers. There are some notable exceptions to that latter point: Minnie Sype and Lulu Wightman, and apparently Ellen Lane, are examples of women who functioned effectively as public evangelists. But to date I have seen no evidence that women served as the leaders of churches. Perhaps further research will shed more light on this matter. [12]

It is now being suggested by some that the circumstances surrounding the licensing of women as ministers comprise a mandate for ordaining women today. The argument, in brief, is this:

Women were first licensed as ministers the same year (1878) the church first called for an examination to be made of candidates for license, it being understood

¹ Arthur L White published this information in the introduction of an article entitled, “Ellen G. White the Person,” *Spectrum* 4, 2 (Spring, 1972): 7.

that licensing would put women on the path to ordination. Ellen White took an active part in examining the qualifications of candidates for license, some of whom presumably were female. The church considered ordaining women shortly after it began licensing them. Though the proposal was not adopted, Mrs. White did not oppose it or warn against it. She in fact called for ordaining women to church ministries and paying them from the tithes.

Some Inaccuracies. Several inaccuracies appear in this scenario. First is the assertion that the decision to examine the qualifications of candidates for license coincides closely with the licensing of the first woman, Ellen Lane, in 1878. Advocates of this view say that the church thereby showed that it recognized that licensing put these women on the path to ordination, and it was going to be careful whom it licensed.

The facts are that Ellen Lane was first licensed not in 1878, but three years earlier in 1875.² The minutes of the Michigan Conference Annual Session show that Sister Roby Tuttle was licensed at the same time. Further, these were not the first women to receive the ministerial license. That honor seems to belong to S. A. H. Lindsey, who received a license from the New York and Pennsylvania Conference at a conference session on August 9, 1871.³ The licensing of these women therefore cannot demonstrate that the church at that time assumed licensing of women would likely lead to ordination. The policy calling for an examination prior to licensing anyone came seven years after the first woman licensee, and the question of the propriety of ordaining women would not be considered until 1881, ten years after their first licensing.

The second inaccuracy is the assertion that Ellen White took an active part in the examination of candidates for license (one public speaker has included *female* candidates), even recommending that some of them not receive licenses. This is based first upon the fact that Mrs. White attended certain conference sessions at which

²The Review and Herald, 46, 8 (August 26, 1875): 63.

³The Review and Herald, 38, 13 (September 12, 1871): 102.

women were granted the ministerial license,⁴ and second on a comment she wrote about her stay at a camp meeting in Oregon. “I was unable to sit up yesterday, for with much writing, reining myself up to meet different ones who put in requests for license, speaking in public, and showing the unfitness of different ones to attempt to teach others the truth, it was too much for my strength.”⁵ But the statement does not say that she took part in examinations or that she recommended that some of the candidates not receive licenses. It merely lists things she had been doing and makes no connection between “meeting” certain license applicants and “showing the unfitness” of certain unnamed individuals to teach the truth. Her lack of intent to connect those two elements is shown by the fact that they are separated by another item on the list—“speaking in public.” And there is not a hint here that any of the candidates for license are female.

[13]

If Mrs. White’s “showing the unfitness of different ones to teach others the truth” was not in the context of an examination for a license, then what *was* it about? A possible clue occurs later in the same paragraph, where she describes her sermon of the night before: “I here brought in genuine sanctification and the spurious article which is so common.”⁶ Was she counteracting false doctrine

⁴For example, see [The Review and Herald, 53, 24](#) (June 12, 1879): 190. On this occasion the record shows that “Brother Butler and Sister White spoke at some length on the subject of licenses,” though it gives no indication of what they said. At another business session later the same day a ministerial license was granted to a woman, though there is no indication Mrs. White was present at that meeting. A camp meeting was in progress on the same grounds (see p. 188 of the same issue), and the meeting in question took place at 4:30 p.m. on Friday, both of which factors might have influenced Mrs. White to be elsewhere at that time. In fact, on this occasion and on every other that I have checked in the 1870’s and early 80’s, I have so far been unable to substantiate Mrs. White’s presence at a specific meeting in which a ministerial license was voted to a woman.

⁵Manuscript Release #1215, p.1 ([Letter 32a, June 14, 1880](#)).

⁶*Ibid.* This was evidently a problem affecting the church at large, for in the next year Mrs. White published an 82-page pamphlet entitled *Bible Sanctification: A Contrast of the True and False Theories* (Battle Creek, Michigan, 1881). This was an edited version of a series of ten articles published in the *Review and Herald* between [January 18 and May 3, 1881](#). Their appearance in pamphlet form in the same year of their publication in the *Review* indicates the importance they held for the church. *Bible Sanctification* was later republished as *The Sanctified Life* (Washington, D. C., 1937).

that was already being taught there, and showing the unfitness of those who were already teaching it. Certainty on that point may not be possible, but it goes beyond the facts to assert that Mrs. White here said that she recommended that certain applicants not receive licenses.

A more likely interpretation of the Oregon situation is that it parallels an experience Mrs. White published in *Testimony* No. 29 that same year.⁷ Under the title, “The Cause in Iowa,” she spoke about danger to the work from unsanctified ministers, singling out two for special notice without whose work the cause would be better off. She considered them unfit to teach the truth to others: “Not having experimental godliness themselves, how can they lead the people to that Fountain with which they themselves are unacquainted?”⁸ And again, “Brother F is not fitted for his work.”⁹ And the problem was broader: “The ministry is corrupted by unsanctified ministers.”¹⁰ Here the same elements (unfitness of some to teach the truth; lack of genuine sanctification) that are mentioned in Oregon appear again. And the problem is not with candidates for license, but with those already in the work.

[14] The third inaccuracy in the scenario is the claim that the Adventist Church considered ordaining women shortly after it began licensing them, indicating that licensing was understood to put them on the ordination track. We have already shown above that rather than three years (which would correspond roughly to today’s typical time between licensing and ordination in the Adventist ministry), it was at least ten years after the church started licensing women that it considered ordaining them. And the events of that consideration need some further explication.

3. The 1881 Resolution to Ordain Women

Two Resolutions. A resolution to ordain women came from the Committee on Resolutions at the 1881 General Conference session.

⁷Testimonies for the Church 4:430-449.

⁸Testimonies for the Church 4:437.

⁹Testimonies for the Church 4:439.

¹⁰Testimonies for the Church 4:442. Note again the concern with sanctification.

Some have suggested that it was not the only one pertinent to the issue, since the preceding resolution reads:

Resolved, That all candidates for license and ordination should be examined with reference to their intellectual and spiritual fitness for the successful discharge of the duties which will devolve upon them as licentiates and ordained ministers. ¹¹

This resolution was adopted. It expands the 1878 mandate for examining candidates for license to include candidates for ordination. It has been suggested that this was enacted in connection with the following resolution, which would authorize ordaining women to the ministry. But such would be putting the cart before the horse. If the intent of this resolution had been to address the question of what to do with the women licentiates, one would expect it to be considered *after* the resolution calling for their ordination. Then the argument might have been: 1) Yes, it is proper to ordain them; and, 2) We should examine their qualifications before doing so. But it does not make sense the other way around. As I see it, one is only at liberty to conclude that the resolution was addressed to those who were already candidates for ordination (as well as license, which is included here).

The Concern of the Resolution. What is more, those who claim that this resolution was intended to provide for prudent advancement in ordaining women overlook the provisions of the resolution itself. It differs from the 1878 action, not just in including candidates for ordination, but in the criteria that are to be applied. The 1881 resolution stipulates “That all candidates for license and ordination should be examined with reference to their *intellectual and spiritual fitness...*” ¹² The 1878 action had specified only that candidates for license be examined “in regard to their doctrinal and educational qualifications.” ¹³ There is a clear shift in emphasis from doctrinal knowledge and amount of education to intellect and spirituality as the areas of desired qualifications.

¹¹The Review and Herald, 58, 25 (December 20, 1881):392.

¹²Ibid., emphasis supplied.

¹³The Review and Herald, 52, 16 (October 17, 1878): 122, emphasis supplied.

This echoed Ellen White's expressed concerns about the prevailing conditions among the ministry of the church at that time, conditions that led her to call for reform. In "The Cause in Iowa" testimony cited above and published the year before the General Conference adopted this resolution, Mrs. White makes an explicit call for a change in the examination of ministerial candidates' qualifications. She writes, "There must be a decided change in the ministry. A more critical examination is necessary in respect to the qualifications of a minister."¹⁴ She made it clear that the problem was spiritual. In the next paragraph she wrote, "The ministry is corrupted by unsanctified ministers. Unless there shall be altogether [15] a higher and more spiritual standard for the ministry, the truth of the gospel will become more and more powerless."¹⁵ It was spiritual qualifications that she was calling for. Is it only coincidental that the 1881 resolution revised the criteria to call for examination of these qualities before giving a license or credentials to a minister? It seems clear that the real concern of this first resolution was the condition of the ministry, not whether the church should ordain women.

Resolution on Women's Ordination. The 1881 General Conference resolution that does address the ordination of women deserves another look, as well. It reads,

Resolved, That females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry.¹⁶

Some have thought that the resolution was passed at the General Conference, but was sidetracked by the General Conference Committee. This is not the case. The first resolution, calling for spiritual qualifications for church ministry, was adopted, but this one on ordination for women was referred to the General Conference Committee. Referral to committee is a way of providing for more careful study of something on which the whole body is uncertain. It has also functioned at times as a means of dealing with something

¹⁴Testimonies for the Church 4:442.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶The Review and Herald, 58, 25 (December 20, 1881): 392.

that will not pass, without having to vote it down. The committee never returned it to the General Conference session.

Yet to conclude that a three-man committee killed the resolution does despite to the facts. Those who would maintain that three recalcitrant men were thwarting the will of the church in 1881 are obliged to explain why no one even brought the matter up again at the General Conference in 1882, or in 1883, or in 1884. In fact, General Conference sessions were held yearly until 1889, when they became biennial. Yet, to my knowledge, no one ever reintroduced the resolution.

Unlike today's situation, the issue apparently created little stir. The minutes of the session record not only the resolutions and their outcome, but the names of those who spoke to them. The first resolution, calling for examining ministers' qualifications, does not seem controversial. Nine people spoke to it, and it was adopted. The next resolution, calling for ordaining women to the pastoral ministry, had eight people speak to it, and it was referred to committee.¹⁷ When this fact is combined with the one noted above, that the measure was never reintroduced, it seems clear that the idea of ordaining women had little support in the church at that time.

Ellen White's Silence. Ellen White was not present at that General Conference session. She likely read the report of the resolutions in the *Review* a few weeks later or heard about them from her son Willie, but we have no record of her making any comment one way or the other on the matter. This is harder to explain from the position that she favored ordination than from the position that she opposed it. Proponents of ordination today that I am acquainted with do not try to explain her silence, one calling it "a mystery still to church historians." They simply deny that her silence lent approval to the handling of the matter, or they claim that her silence must least be construed as permissive in light of her responsibility to warn the church against error and her encouragement to women to participate in the work of the church. [16]

One must beware of arguments from silence, which are incapable of giving proof. Ellen White's silence, by itself, neither promotes nor refutes ordination for women. But if she favored it, her silence

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

is indeed a mystery. Why did she not speak out when the church veered away from ordaining women on the other hand, if she did not favor it, then some reasons for silence come to mind. She may simply have felt that the issue was not important. Or, if she felt that the church should not ordain women, she may have made no comment on the resolution simply because none was necessary. The church was not about to begin ordaining women, so no corrective was needed.

Indeed, we know of another time when the church faced real dangers that Mrs. White was warned of in vision, and yet she kept silent. In connection with the crisis over pantheism that came to a head with the publication of Dr. John Harvey Kellogg's book *Living Temple*, she wrote the following:

About the time that *Living Temple* was published, there passed before me in the night season, representations indicating that some danger was approaching, and that I must prepare for it by writing out the things God had revealed to me regarding the foundation principles of our faith. A copy of *Living Temple* was sent me, but it remained in my library, unread. From the light given me by the Lord, I knew that some of the sentiments advocated in the book did not bear the endorsement of God, and that they were a snare that the enemy had prepared for the last days. I thought that this would surely be discerned, and that it would not be necessary for me to say anything about it ¹⁸

Had the church leaders discerned the danger of the concepts in *Living Temple* and moved against it, evidently Mrs. White would have said nothing. Yet her silence would not have been permissive in regard to pantheism. Only when it was clear that the error was gaining ground did she speak out. By contrast, when the church considered a resolution in 1881 to ordain women as pastors, that

¹⁸Ellen G. White, [Selected Messages 1:202-203](#) (Washington, D. C., 1958). The original source is [Manuscript 46, 1904](#), which was published in Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies, Series B, No. 2* (Washington, D. C., 1904). The passage quoted appears on p. 52 of that publication.

view did not prevail, and Mrs. White said nothing about it. But if, on the other hand, the error were in the rejection of women's ordination, and such error had triumphed at the General Conference, then we might well expect her to have spoken out against that rejection.

Charged to Protest Injustice. Especially would we expect Mrs. White to have spoken out against denying ordination to women if such denial were (as some today claim) arbitrary, unjust and oppressive. She stated,

I was charged not to neglect or pass by those who were being wronged. I was specially charged to protest against any arbitrary or overbearing action toward the ministers of the gospel by those having official authority. Disagreeable though the duty may be, I am to reprove the oppressor, and plead for justice. I am to present the necessity of maintaining justice and equity in all our institutions. ¹⁹

The women we are speaking of here were licensed as ministers of the gospel, but church officials did not see fit to permit their ordination. Mrs. White spoke strongly in favor of the women workers being paid and paid fairly, even from the tithe; she spoke about the importance of supporting aged ministers; ²⁰ she protested against unfair treatment of black ministers; ²¹ but she had nothing to say when the General Conference declined to ordain licensed women ministers. Perhaps the instruction to protest unfairness came after 1881 (her statement is from twenty-five years later, in 1906). But even so, the practice of not ordaining women prevailed through to the end of her life and beyond. Evidently she did not see this as "arbitrary," "overbearing," or a matter of "justice and equity." She had been "specially charged to protest" against such things, but on this she had no protest. [17]

Again, one must be careful not to claim too much on the basis of silence. Yet Mrs. White's silence on the ordination issue, especially in light of the related data we have looked at, should make one

¹⁹*Review and Herald*, 83, 30 (July 26, 1906): 8. (Also in [Selected Messages 1:33](#).)

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹[Testimonies for the Church 9:223](#) (Manuscript 129, 1902).

slow to claim that she gave her support or influence to the cause of bringing women into the ordained pastoral ministry.

Active Personal Ministry. The final claim of the scenario we have been examining is that Ellen White called for women to be ordained and for them to be paid from the tithe. We have already examined the passages that are used to say that Mrs. White called for women to be ordained to the gospel ministry (especially the “ordination” statement from 1895), and we have found that they do not make such a call. Yet we must recognize that Mrs. White did call for women to be involved in an active personal ministry, especially to women and families, and that she envisioned paying from the tithe the women workers who gave themselves whole-souled to this work, “although the hands of ordination have not been laid”²² upon them. But there is no basis in that statement for saying that Mrs. White called for women to be ordained in the usual sense to the gospel ministry.

²²Manuscript Release #330, p.1 ([Manuscript 43a, 1898](#)).

Part 3 : Ellen White’s View Of Woman’s Role In The Church

We have already seen that Ellen White made no explicit statement supporting (nor prohibiting) ordination for women. When she had opportunity to speak for it, as she did in response to the failure of the 1881 General Conference resolution that would have provided for it, she said nothing. When she could have called for it in connection with the pay issue for women, she did not do so. All the evidence that I have seen so far fails to substantiate support in her writings for ordaining women.

Then what did she envisage as woman’s role in the church? That study is considerably broader than the one I have attempted here in examining the claims that she supported ordination. But the material that I have looked at, some of which has been quoted above, indicates that she saw women as able to do a great work for Christ in personal contacts, bringing the message for this hour into homes and families. And she recognized and cited important contributions they could make in various leadership responsibilities in the church, as well.

For instance, during the same time period in which she made some of the strong appeals we have noted above, she called for training to be offered for women in our schools. Speaking of Avondale, the new school in Australia, she said, “The Lord designs that the school should also be a place where training may be gained in women’s work...” After enumerating certain domestic and educational training to be included, she adds, “They are to be qualified to take any post that may be offered—superintendents, Sabbath school teachers, Bible workers. They must be prepared to teach day schools for children.”¹

[18]

She saw an important mission for women:

¹Evangelism, 475 (Letter 3, 1898).

Wonderful is the mission of the wives and mothers and the younger women workers. If they will, they can exert an influence for good to all around them. By modesty in dress and circumspect deportment, they may bear witness to the truth in its simplicity. They may let their light so shine before all, that others will see their good works and glorify their Father which is in heaven. A truly converted woman will exert a powerful transforming influence for good. Connected with her husband, she may aid him in his work, and become the means of encouragement and blessing to him. When the will and way are brought into subjection to the Spirit of God, there is no limit to the good that can be accomplished ²

While there is surely an emphasis on a husband-wife ministry here, single women (“the younger women workers”) are also included. The type of work is not here designated, but would surely include the various lines of work Mrs. White specified that we have noted before. With modesty and propriety, women may let their light shine and may exert a limitless influence for good. Such will be the effect when the will and way are brought into subjection to God.

A God-Appointed Sphere. Yet Mrs. White noted that not all would be willing to live in subjection to God. From our first parents, both men and women have shown that they have been unwilling to do so. Though the issue in the following passage is not specifically the role relations of men and women in the church, perhaps the principles may find some application there.

Eve had been perfectly happy by her husband’s side in her Eden home; but, like restless modern Eves, she was flattered with the hope of entering a higher sphere than that which God had assigned her. In attempting to rise above her original position, she fell far below it. A similar result will be reached by all who are unwilling to take up cheerfully their life duties in accordance with God’s plan. In their efforts to reach positions for which He has not fitted them, many are leaving vacant the

²Evangelism, 467-468 (Manuscript 91, 1908).

place where they might be a blessing. In their desire for a higher sphere, many have sacrificed true womanly dignity and nobility of character, and have left undone the very work that Heaven appointed them. ³

Clearly it is important in her view to operate within the sphere that God has assigned, for our own happiness, nobility and effectiveness. Defining that sphere is, of course, what this whole discussion is about in our church. While Ellen White will have some things to say that will help us sort matters out, she would be the first to say than we should go to the Bible for guidance on the matter of the role relationships of men and women “The Scriptures are plain upon the relations and rights of men and women.” ⁴ [19]

Spirit of the Times. She would also remind us of the dangers of imbibing the spirit of the times when that is out of harmony with our Scriptural duty. The statement just quoted comes from a passage that deals with a women's rights movement in the 1860's. A part of that movement was an attempt to bring about much-needed reform in the matter of women's dress. But the alternative proposed to the abuses that had flourished consisted of a style that minimized the differences between the dress of men and of women.

After addressing the Biblical call for a clear distinction in dress, Mrs. White commented on the spirit that attended the women's rights movement: “Those who feel called out to join the movement in favor of woman's rights and the so-called dress reform might as well sever all connection with the third angel's message. The spirit which attends the one cannot be in harmony with the other. The Scriptures are plain upon the relations and rights of men and women.” ⁵ Was there a spirit of disaffection, of promotion of self? In the assertion of one's rights, is there a spirit that comes not from above, and that would keep us from representing the character of Jesus, who did not think that equality was “a thing to be grasped” ([Philippians 2:6](#))? This statement seems to warn us of such dangers.

Respect for Husband's Leadership. And contrary to the positions taken by many feminists today, Mrs. White upheld, in both

³Ellen G. White, [Patriarchs and Prophets](#), 59(Mountain View, California, 1958).

⁴[Testimonies for the Church](#) 1:421.

⁵Ibid

her practice and her teaching, the traditional understanding of the Bible's statements on the headship of man in marriage. Arthur White writes,

Her understanding of the proper relationship between husband and wife stands out in a letter written to a friend in her early married life: "We women must remember that God has placed us subject to the husband. He is the head and our judgment and views and reasonings must agree with his if possible. If not, the preference in God's Word is given to the husband where it is not a matter of conscience. We must yield to the head" [[Letter 5, 1861](#)]. She would not stand in the pulpit to speak at the Sabbath morning worship service if James White was present. He would take the Sabbath morning service, and she would speak in the afternoon. Only when he was stricken with paralysis in 1865 and for some time could not take his place in public work did she depart from this procedure ⁶

Yet we still have not answered fully the question of what Mrs. White's concept of women's work really was. She stressed the importance of working within one's own sphere, and did so in the setting of the danger of leaving the very work to which God was calling, while seeking some supposedly higher sphere of labor. Her concern seems to have been not so much to deny this or that activity to anyone, but rather to encourage each to labor within his God-appointed sphere, where he could be most effective.

[20] **Emphasis on Personal Ministry.** It is clear that Ellen White did see a particular sphere of labor for women. In *Testimonies*, Volume 6, she published a selection called, "Women to Be Gospel Workers."⁷ Since this was published during her lifetime (1900), under her supervision, one may presume that she took responsibility for the

⁶Arthur L White, "Ellen G. White the Person," *Spectrum* 4,2 (Spring 1972): 20. See also *Testimonies*, Volume 1, p. 307, which comes from a testimony entitled, "Family Religion." In it Mrs. White also describes the duty of the husband to show a Christlike headship in his home.

⁷[Testimonies for the Church 6:114-118](#)

title and that the selection represents fairly what her view of women as “gospel workers” really entailed.

And what do we find there? First is her own reworking of the material she had earlier sent to S. M. I. Henry, which Mrs. Henry published in the *Review*,⁸ and to which I have already referred. The emphasis is on individual accountability to God to be involved in personal work for others. In addition to the statements from the *Review* article which I have quoted earlier, a few other statements will help to give the main thrust:

The most successful toilers are those who cheerfully take up the work of serving God in little things. Every human being is to work with his life thread, weaving it into the fabric to help complete the pattern.

The work of Christ was largely made up of personal interviews. He had a faithful regard for the one-soul audience. From that one soul the intelligence received was carried to thousands.

We should educate the youth to help the youth; and as they seek to do this work they will gain an experience that will qualify them to become consecrated workers in a larger sphere. Thousands of hearts can be reached in the most simple, humble way.

...Nothing is to be allowed to keep the servant of God from his fellow men. The individual believer is to labor for the individual sinner. Each person has his own light to keep burning; and if the heavenly oil is emptied into these lamps through the golden pipes; if the vessels are emptied of self, and prepared to receive the holy oil, light will be shed on the sinner's path to some purpose. More light will be shed on the pathway of the wanderer by one such lamp than by a whole procession of torchlights gotten up for a show.⁹

Ministry to Families. Ellen White added some other material after the reworked paragraphs from her letter to Mrs. Henry, and

⁸The *Review and Herald*, 76, 19 (May 9, 1899):293.

⁹Testimonies for the Church 6:115-116.

they became part of this article in *Testimonies*, Volume 6. Here too she speaks specifically of the work that women are to do, after first speaking of what they are to be.

The Lord has a work for women as well as men to do. They may accomplish a good work for God if they will first learn in the school of Christ the precious, all-important lesson of meekness. They must not only bear the name of Christ, but possess His Spirit. They must walk even as He walked, purifying their souls from everything that defiles. Then they will be able to benefit others by presenting the all-sufficiency of Jesus.

Women may take their places in the work at this crisis, and the Lord will work through them. If they are imbued with a sense of their duty, and labor under the influence of the Spirit of God, they will have just the self-possession required for this time. The Saviour will reflect upon these self-sacrificing women the light of His countenance, and this will give them a power which will exceed that of men. They can do in families a work that men cannot do, a work that reaches the inner life. They can come close to the hearts of those men cannot reach. Their labor is needed.

[21]

A direct necessity is being met by the work of women who have given themselves to the Lord and are reaching out to help a needy, sin-stricken people. Personal evangelistic work is to be done. The women who take up this work carry the gospel to the homes of the people in the highways and the byways. They read and explain the word to families, praying with them, caring for the sick, relieving their temporal necessities. They present before families and individuals the purifying, transforming influence of the truth. They show that the way to find peace and joy is to follow Jesus. ¹⁰

There is a bit more in the article, but the above statements will illustrate the perspective Mrs. White identifies with concerning

¹⁰[Testimonies for the Church 6:117-118.](#)

women as gospel workers. She saw them involved in personal work, with women and in families. If done in the right spirit, under the influence of Christ, “the light of His countenance...will give them a power which will exceed that of men...Their labor is needed.”

This is the very concern that we hear expressed today by those who would like to see women serving in the ordained ministry of the church or who urge their election as local elders—that their ministry is needed, especially to women and families. Clearly Ellen White shared that concern, but also it is quite clear that she envisioned this ministry being performed by women without reference to their serving as ordained elders or pastors. She said that such ministry is capable, when rightly done, of exhibiting a power greater than that of men. It is noble work, needed work. In defining women’s work in this way, she has in no way belittled it. ¹¹

¹¹She cautioned others concerning that danger: “Seventh-day Adventists are not in any way to belittle woman’s work.” [Evangelism, 492-493](#).

Conclusion

Did Ellen White call for ordaining women as elders or pastors? No. Did she explicitly forbid it? No. She simply did not address it directly as an issue. But it also seems clear that she did not envision it. What she did envision is significant: apart from the matter of ordination, she urged a vigorous participation of women especially in personal ministry, one that is not yet being widely done and that the Adventist Church needs desperately.

What difference would our adoption of Ellen White's view of the role of women in the church make? It calls for no change in church structure or polity, yet its implementation would revolutionize the church's practice. There would be a great increase in personal work being done, both by paid full and part-time workers and by volunteer laborers. If the work were done in the light of the spirit of Jesus, the women would show a power greater than that of the men. There would be an explosion in the numbers of people won to Christ and His truth through the gentle, appealing ministry of women. There would be healing in the home relationships, as godly women workers challenged men to reflect the self-sacrificing headship of Christ in their own relationship with their wives, and women to honor that headship as they would the headship of Christ. Families would be strengthened, and the church would make a start on the road to showing a world filled with hurting and broken families what a difference the practice of the Lordship of Jesus really makes.