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Chapter 2

A Look at the Methods of Interpretation in *Women in Ministry*

P. Gerard Damsteegt



During the 1995 General Conference session, the Seventh-day Adventist world church delegates voted overwhelmingly (1481 to 673) against a request of the North American Division that would have allowed each division to ordain women as ministers within its territory. An earlier request for women to be ordained as ministers had been soundly defeated at the 1990 General Conference session.

Soon after the 1995 decision several of the disappointed North American Division union presidents met with some of the faculty of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and requested help. A major issue had surfaced during the 1995 General Conference. It had become obvious that the significant barrier to women's ordination was hermeneutics, the way people interpret Scripture. The presidents asked the Seminary to investigate the question of women's ordination.

In response, a Seminary "Ad Hoc" Committee was set up. (*Ad hoc* means "for this one purpose.") Members of the committee were selected so as to avoid the inclusion of well-known opponents of women's ordination. For more than two and a half years the committee met, first assigning topics to various authors, then going over their papers again and again. The result was published by Andrews University Press in October of 1998 as the book, *Women in Ministry: Biblical & Historical Perspectives*.

As one might have anticipated, given the committee's assignment and its exclusive membership, the committee's conclusion was that the Bible, rightly interpreted, is not

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opposed to the ordination of women as ministers and that for women to function in positions of pastoral leadership is “a manifestation of God’s grace in the church.”¹

The press release issued by Andrews University announced the book as a “watershed” that makes a convincing “biblical case for women’s ordination.”² Both *Ministry* magazine (January 1999, pp. 28, 29) and *Adventist Review* (April 15, 1999, p. 29) published positive reviews of the book.

Such powerful claims deserve our attention. In this chapter we will focus on the principles of interpreting the Bible set forth by the book. Since hermeneutical issues were the very reason the book was requested, the underlying interpretive methodology deserves careful review and evaluation.

1. The Principles of Bible Interpretation

In the prologue of the book, Professor of World Mission Dr. Nancy Vyhmeister, the committee’s chair and the book’s editor, lists the scriptural principles of interpretation that she says lie at the foundation of the book.

The Bible is divinely inspired, she says, and is the authoritative rule of faith, presenting God’s word for all people in all times. The different authors, she observes, stress that the Bible must be allowed to interpret itself, one part explaining another. And because the Bible forms an intrinsic unity, the whole Bible must be taken into account before firm conclusions can be made, meaning that Scripture must be compared with Scripture to find the true meaning of any passage.

The prologue further states that although readers do profit from a simple reading of the Bible, the understanding of a passage is enhanced by a study of the literary and historical context of any passage. It cautions against imposing external interpretations on the Bible.

Wisely, the prologue points out that one needs to approach Scripture in faith, with a willingness to obey. For a correct interpretation, one must have the aid of the Holy Spirit, making prayer a necessity.

Finally it mentions that “absolute uniformity of understanding was not possible or desirable.”³ On this point the prologue quotes Ellen G. White, who wrote, “We cannot then take a position that the unity of the church consists in viewing every text of Scripture in the very same light. The church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions, but we cannot force the mind and will, and thus root out disagreement. These resolutions may conceal the discord, but they cannot quench it and establish perfect agreement. Nothing can perfect unity in the church but the spirit of Christlike forbearance.”⁴

So far, so good. These principles we can fully endorse.

There is, however, a very significant additional “rule” of Bible interpretation that the prologue mentions which raises major questions as to how it should be applied. This additional rule is intended to deal with the question, “What do we do with matters of faith on which Scripture is silent?” In view of the significance of this rule in the reasoning of *Women in Ministry*, the whole paragraph in which it appears deserves our attention here:

“On matters on which Scripture is silent, one must search for biblical principles that relate to the situation and apply them with sanctified reasoning. For example, the Bible does not prohibit smoking, but it does admonish us to care for the body temple. Church organization is not spelled out in the Bible. In the 1850s and 1860s Adventist pioneers agonized over whether or not to organize the little flock. James White put forth his position: ‘All means which, according to sound judgment, will advance the cause of truth, and are not forbidden by plain scripture declarations, should be employed.’ While some Christians have taken the position that whatever Scripture does not specially command is prohibited, Seventh-day Adventists have followed James White’s thinking. Our committee did likewise.”⁵

As the committee was not clear that women were excluded from pastoral leadership, they found this rule helpful in their investigation of the question of women’s ordination.

We readily acknowledge that when confronted with such modern problems as incorporating under state law in order to hold property, selection of a name for the church organization, and applying for insurance, James White could not find explicit instructions “spelled out in the Bible.” In such cases he did indeed seek out “biblical principles” and apply them with “sanctified reasoning.” At the same time, we must ask whether James White found that the Bible did not spell out church organization. More specifically, we must ask whether James White would have used his rule and sanctified reasoning to allow for the ordination (or commissioning) of women pastors.

It is their use of James White’s rule that seems to have enabled the authors of *Women in Ministry* to present their case for women’s ordination as elders and ministers. The Seminary committee claims to have done what James White did. Candid attention to the evidence suggests the opposite. This current chapter in *Prove All Things* examines Elder White’s perception of church organization as presented in the Bible and his manner of applying what he found. *Women in Ministry* attaches great importance to his example. This chapter does also—though from a different perspective.

2. The Misuse of James White’s Rule

In the earliest printed Adventist literature, James White, along with his wife, deplored the confusion and disorganization current among Sabbath-keeping Adventists. They appealed for order and unity. As early as 1853, in a series of articles called “Gospel Order” (James White’s name for church organization), Elder White showed his strong support for following the *biblical model* of church organization and leadership.

Elder White wrote that the fundamentals of church organization, or gospel order, were spelled out in the Bible. He urged that “vigorous efforts should be put forth to restore as fast as possible the order of the gospel.”⁶ He declared that “the divine order of the New Testament is sufficient to organize the church of Christ” and added significantly, “If more were needed, it would have been given by inspiration.”⁷

The New Testament was James White's model for church leadership. First, a minister should be called by the Lord to the responsibility of such a position. Second, he said, the prospective minister must meet the "necessary qualifications" that "are plainly stated in the Word."⁸ These qualifications, Elder White wrote, were listed by Paul in his counsel to Timothy: "This is a true saying," White quoted, "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.' (1 Tim. 3:1-7)."⁹

Commenting on the requirements for the office of elder or minister, James White remarked: "Many seem to desire the office of a bishop, or elder, who fail in many points named here by the Apostle. He must be 'blameless,' 'vigilant,' 'sober,' 'patient,' 'not a brawler.' He must rule well his own house. How is it possible that the Holy Ghost should make a man an overseer of the precious flock, to rule over them [Heb. 13: 17], who knows not how, or neglects to govern his children at home?—Here the Apostle appeals to our reason. And it seems the greatest absurdity that such a man should be called to rule the church. God does not call them. He will not trust souls to their care."¹⁰

From these comments it is obvious that Elder White did *not* believe that church organization is not spelled out in Scripture. He said the Bible was the guidebook for the selection of church leaders. Judging by the specific requirements he quoted from the Bible, he believed that elders or ministers must be persons with one wife who are successful leaders in their home. This obviously disqualified women from serving as elders or pastors. And not just any man could qualify, but only men who had proven themselves to be successful leaders in their own families.

To use James White's rule—that "all means which, according to sound judgment, will advance the cause of truth, and are not forbidden by plain scripture declarations, should be employed"—to allow the ordination of women as elders and ministers violates his plain intent.

By using Elder White's rule out of context, *Women in Ministry* moves startlingly away from the solid Adventist practice of following the Bible and the Bible only. This departure is seen in the many unwarranted conclusions of the book.

3. What Does James White's Rule Mean?

Women in Ministry emphasizes a point that James White made in 1860 and uses it as an additional rule for interpreting the Bible. We have just seen that Elder White was *not* arguing in defense of women pastors or for church organization as a whole. So what specific problems did he have in mind? What was the historical setting in

which he used this rule? For this we need to go back to the years prior to the official organization of the believers into the Seventh-day Adventist movement.

In 1860 Sabbath-keeping Adventists were wrestling with the issue whether they as a church could *legally hold church property*. Donations had been made to James White for the operation of a publishing office for which capital of \$5000 was felt to be necessary.¹¹ Some held Elder White responsible for handling the money, but he declined, arguing that the publishing office was not his personal property but belonged to the church at large. He said, “We do object to being in any way responsible for money lent to this Office, used in printing books while the Office property is not insured.”¹²

To prevent total loss in the case of a fire, the office would have to be insured, and he pointed out that to insure the publishing office the believers would have to be incorporated officially as a religious body under the laws of the state of Michigan. This meant that Sabbath-keepers would have to adopt a name for their organization.

But to some strong-minded individuals among the small number of Sabbath-keepers (we numbered about 3000 at that time), organizing as a church was unthinkable. It would make us just like the other churches that constituted Babylon. And to be legally incorporated as a religious body was out of the question because it would unite God’s people with the state—with the United States, the two-horned beast of Revelation 13.¹³

To counteract these objections Elder White asked opponents for clear *scriptural proof* that it was objectionable *to hold church property legally*. He could not see that there was anything in Scripture that prohibited it. He pointed out that there were no biblical counsels for having a weekly church paper or a publishing press, yet it was perfectly proper to have these things. This is the setting in which he suggested that when the Bible does not specifically address an issue, we should follow the rule that “all means which, according to sound judgment, will advance the cause of truth, and are not forbidden by plain scripture declarations, should be employed.”

To avoid confusion among believers, Elder White invited everyone to examine his rule, saying, “If this rule be defective, let its defects be shown; if right, then let it be adopted, that confusion *on this question* be prevented.”¹⁴

There certainly can be no objection to James White’s rule when it concerns matters that the Bible does not address, such as publishing a weekly church paper or owning a printing press. It is obvious that the Bible is silent on these matters. Here we can fully endorse the use of this rule. However, when it comes to applying his rule to the basic structure of church organization that deals with the qualifications for ministers and elders, we find that his rule does not fit at all. Contrary to the suggestion of *Women in Ministry’s* prologue, we have seen that Elder White taught that the Bible does indeed address the basic structure of church organization. The prologue’s claim that “church organization is not spelled out” comes as a surprise in view of the many references to church organization in the Bible to be found in the early Adventist literature.

4. The Bible Teachings on Church Organization

In light of the prologue's assertion that the Bible does not spell out church organization, we need to look extensively at what God has said on this subject. To do this, it is appropriate to investigate the testimonies of Ellen G. White, given to protect the remnant church against almost overwhelming last-day deceptions.

In words that have become famous, Mrs. White observed in 1892 that "the church of Christ, enfeebled and defective as it may be, is the only object on earth on which He bestows His supreme regard."¹⁵ Christ is constantly watching His church with "solicitude, and is strengthening it by His Holy Spirit."¹⁶ If God loves His church this much, we ask, would He have left it to develop without operating instructions? Hardly! And throughout the history of the remnant church, the Lord has given abundant counsels on how it should operate.

During the early days, when some were suspicious of organizing, the believers sought God's counsel earnestly, and He answered. Ellen White wrote: "We sought the Lord with earnest prayer that we might understand His will, and light was given by His Spirit, that there must be *order and thorough discipline* in the church, that *organization was essential*. System and order are manifest in all the works of God throughout the universe. Order is the law of heaven, and it should be the law of God's people on the earth."¹⁷

Through His Spirit Jesus gave early Adventists testimony after testimony. When the believers accepted this light, they prospered. "Marked prosperity," Mrs. White wrote, attended the progress of the movement. "What is the secret of our prosperity?" she asked. "We have moved under the order of the Captain of our salvation. God has blessed our united efforts. The truth has spread and flourished. Institutions have multiplied. The mustard seed has grown to a great tree. The system of organization has proved a grand success."¹⁸

Among the counsels given by God's inspiration was instruction to study the excellent organization developed by Moses in the Old Testament. As we shall see, we have considerable information to guide us in our quest for organization that follows the Bible pattern.

5. Church Organization in the Old Testament

The ancient Israelites constituted God's church. Today we should take notice of how God organized this church. "Has God changed from a God of order? No; He is the same in the present dispensation as in the former. Paul says, 'God is not the author of confusion, but of peace' [1 Cor 14:33]. He is as particular now as then. *And He designs that we should learn lessons of order and organization from the perfect order instituted in the days of Moses*, for the benefit of the children of Israel."¹⁹

The Old Testament's Model of Perfect Organization. The organization of Israel under Moses was characterized by completeness and simplicity. God, the One in control, delegated His authority through leaders. Moses, the highest human leader,

was assisted by a council of elders. Spiritual responsibilities were assigned to priests. Each tribe had rulers who delegated responsibilities to subordinates.

“The government of Israel was characterized by the most thorough organization, wonderful alike for its completeness and its simplicity. The order so strikingly displayed in the perfection and arrangement of all God’s created works was manifest in the Hebrew economy. God was the center of authority and government, the sovereign of Israel. Moses stood as their visible leader, by God’s appointment, to administer the laws in His name. From the elders of the tribes a council of seventy was afterward chosen to assist Moses in the general affairs of the nation. Next came the priests, who consulted the Lord in the sanctuary. Chiefs, or princes, ruled over the tribes. Under these were ‘captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds, and captains over fifties, and captains over tens,’ and, lastly, officers who might be employed for special duties. Deut. 1:15.”²⁰

An Organization With No Equality in Ministry. It is noteworthy that even though leadership responsibilities were widely distributed, there was no sense of “equal opportunity” for everyone to select his or her own choice of a life calling. God gave minute and specific instructions, and no one was allowed to depart from them. Anyone who did paid a terrible price. For example:

“The Lord did not leave His holy tabernacle to be borne [carried] indiscriminately by any tribe that might choose. He was so particular as to specify the order He would have observed in bearing the sacred ark and to designate a special family of the tribe of the Levites to bear it.”²¹ When Uzzah disregarded this order, he died instantly.

When the tribes moved forward, “The head officer of each company gave definite directions in regard to the movements they were required to make, and none who gave attention were left in ignorance of what they were to do. If any failed to comply with the requirements given by the Lord to Moses, and by Moses to the people, they were punished with death. It would be no excuse to plead that they knew not the nature of these requirements, for they would only prove themselves willingly ignorant, and would receive the just punishment for their transgression. If they did not know the will of God concerning them, it was their own fault. They had the same opportunities to obtain the knowledge imparted as others of the people had, therefore their sin of not knowing, not understanding, was as great in the sight of God as if they had heard and then transgressed.

“The Lord designated a special family of the tribe of Levi to bear the ark; and others of the Levites were specially appointed of God to bear the tabernacle and all its furniture, and to perform the work of setting up and taking down the tabernacle. And if any man from curiosity or from lack of order got out of his place and touched any part of the sanctuary or furniture, or even came near any of the workmen, he was to be put to death. God did not leave His holy tabernacle to be borne, erected, and taken down, indiscriminately, by any tribe who might choose the office; but persons were chosen who could appreciate the sacredness of the work in which they were engaged.”²²

Israel's "perfect organization," their subsequent rebellion, and their punishments have all been recorded for us as a warning. The reason for their severe punishment was simply "because of their unwillingness to submit to God's wise arrangements—this faithful picture is hung up before us as a warning lest we follow their example of disobedience and fall like them."²³

Growth in population led to a refinement of national organization that greatly increased the number of participants and is upheld as a model for today.

Organizational Refinements Lead to Greater Involvement. Under King Solomon the organizational structure was further expanded. "The thoroughness and completeness of the organization perfected at the beginning of Solomon's reign; the comprehensiveness of the plans for bringing the largest number possible of all the people into active service; the wide distribution of responsibility, so that the service of God and of the king should not be unduly burdensome to any individual or class—these are lessons which all may study with profit, and which the leaders of the Christian church should understand and follow."²⁴

But there still was no "equality in ministry"; all were still assigned specific tasks. "So far as possible, they followed the system of organization given Israel soon after the deliverance from Egypt. The Levites were assigned the work connected with the temple service, including the ministry of song and instrumental music, and the keeping of the treasures."²⁵

6. Church Organization in the New Testament

As with the Old Testament, so the New Testament provides us considerable specific information about church organization for our guidance. Organization of the New Testament church began when Jesus ordained His twelve disciples. "It was at the ordination of the twelve that the first step was taken in the organization of the church that after Christ's departure was to carry on His work on the earth. Of this ordination the record says, 'He goeth up into a mountain, and calleth unto Him whom He would: and they came unto Him. And He ordained twelve, that they should be with Him, and that He might send them forth to preach.' Mark 3:13, 14."²⁶ We notice that Jesus called "whom He would."

The Jerusalem Church a Model of Church Organization. When difficulty developed in the young Jerusalem church after Christ's ascension, the apostles were led by the Holy Spirit to appoint seven assistants (Acts 6:1-7), who came to be known as the seven deacons. There were now two classes of church leaders or officers: the apostles or elders, with the general oversight of the church, and the deacons, with supportive roles. This simple but effective organization the Lord recommended as a model for future churches: "The organization of the church at Jerusalem was to serve as *a model* for the organization of churches in every other place where messengers of truth should win converts to the gospel."²⁷

Spiritual Gifts. “Later in the history of the early church, when in various parts of the world many groups of believers had been formed into churches, the organization of the church was further perfected, so that order and harmonious action might be maintained. Every member was exhorted to act well his part. Each was to make a wise use of the talents entrusted to him. Some were endowed by the Holy Spirit with special gifts—‘first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.’ 1 Corinthians 12:28. But all these classes of workers were to labor in harmony.”²⁸

Again, although we observe harmonious action, not everyone is qualified for whatever position he or she would like to occupy. There were restrictions on the roles church members were called to fill, just as in the Old Testament church.

To help assure optimum cooperation within the church, God specified qualifications so that the right leaders might be selected.

Requirements for Elected Officers. Near the end of his long ministry Paul, under divine inspiration, listed the leadership qualifications for the two leading officers of the church: the elders, the highest elected officers, whose function is oversight of the church, and the deacons, who have supportive duties.

A study of these requirements makes it plain that the Lord, as head of the church (Eph 5:30), is interested in having His church under leaders who have a proven record of success. They must have been successful as leaders in their own families. The elder or minister must be “one who rules his own house well . . . for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?” (1 Tim 3: 4, 5).

7. Church Organization in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Is the model of church organization that God gave to the first Christians still the model that He wants Seventh-day Adventists to follow until the second advent? Through the prophetic ministry of Ellen G. White, the Lord fully endorses the relevance of Paul’s list of qualifications for the office of elder and minister.

In 1852, during the formative stages of church organization of the Seventh-day Adventist church, the Lord gave Ellen White a vision calling attention to the need for our churches to follow the “gospel order” of the Bible.²⁹ At this time the believers were plagued by various persons who felt that God had called them to the ministry. In reality they had not been called by God at all. Mrs. White was shown that they were false teachers planted by Satan to bring confusion into the church. When she asked the angel in the vision what could be done to stop this, he answered that they were to follow the Bible on church organization. He said, “The church must flee to God’s Word and become established upon gospel order, which has been overlooked and neglected.”³⁰

Ellen White saw that the church in the days of the apostles was in danger of false teachers. To counteract this problem the New Testament church, by divine

guidance, was given a list of qualifications so church leaders could safely select and appoint those truly called by God, distinguishing them from false teachers. Thus “the brethren chose men who had given good evidence that they were capable of ruling well their own house and preserving order in their own families, and who could enlighten those who were in darkness.”³¹ These persons who gave evidence of successful leadership in the home were chosen to be ordained “by the laying on of hands.”³²

Ellen G. White was shown that Adventists should follow the apostles’ example. Said she, “I saw that we are no more secure from false teachers now than they were in the apostles’ days; and, if we do no more, we should take as special measures as they did to secure the peace, harmony, and union of the flock. We have their example, and should follow it.”³³

Ellen White added that we have to follow the Bible in determining whether persons are called by God. When these persons have met the Bible criteria, then they may be ordained. She wrote, “Brethren of experience and of sound minds should assemble, and following the Word of God and the sanction of the Holy Spirit, should, with fervent prayer, lay hands upon those who have given full proof that they have received their commission of God, and set them apart to devote themselves entirely to His work. This act would show the sanction of the church to their going forth as messengers to carry the most solemn message ever given to men.”³⁴

Persons’ claims that they had a call from God were not sufficient. Unless they met the biblical qualifications for elder or minister, they were not to be ordained. Ellen White strongly warned against so-called “self-sent” persons. “Men are hurried into the field who lack wisdom and judgment, perhaps not ruling well their own house, and not having order or government over the few that God has given them charge of at home; yet they feel capable of having charge of the flock.”³⁵ Here she clearly endorsed the validity of the qualifications for leadership of elders and ministers that are listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 given nearly 2000 years ago. Men are to be successful leaders in the “church” in their homes before they should be appointed to take care of a church congregation. Throughout her ministry she recommended that Seventh-day Adventists follow these Bible qualifications.³⁶

8. What Would Be Ellen White’s Solution to the Issue?

The Prologue of *Women in Ministry* mentioned that “absolute uniformity of understanding was not possible or desirable,” supporting this view with an Ellen White statement. In a conversation the editor mentioned to me that we could maintain church unity without having uniformity on women’s ordination. Evidently, in this unity some may look at a series of texts and conclude that the Bible allows the ordination of women, while others looking at the very same texts may conclude that women’s ordination is unbiblical. Is this really the unity Ellen White wrote of?

Let us look more carefully at the Ellen White statement quoted in *Women in Ministry*. The quotation begins with the sentence that “we cannot *then* take

the position that the unity of the church consists in viewing every text in Scripture in the very same light.”³⁷ The word “then” indicates that the statement offers a conclusion to something that was said before. To help the reader see what Ellen White was talking about, we will quote more of the paragraph than was quoted in the book.

“One man may be conversant with the Scriptures, and *some particular portion of the Scripture* may be especially appreciated by him; another sees *another portion* as very important, and thus one may present *one point*, and another, *another point*, and *both may be of highest value. This is all in the order of God.* But if a man makes a mistake in his interpretation of some portion of the Scripture, shall this cause diversity and disunion? God forbid. We cannot *then* take a position that the unity of the church consists in viewing every text of Scripture in the very same light.”³⁸

In this paragraph Ellen White mentions that some believers see one section of the Bible as important, others another portion. Some present one point, others stress another point, but that “both may be of highest value. This is all in the order of God.” It is important to notice that she is dealing here with views that are not mutually exclusive. They are, she says, “all in the order of God.” And even if a person makes a mistake in the interpretation of a text, it should not disturb the unity of the church.

The question we have to ask ourselves is whether the contradicting positions taken on numerous Bible passages related to women’s ordination are “of the highest value” and “all in the order of God.”

The conflict over the ordination of women to the role of elder or minister amounts to more than just differences of opinion. It involves the biblical doctrines of Christian leadership in the home and in the church, together with the unique divinely-ordained roles of men and women which God instituted at creation and after the Fall. One’s understanding of these doctrines has a far-reaching impact on the organizational structure and operation of the home and the church and how men, women, and children relate to each other. It affects not only the operation of the local church, but also that of the conferences, unions, and world divisions.

The dispute over women’s ordination involves not only the meaning of many biblical passages but also two different approaches to the Bible, one of which is foreign to the way that Adventists have used the Bible in their studies of Scripture and the conclusions they draw. Even though the Seminary committee seems to be sincerely convinced that the unity of the church can be preserved while both positions are allowed to operate side by side, it is difficult to support this with the Ellen White quotation in the Prologue.

In reading the complete Ellen White manuscript, one cannot but be impressed with the thought that studying the Bible together is the real answer to our conflicts: “If brethren would meet together once or twice a week, and with humble minds, feeling their weakness and realizing their defects, would then ask the Lord to enlighten their understanding and fill their hearts with His love, examining not one another, but the Scriptures, Satan would be defeated.”³⁹

Conclusion

We have seen that *Women in Ministry* puts forth some excellent principles of Bible interpretation, one of them being that “doctrine cannot be construed on the basis of one text alone” but “the whole Bible message must be taken into account.” It is one thing to state these principles and another to implement them. Unfortunately, *Women in Ministry* has not followed its own principle of taking the whole Bible’s message into account, as I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters of this book.

The question of ordination involves many dimensions, such as the priesthood of all believers, the relationship between male and female at creation, the impact of the fall, the male and female roles throughout the Bible, the impact of Christ’s incarnation on gender relations, the model of church organization throughout the Scriptures, the laying on of hands, the distinction between spiritual gifts and appointed church offices, the qualifications for church leadership, and Ellen G. White’s interpretation of the Bible passages. Without looking at each of these factors one cannot make a sound judgment on the ordination of women as ministers.

In *Women in Ministry* one author focused on the biblical topic of the priesthood of all believers. His presentation was helpful in many respects. Yet, on this limited set of biblical data, without grappling with the Bible’s own stated qualifications for church leadership, he concluded that the distinctions between men and women are no longer valid considerations for the ministry. Another author capably addressed the biblical teaching of the laying on of hands. But he too concluded, without dealing with the biblical leadership qualifications affecting ordination, that women can be ordained as ministers. Other chapters of the book are open to similar observations. The data these authors considered were too limited to support their conclusions regarding ordaining women.

Women in Ministry, then, has followed a fragmented approach to women’s ordination, each author dealing with one aspect of the subject, yet not considering the whole message of the Bible before endorsing women’s ordination. The same can be said of the historical and cultural studies in the book. These can be helpful when based on solid evidence. But the authors are not qualified to make sound recommendations in favor of ordination unless they take into consideration what the whole Bible teaches on this subject. It is the responsibility of an editor to make sure that the authors do not jump to conclusions too quickly but faithfully adhere to the principles of Bible interpretation set forth in the prologue. Unfortunately this has not been done, and as a result the book has set forth conclusions that are invalid.

As the book claims to be a scholarly production one may wonder why this important practice of evaluating every chapter in the light of the whole Bible has not been rigidly followed. One plausible reason is that the committee assumed that the Bible did not spell out a church organization concept in which women were not supposed to function as elders and ministers. This incorrect assumption seems to dominate the whole book and explains the adoption and misuse of James White’s rule of interpretation.

At the beginning of this chapter we noted how the editor's prologue to *Women in Ministry* said that "church organization is not spelled out in the Bible," allowing its authors to use James White's rule in a search for principles and to use sanctified reasoning. Readers may very well get the impression that the editor thinks James White would doubtless approve of women pastors, even though this provision is not spelled out in Scripture.

Perhaps, as often happens, the editor did not express her full mind regarding which aspects of church organization are spelled out in the Bible, but we have seen from the Bible itself and from Ellen G. White's use of it that in fact, the Bible says a great deal about the basic structure of church organization. Specifically, in a passage that Elder White cited, the Bible does indeed spell out the qualifications for the elder or pastor. The passage says that an elder is to be "the husband of one wife," one who "rules his own house well."

The editor says that *Women in Ministry* has followed James White's example. His example was one of deep, careful Bible study, letting the Bible speak for itself. Very likely, *Women in Ministry* intended to do the same; but with all due respect to the serious writers who contributed to its pages, evidence seems to indicate that his example was not followed.

By assuming that church organization is not spelled out in the Bible, the writers of *Women in Ministry* generally pass over the list of biblical qualifications for elders given in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus. It seems that they have taken for granted that these lists are not an important consideration for the election of women as elders and ministers.

From their early beginnings Adventists, however, have taken the Bible as their standard to test all their practices. Therefore, they take seriously the lists of qualifications the Lord inspired Paul to write. Today, on the brink of a new millennium, Seventh-day Adventists will still take these lists of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 seriously in determining whether women may be ordained to the function of elder or minister.

One would have hoped, however, to see the prologue include a reference to a fundamental principle in the Adventist approach to Scripture, stating that the conclusions and recommendations on the ordination of women in each chapter have been tested by the Bible. In conversations with the editor it became clear to me that this was not the purpose of the book. Its authors had adopted a broader approach, studying the subject of ordination from a much wider perspective that included not only the biblical but also the theological and historical dimensions of women's ordination. Nevertheless, the committee would have done well to follow Mrs. White's counsel on matters that are controversial.

"The word of God is the great detector of error; to it we believe everything must be brought. The Bible must be our standard for every doctrine and practice. We must study it reverentially. We are to receive no one's opinion without comparing it with the Scriptures. Here is divine authority which is supreme in matters of faith.

*“It is the word of the living God that is to decide all controversies.”*⁴⁰

Failing to make the Scriptures the final test in evaluating all the research presented in the twenty chapters of the book, *Women in Ministry* will be an *unreliable* “resource tool for decision making” and will fall short in affirming women in pastoral leadership as the committee hoped to do.⁴¹

Finally, one can agree with the Andrews University press release that the book signifies a watershed, but not the kind the press secretary had hoped for. Instead of being a convincing “biblical case for women’s ordination,”⁴² the book reveals a major departure from the standard Adventist practice of evaluating all research by the Bible before making final conclusions and recommendations.

We must be willing to set aside personal agendas and go to Scripture with hearts that are willing to hear and obey. “If any man will do His will,” Jesus promised, “he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17). The church need not be in conflict over matters such as these. Ellen White pointed the way for us as a people as well as individuals: “It is obedience and faith that unite us with Jesus Christ. You must learn the simple art of taking God at His word. Then you have solid ground beneath your feet.”⁴³

Endnotes

1. Ad Hoc Committee on Hermeneutics and Ordination, Epilogue, *Women in Ministry*, p. 436.
2. Andrews University press release, Oct. 22, 1998.
3. Nancy Vyhmeister, Prologue, *Women in Ministry*, p. 4.
4. Ellen G. White, *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, p. 1092; *Manuscript Releases*, 11:266.
5. Nancy Vyhmeister, *Women in Ministry*, p. 3. The reference to James White was from J. White, “Making Us a Name,” *Review and Herald*, April 26, 1860, p. 180.
6. [J. White], “Gospel Order,” *Review and Herald*, Dec. 6, 1853, p. 173.
7. Ibid.
8. [J. White], “Gospel Order,” *Review and Herald*, Dec. 20, 1853, p. 189.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. J. White, “Making Us a Name,” *Review and Herald*, April 26, 1860, p. 181.
12. Ibid., p. 182.
13. Some assumed that the number 666 (Rev. 13:18) was the number of the apostate churches in the United States of America. They felt that to become legally organized as a church meant becoming a part of the apostasy (ibid., pp. 181, 182).
14. Ibid., p. 180, emphasis mine.
15. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 15.
16. Ellen G. White, Ms. 155, 1902, pp. 5, 6 (sermon preached Sabbath, Nov. 22, 1902, “On the Study of the Book of Revelation”), *Manuscript Releases*, 1:154.
17. Ellen G. White, *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, Jan. 29, 1893, p. 22, emphasis mine.
18. “Lessons from the Life of Solomon—N. 5: Order and Organization,” *Review and Herald*, October 12, 1905, p. 9.
19. *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, Jan. 29, 1893, p. 23; Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:653, emphasis mine.
20. Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 374. See also Ellen G. White, “Order and Organization,” *Review and Herald*, October 12, 1905, p. 8.
21. *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:650.

22. Ibid., pp. 651, 652.
23. Ibid., p. 652.
24. "Order and Organization," *Review and Herald*, October 12, 1905, p. 8.
25. Ibid.
26. Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 18.
27. Ibid., p. 91, emphasis mine.
28. Ibid., pp. 91, 92.
29. Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years, 1827-1862*, 1:286.
30. Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, p. 100.
31. Ibid., pp. 100, 101.
32. Ibid., p. 101.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., p. 97.
36. See, for example, *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:617; *ibid.*, 2:620, 621; Ms. 104, 1901 and Ms. 67, 1900 in *Manuscript Releases*, 5:449, 450; Letter 164, 1902 in *ibid.*, 21:98. See also Ellen G. White's comments in *SDA Bible Commentary*, 2:1009.
37. *Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, p. 1092, emphasis mine.
38. Ibid., emphasis mine.
39. Ibid., *Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, p. 1087.
40. Letter, Ellen G. White to Dear Brethren Who Shall Assemble in General Conference, Aug. 5, 1888 in *Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, pp. 44, 45, emphasis mine.
41. Nancy Vyhmeister, *Women in Ministry*, p. 5.
42. Andrews University press release, Oct. 22, 1998.
43. Ellen G. White, "The Mirror," *The Youth's Instructor*, Aug. 18, 1886.