

“Quench not the Spirit; Despise not Prophecy. Prove all Things. Hold Fast that which Is Good”: Early Adventist Hermeneutics, Paul’s Teachings, and Women’s Spiritual Leadership

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church identifies itself as a part of the tradition of bold Christians who have endeavored to follow Jesus’ teachings through the centuries. When recounting its history, Adventist historians typically emphasize the role of William Miller in renewing an interest in prophecy and the genesis of the Advent Near Movement. In many ways, the sabbatarian Adventism that emerged as a remnant of that movement is viewed as an extension of the Protestant Reformation and evidence of scriptural credibility and the surety of God’s promises to provide ongoing spiritual guidance. The nineteenth-century founders and pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church remain respected for the manner in which they committed themselves to the study of Scripture and humble resolve to follow where the Spirit led them, whatever the personal cost.

During Adventism’s earliest years, believers were at odds with their larger religious and social communities on a number of theological and practical issues. Not only did they repudiate popular understandings of the millennium, the state of the dead, and the Sabbath, they also opened the door for women to speak and preach in religious gatherings.¹ Even as Millerite women had performed unconventional roles by preaching despite opposition and persecution, certain sabbatarian Advent women braved public censure and took on the responsibilities of

¹ This paper grows out of nearly a decade of research on nineteenth-century Adventism. We chose the *Review and Herald* for our analysis because it was then, as it is now, the formal voice of the Adventist Church. The *Review* houses the literary evidence of the SDA segment of the defunct Millerite movement becoming a people who were becoming a church. Within its pages we discovered not only what the pioneers deemed necessary and important to say to the world and each other, but the manner in which they conversed. We had the opportunity to observe them “at work” as they set forth their theological points, promoted scriptural study, encouraged and ministered to the scattered flock, provided instruction for spiritual growth, and advanced the third angels’ message throughout the world. Our analysis paid particularly close attention to the topic of women and the church. We wanted to see everything that had been written in the *Review* concerning women. In order to obtain as full a view as possible, we proceeded systematically, page by page, volume 1, issue 1, reading through each edition to discover what women were doing and what was being said by and about women in those early years. What we found by using this methodology was a picture of early Adventists practicing (inventing) Adventism. As we read from the first page through the last issue printed in the nineteenth century, we discovered when various issues rose to importance for the Advent community and when they faded out of focus as changing social, religious, or economic circumstances pushed different items into view. The results were quite different than those obtained by a computer word search. We found the spirituality of a people who had left their local churches, traditionally the center of community life, and had become part of a scattered flock held together by the *Review*.

testifying and evangelizing publicly.² How, then, did Adventist pioneers, as people of the book, respond to the “women heralds?” One indication of their response appeared in the March 7, 1871 edition of the *Review*, where a small editorial comment was placed beside an advertisement for a pamphlet, “Woman and Her Work.” The editors noted, concerning the Seventh-day Adventist Church, “We are not among those who would hedge up before woman any avenue of labor or usefulness. . . . Let woman work in public, and in private, in whatever position her varied capacities may render her efficient.”³ Given their commitment to scriptural primacy, what did they say about the commonly held view of “the” biblical stance on the role of women in the church? As early as 1857, prominent Adventist leader David Hewitt had noted in the *Review* article, “Let your Women keep Silence in the Churches,” that, “Many sincere and honest souls have been very much perplexed respecting this declaration of the apostle Paul.”⁴ How did they understand the Scriptures that were then and are today applied to limit the roles women may perform within the church community? What was the official response to the challenges to women in spiritual leadership that existed in their day? As Adventist women were licensed to preach in the nineteenth century, and Ellen White served in a public role of ministry and leadership in the movement, there was a need to formulate statements about women in ministry during this period.⁵ Detractors challenged the propriety of women in spiritual leadership positions, frequently using Pauline injunctions to women’s silence. The *Review*, as the community’s official voice, provides a significant guide as to how early Adventist leaders responded to these concerns; how they read the text and understood it.⁶

It is through the pages of the *Review* that we obtain snapshots of the community in dialog on a number of pressing issues, including that of the meaning of gender in the waiting remnant. It is important to know that the Adventist discussion on women and the church began a century before the 1970s, when various church scholars and leaders researched the question of women in

² For a helpful overview of women Millerite preachers, see, Carole Rayburn, “Women Heralds of the Advent Near,” *Adventist Heritage* 17, no. 2 (1996): 11-21.

³ “Woman and Her Work,” *Review and Herald* 37, no. 12 (March 7, 1871): 96.

⁴ David Hewitt, “Let your Women keep Silence in the Churches,” *Review and Herald* 10, no. 24 (October 15, 1857): 190. Three and a half decades later, Adventist leaders were still engaged in the fight to overcome the generally held misunderstandings of oft-quoted Pauline passages. N.J. Bowers, for example, addressed the issue in, “May Women Publicly Labor in the Cause of Christ?” *Review and Herald* 57, no. 24 (June 14, 1881): 372-373. He answered this question thus: “Some think not, because Paul says, ‘Let your women keep silence in the churches;’ and, ‘It is a shame for women to speak in the church.’ 1 Cor. 14: 34, 35. Standing alone, and severed from their connections and other related scriptures, these statements seem to justify such conclusion; but we must not forget to bring into the investigation what the author of the language has elsewhere said directly or indirectly touching the matter of Christian teaching and Christian labor, and also what the Bible elsewhere instructs us in regard to the question.”

⁵ The relative silence of Adventist discussion and publications concerning the women in ministry and other leadership positions in the nineteenth century has created a hole in the overall knowledge and understanding of the SDA heritage.

⁶ While the *Review and Herald* did not become a regular publication until about six years after the Great Disappointment of 1844, most of its earliest readers were drawn from the ranks of the Advent-near movement first proclaimed by William Miller. The remnant of the Millerite movement who remained convinced of Christ’s imminent return and embraced the seventh-day Sabbath were those who were unwilling to abandon their course without scriptural evidence correcting their belief in the Advent Near. For an overview of the significance and functions of the *Review* for this early phase, see Ginger Hanks Harwood, “Like the Leaves of Autumn: The Utilization of the Press to Maintain Millennial Expectations in the Wake of Prophetic Failure,” <http://www.mille.org/publications/winter 2001/Harwood.html>.

ministry and compiled what became known as the Mohaven papers.⁷ The conversation began as part of a search for God's will for his people during the waiting time, as individuals worked to discern the difference between God's ways and human teachings. Encouraged by prominent leaders such as James White and Uriah Smith to participate in the dialog,⁸ men and women alike found a voice in the *Review* and spoke of its importance in their spiritual lives. In numerous letters, they referred to it as an itinerant teacher⁹ and "welcome visitor" that gave "meat to those who are hungry and thirsty, and to those who have fed on husks long enough."¹⁰ Their dearest hope was still to meet their Savior face to face, and their desire to be ready whenever he should come led them to stay the course. Until that time, they would continue to view themselves as pilgrims bound for the eternal city, ever-seeking to grow in grace and knowledge, committed to their belief in the Bible as God's word and the fruitfulness of careful scriptural study to their spiritual growth.

"Study to Show Thyself Approved": Historic Adventist Hermeneutics

The group of Adventists that eventually became the Seventh-day Adventist Church retained the characteristic Millerite regard for systematic study of Scripture even as their interest widened beyond the topic of Christ's return. Believing that Scripture is inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16-17), they began the ambitious task of reevaluating what the Bible said on various topics and doctrines. They especially searched for the truths that furthered their spiritual quest to "draw near to God."¹¹ They prepared themselves for the kingdom of God, in which they expected to live eternally. They sought to purify their minds: they wanted to strip away the learned dogma, creeds, and social conventions that obscured and distorted their perception of God's Word. They wanted to hear the voice of God as it came from the Bible and follow it as it led them ever closer to God and his will. The question was not only a matter of what the Bible said but also how to understand what it meant for them in their time and place. Articles in the *Review* concerned themselves not only with what the Adventist leaders understood the Bible to teach on select issues, but also how the power of God's Word transformed them into the image of God and their community into an expression of God's kingdom. The meaning of gender for domestic and communal religious life, provides an excellent case study on how early Adventists grappled with Biblical texts and then applied them to their own context.

It needs to be said that Adventist pioneers did not invent their own hermeneutic from nothing: they relied on the legacy from their Millerite heritage. The movement was centered on biblical revelation and had utilized a distinct approach to Scripture. It was William Miller's careful consideration of principles of Biblical interpretation and their eschatological application that drew the attention and respect of first his neighbors and then multitudes of clergy and laity alike. Miller differed from other great preachers of the Second Great Awakening by his lack of charisma: he did not rely on dynamic sermons or emotional appeals to captivate and convince his

⁷ The papers presented at the Mohaven conference are available online through the General Conference Archives at adventistarchives.org/study commissions and committees.

⁸ "Wanted.---On our table a large pile of spirited and interesting articles and communications...." *Review and Herald* 15, no. 1 (November 24, 1859): 8.

⁹ Elizabeth Degarmo, "From Sister Degarmo," *Review and Herald* 6, no. 2 (August 22, 1854): 15.

¹⁰ Morinda G. Bartlett, "From Sister Bartlett," *Review and Herald* 5, no. 11 (April 4, 1854): 87.

¹¹ "Drawing Near to God," *Review and Herald* 10, no. 25 (October 22, 1857): 195.

audiences. He neither charmed nor intimidated his listeners into accepting his ideas, and made no claims to unquestionable authority. Instead, he presented his views through a calm and carefully reasoned presentation of the Scriptures that he felt illuminated the topic. It is worth noting that many of his presentations were billed and referred to as lectures rather than sermons.

As he expounded his beliefs concerning the Second Advent, William Miller transferred more than a knowledge set to those who embraced his thought: he modeled a process for study and Christian exploration of Biblical truth. His account of his personal Bible study served as a paradigm for his followers:

I proceeded to lay aside all my presuppositions, to thoroughly compare scripture with scripture, and to pursue its study in a regular and methodical manner. I commenced with Genesis, and read verse by verse, proceeding no faster than the meaning of the several passages should be so unfolded as to leave me free from embarrassment respecting any mysticisms or contradictions. Whenever I found anything obscure, my practice was to compare it with collateral passages: and by the help of Cruden, I examined all the texts of Scripture in which were found any of the prominent words contained in any obscure portion. Then, by letting every word have proper bearing on the subject of the text, if my view of it harmonized with every collateral passage in the Bible, it ceased to be a difficulty.¹²

His description of his method contained several points eventually adopted by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The steps include: 1) laying aside preconceptions concerning meaning of a text or biblical teaching on a particular subject; 2) comparing scripture to scripture; 3) intentional pursuit of each topic in a regular and methodical manner; 4) word study; and 5) the harmonizing of all collateral texts. Underlying his methodology is the assumption that diligent study and application of human reason can together reveal the meaning of Scripture, as long as truth is more important to an individual than tradition or personal prejudice. The role of the intellect and power of reason is central in the method he modeled for discovering Bible knowledge and truth. His method of comparing related texts and developing an interpretation that encompassed them all replaced an absolutist literalism that comes from looking only at the surface meaning of any particular text.

William Miller's procedure extended beyond these techniques of individual Bible study to include two additional steps: willingness to submit the insights garnered through study to other believers for confirmation or rebuttal, and readiness to be instructed by others' interpretations of the same material.¹³ These last two steps moved the search for biblical understanding from private investigation and reflection to the community arena, where intellect was employed to judge evidence, test logic, and come to a conclusion. These steps provided the basis for

¹² James White, *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller, Gathered from his Memoir by the late Sylvester Bliss, and from Other Sources* (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1875), 38.

¹³ The call to the conference included the following advisement: "The object of this conference will not be to form a new organization in the faith of Christ, nor to assail others of our brethren who differ from us in regard to the period and manner of the advent: but to discuss the whole subject faithfully and fairly, in the exercise of that spirit of Christ in which it will be safe immediately to meet him at the judgment seat." Isaac C. Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message and Mission, Doctrine and People* (Yarmouth, ME: I.C. Wellcome, 1874): 177.

Christians from various communions to engage in a joint project: Advent Conferences held between 1840 and 1844 were extended examinations of Miller's views and the pooling of corporate perceptions on the Scriptures.

Miller's approach informed the assumptions of the earliest SDA's. His hermeneutical process was perpetuated in the church by numerous articles penned by James White, Uriah Smith, and other notables, and passed on to later generations through the writings of Ellen White. Ellen White, shaped by her early Millerite experience, utilized and commended it as she encouraged a faith with reason built upon mental discipline and logic. Throughout her life, she was a tireless student, reading not only the Bible but also the major religious writers of her era, as her own writings attest. Reflecting the ethos of Millerism, Mrs. White was not content with a faith built on superficial, sentimental, or casual study of Scripture. The utilization of intellectual ability to construct a logical argument for any particular belief and rationally investigate alternatives was woven into her assumption of the basic process for the investigation of biblical understanding. She wrote,

We cannot obtain wisdom without earnest attention and prayerful study. Some portions of Scripture are indeed too plain to be misunderstood; but there are others whose meaning does not lie on the surface, to be seen at a glance. Scripture must be compared with scripture. There must be careful research and prayerful reflection.¹⁴

“Quench Not the Spirit; Despise Not Prophesying”: The Spiritual Components of Sound Hermeneutics

In their approach to Bible study, the Advent community embodied Paul's advice to the Thessalonians, who were also awaiting Christ's return: “Quench not the Spirit; despise not prophesying. Prove all things. Hold fast that which is good,” (1 Thess. 5:19-21).¹⁵ The process of discernment required a spirit of humility and faith that God was present and leading in their individual and corporate quest for further light that they might follow Him more fully.¹⁶ Miller's methodology involved more than a keen intellect and willingness to undercover nuances in various words and texts. It also mandated certain attitudes towards “Truth,” self, and others in the group study process. It would have been impossible to meld together Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, Christian Connection preachers, and the host of other faith groups represented in the early Adventist body without the values of individual spiritual freedom and responsibility, respect and tolerance, and willingness to study rather than rely on tradition or creed. Individuals within the group were certain that their own integrity would be respected even as they negotiated with others over the teachings of Scripture. As church organizer James White noted, “Christ never designed that human minds should be molded for heaven by the influence merely of other human minds. ‘The head of every man is Christ.’... However important

¹⁴ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Tacoma Park, Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1892, 1908), 90-91.

¹⁵ One article specifically quoting this passage and highlighting these points is James White, “Unity and Gifts of the Church. No.4.,” *Review and Herald* 11, no.9 (January 7, 1858): 68-69.

¹⁶ Various articles assert the necessity of this component. Some include this under the instruction to “Begin every reading with a prayer for a teachable spirit,” *How to Read the Bible*, *Review and Herald* 9, no. 12 (January 22, 1857): 89. The same sentiments apply in articles that admonish the Bible student that, “*Prayerful attention* and a docile, childlike spirit insure success in exploring these mines of heavenly wisdom.” “*How do You Read the Prophets?*” *Review and Herald* 9, no. 19 (March 12, 1857): 145-146.

organization may be for the protection of the church, and to secure harmony of action, it must not come in to take the disciple from the hands of the master.”¹⁷ Ellen White addressed the same issue of individual freedom and accountability later when she argued that, “We should not take the testimony of any man as to what the Scriptures teach, but should study the words of God for ourselves. If we allow others to do our thinking, we shall have crippled energies and contracted abilities.”¹⁸ The goal of preparation for eternal community required a continual balancing between carefully acquired individual belief and openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit through the information or insights provided by others.

Along with respect for the role of the Holy Spirit in leading both individuals and groups into “Truth,” came the recognition that honest inquiry required a willingness to abandon previously held ideas and beliefs when they came into conflict with new evidence revealed in the study process. Appropriate methodology required a spirit of continued openness toward divergent views and a willingness to examine beliefs without privileging preconceived conclusions. Ellen White reflected Miller’s commitment to submitting previous interpretations (and beliefs) to the results of further study when she commented in the 1890s, “We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed. As long as we hold to our own ideas and opinions with determined persistency, we cannot have the unity for which Christ prayed.”¹⁹

The emphasis on honest and open inquiry yielded the concept of “progressive revelation”: the belief that God would impress believers as they studied together to see certain Scripture passages in a new light and understand them in new ways. According to Ellen White, this process of increased understanding of God’s will and word are to be viewed as ongoing:

New light will ever be revealed on the word of God to him who is in living connection with the Sun of Righteousness. Let no one come to the conclusion that there is no more truth to be revealed. The diligent, prayerful seeker for truth will find precious rays of light yet to shine forth from the word of God. Many gems are yet scattered that are to be gathered together to become the property of the remnant people of God.²⁰

With the concept of progressive revelation, the search for truth becomes a personal and community endeavor based on the conviction that the infinite wisdom of God is never completely in human hands, that God has more to teach his people as they are open to receive it. The pioneers believed that God sent the Spirit to guide his people and that they must pursue truth through study and personal preparation to receive further light.²¹ Both the corporate church

¹⁷ Quoted in M[ahlon] Ellsworth Olsen, *A History of the Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists*, 2nd ed. (Takoma Park, Washington, D. C.: *Review and Herald*, 1926), 253.

¹⁸ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, 89.

¹⁹ Ellen G. White, “Search the Scriptures,” *Review and Herald* 69, no. 30 (July 26, 1892): 465-466.

²⁰ Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work: A Compilation from the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Washington, DC: *Review and Herald*, 1892, 1938), 34.

²¹ Ellen White expanded the significance of study and search for truth when she tied it with one’s ability to comprehend Scripture. She posited a mental law of use or atrophy, saying, “The mental powers will surely be contracted, and will lose their ability to grasp the deep meanings of the word of God, unless they are put vigorously

community and individuals within the church must stay engaged in an active quest for truth.²² Miller's model of scriptural interpretation required individual responsibility for personal religious beliefs. In it, congregants are active participants in negotiating belief rather than passive recipients of traditions and predetermined "truth" supplied by religious leaders. The model can be sustained only as long as both individuals and the group value careful study and individual freedom to explore and exposit.

The search for truth required a commitment to follow it once it was uncovered. For the early Adventist community, Biblical interpretation is not just a matter of finding correct readings; the results must be lived out in the life of the church, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. To fully interpret a biblical text, one has to determine how to apply it, both in an individual's life and in the community. The process of organizing the Advent people into a church helps to clarify this practical aspect of Adventist hermeneutics. In an article "Making us a Name," a dialog on church organization between R. F. Cottrell and James White, Cottrell wrote an impassioned letter in which he identified the potential danger of worldly practices being introduced into the Adventist group. He believed that owning property was directly opposed to the practice of the apostolic church because it would require adopting a name and becoming a legal entity. Taking such steps, he said, "lies at the foundation of Babylon. I do not think that God would approve it." James White responded to his charge, asking for evidence and reasons. He challenged Cottrell in the *Review* to supply evidence to support his claims: "In all this where is the proof that it is wrong to take those steps necessary to legally hold church property? Where are the strong reasons? Where are the plain texts from the Book? This is not Bro. R. F. C.'s usual style of treating subjects. Should he handle the Sabbath question in this manner, the opponents might charge him with speaking more from humor than reason and revelation."

In this article, White extended the argument to an imaginary inquisitor who might ask him, "Where are your plain texts of scripture for holding church property legally?" He based his answer to the query with the following argument: there is no such text for that or many of the other practices that Adventists have used to spread the gospel, including publishing the *Review* or using a printing press, or holding tent meetings. He rested his defense on Jesus' command to "let your light so shine before men," but he [Jesus] "does not give all the particulars how this shall be done. The church is left to move forward in the great work, praying for divine guidance, acting upon the most efficient plans for its accomplishment." White then proposed a general rule for determining the right course of action: "All means which, according to sound judgment, will advance the cause of truth, and are not forbidden by plain scripture declarations, should be employed. If this rule be defective, let its defects be shown; if right, then let it be adopted, that confusion on this question be prevented."²³

This same principle was applied to the question of discipleship and women's responsibility to exercise their gifts in the church, even the gifts of leadership. These early

and persistently to the task of searching for truth." Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1988, 1923), 127.

²² A study of the history of various church doctrines reveals that official statements on several issues have evolved over the years. Theologians in the church have gradually modified doctrines as their study and reflection demonstrated the need for revised interpretations.

²³ James White, "Making us a Name," *Review and Herald* 15, no. 23 (April 26, 1860): 180-82.

Adventist leaders utilized the entire Scripture to illuminate their stance, not just those that singled out women. They saw the Gospel message and commission as inclusive and binding: every disciple was needed to carry the last warning to a perishing world. The belief that they were living in the last days brought both urgency to the task and conviction that Joel's prophecy, in the last days, "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Joel 2:28) applied directly to them.

The remnant people saw the preaching and prophesying of both men and women in their midst as evidence that the promise was being fulfilled again and that the Day of the Lord was at hand. The promise of the Father to bestow the gifts of the Holy Spirit on both sons and daughters became an essential component of the early Adventist vision of the church and proof that they were God's last-day people. The "promise" became fundamental to their identity as a community in which every individual was a disciple called to spread the gospel to the world. As their numbers and financial resources were few, they trusted that they could accomplish their task by utilizing the gifts of the Spirit, particularly the gift of prophecy. This necessary gift was poured out on the disciples without regard to status or gender, simply according to the will of the Spirit. It is significant to note that they repeatedly defined the gift of prophecy as speaking to the church for "edification, and exhortation, and comfort" (1 Cor 14:3).

The responsibility rested on the church to use and to honor the spiritual gifts that God provided. To neglect these gifts risked their withdrawal. James White in particular commented on the resistance to women's gifts as based on personal prejudice, that they "do not like to hear the Marys preach a risen or coming Saviour,"²⁴ while others such as B.F. Robbins pinpointed the problem as the "defective" teaching of the churches to which they previously belonged.²⁵ Even without specific scriptural instruction to recognize women's spiritual leadership in their churches, an analysis of the overall message of the Gospel and the prophecies concerning the last days proved to be sufficient warrant for the endorsement of women's spiritual leadership when it was accompanied by clear signs of God's Spirit. To fail to do so would be to despise the good gifts God was sending and to quench the presence of the Holy Spirit among them.

²⁴ James White, "Paul Says So," *Review and Herald* 10, no. 9 (September 10, 1857): 152.

²⁵ It needs to be noted that resistance to religious equality came from women as well as from men. The message that the gift of prophecy would be poured out upon God's people, sons and daughters alike, in what James White called the "glorious promise to the waiting, trusting people of God," presented some difficulties to the female disciples who were conditioned to silence by society and their previous religious training. J[ames] W[hite], "Unity and Gifts of the Church, No. 4," *Review and Herald* 11, no. 9 (January 7, 1858): 68-69. Some of these articles particularly addressed these women, urging them to overcome their fears and exercise their spiritual gifts, regardless of the public shame this might bring upon them. B. F. Robbins wrote, "I know that the most of us have been gathered into the message of the third angel from the sectarian churches where we received our religious training, which we now, in the clear light of God's truth see was defective, both in doctrine and practice." One of these defects was their suppression of women's voices. He continued, "In some of them the prejudice against woman's efforts and labors in the church, have crushed out her usefulness. This kind of training has in many of you caused timidity, and discouragement, and the neglect of the use of gifts designed to edify the church and glorify God." Now these women faced the challenge of overcoming "the embarrassing influence of our former associations" and "conformity to the world" and receive and exercise their spiritual gifts. B. F. Robbins, "To the Female Disciples in the Third Angel's Message," *Review and Herald* 15, no. 3 (December 8, 1859): 21-22.

“Prove All Things; Hold Fast That Which Is Good”: Dealing with the Pauline Texts Some Christians Used to Limit Women’s Function in the Church

Adherence to William Miller’s principles of Bible interpretation became increasingly important when the Advent “tarried” longer than expected and the sabbaterians had to continue to function as a religious community. As such, they needed to provide answers for their practice of inclusive ministry not only to the larger Christian context but also to those who had not been part of the Millerite movement. Within twenty years, the handful of believers became the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which was a worldwide church by the end of the century. As people joined the group, questions increased concerning the propriety of women speaking in church, leading in worship services, preaching, and evangelizing, as most were recruited from religious groups that taught that Paul admonished women to be silent in church.²⁶ The *Review* received an ever-increasing number of inquiries: what about Paul? They were a people of the book: how did their inclusive ministry harmonize with particular Bible statements? How did they respond to texts that seemed to forbid some to exercise their gifts?

Women’s leadership in the religious context defied social mores and was generally assumed to be contrary to Scripture,²⁷ as Paul had said, “Women should keep silence in the churches.” While Adventists cherished the specific promises given to them as “the end-times faithful” and the evidence of God’s work in their midst provided by the women who exercised their spiritual gifts, their ethos demanded that they address Scriptures that appeared to contradict their beliefs and practices as well as presenting those that inspired them. Adventist leaders used Miller’s methods of biblical interpretation to address the topic, focusing on the Pauline verses most frequently cited as obstacles to women’s full participation in the religious context. As early as the 1850s, the *Review* featured an article titled, “Let Your Women Keep Silence in the Churches,” by David Hewitt that summarized both the questions of readers and the Adventist position on the active participation of women in the church meeting. Hewitt acknowledged the challenge that certain Pauline verses posed to Adventist practice and invited readers to move their understanding from that of relying on isolated texts to considering the larger context of Scripture. He stated:

Many sincere and honest souls have been very much perplexed respecting this declaration of the apostle Paul. Many have inferred from this that women professing godliness should keep silent and not speak in prayer and social meetings for religious worship. But the candid reader of the sacred pages will find other declarations of the same apostle that must be brought to harmonize

²⁶ Sarah A. Hallock, “A Query.—Bro. Smith,” *Review and Herald* 15, no. 8 (January 12, 1860): 64.

²⁷ This was even the case in the two most liberal protestant denominations. As late as 1881, the same year as the first formal resolution to ordain women was presented at the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference, Matilda Joslyn Gage commented that, “In the Unitarian and Universalist churches, which ordain women to preach and administer the ordinances, these women pastors are made to feel that the innovation is not universally acceptable.” In Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1: 1848-1861 (Rochester, N.Y.: Mann, 1881), 784. The fact that the two denominations officially recognized women in ministry by ordaining them in 1871 and 1863 respectively did not mean that the public perception of the appropriate role of women in religion had changed, or even that the numbers of individuals within these denominations did not question the legitimacy of women ministers.

with this in order to get a clear understanding of the Apostle's meaning in 1 Cor. xiv.²⁸

Hewitt's article was one of 15 major *Review and Herald* articles in the last half of the nineteenth century designed to help individuals resolve the tension between specific Pauline admonitions and the church practice of licensing women as preachers and evangelists.²⁹

The need to harmonize Adventist practices for newcomers and the larger community led church leaders to publish some of their clearest and most explicit examples of how to approach biblical interpretation. Each of these major articles, as well as several lesser articles that appeared in a response section to reader questions on specific Bible texts, utilized the principles of biblical interpretation discussed earlier. The author of each article, whether it was one of the paper's editors, guest writers, church leaders, or scholars, used accepted and established Adventist hermeneutics to defend women's spiritual leadership. The various articles enjoined readers to set aside their preconceived ideas and study the issue carefully, remembering that their conclusion needed to, as James White was fond of saying, "harmonize with both revelation and reason."

Various authors acknowledged that putting aside personal prejudice and the notion that the meaning of Biblical passages is transparent without study were the most difficult parts of the hermeneutical process. One early example of this appeal to push beyond these facile assumptions appeared in James White's article, "Paul Says So,"³⁰ where he asked the reader to examine what he or she thought they knew about Paul's teaching on women and the church. He queried the reader as to "What is it that Paul actually says?" The premise of his very pointed article was that serious followers of Christ must not be content to accept popular notions based on isolated texts, such as "women must be silent in church," but instead examine what they thought they knew on the topic. For White, as well as the other authors who addressed the topic in the *Review*, the final answer had to be based on sound scholarship. This required the use of scholarly tools to investigate the topic, a review of the Pauline verses in their social and historical context, comparison with Paul's other writings on the same and related subjects, consideration of the text in its literary context (the meaning of the entire passage and the book), and Paul's general teachings and practice. Additionally, the interpretation of the verses needed to be congruent, to make sense, in light of the rest of Scriptural teaching.

In short, the popular procedure of arriving at a biblical answer to any question demanded far more than picking up an English version of the Bible and accepting the surface meaning of a text "just as it reads." All Adventists, not just church leaders, were expected to be familiar with basic tools for biblical study, such as commentaries and concordances. Scholarly works were consulted to provide additional information where the original meaning of a passage was

²⁸ D[avid] Hewitt, "Let Your Women Keep Silence in the Churches," *Review and Herald* 16, no. 24 (October 15, 1857): 190.

²⁹ For an analysis of all these articles and their backgrounds, see Beverly Beem and Ginger Hanks Harwood, "'Your Daughters Shall Prophesy': James White, Uriah Smith, and the 'Triumphant Vindication of the Right of the Sisters' to Preach," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 41-58; and Ginger Hanks Harwood and Beverly Beem, "'It was Mary that First Preached a Risen Jesus': Early Seventh-day Adventist Answers to Objections to Women as Public Spiritual Leaders," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 45, no. 2 (Autumn 2007): 221-45.

³⁰ James White, "Paul Says So," *Review and Herald* 10, no. 9 (September 10, 1857): 152.

obscured by translation choice, alternative renderings, or cultural and textual contexts.³¹ Church leaders sometimes referred questions to J.N. Andrews, a scholar who could read the Bible in seven languages. Early Adventist leaders were acquainted with the scholarly tools of their day and did not hesitate to cite them for the light they shed on biblical texts.

Consistent with Millerite practice, church leaders did not consider isolated verses, even several of them, as a solid basis for establishing a biblical position on questions of doctrine or practice. Hewitt explained the dangers of such an approach:

It is a custom with all Bible students to find all the important texts that bear on any one subject, and compare them together until they come to a satisfactory understanding of what the inspired penman means. No one should found a theory on one single isolated passage, for this mode of proving things has produced many discordant theories in the world.³²

Nineteenth-century Adventist leaders maintained Miller's view that a position on a topic (including women's leadership) had to be based on all the information on the subject from both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Even then, the process demanded more than a simple proof text compilation. Before a verse could be vetted as speaking to or definitive of an issue, it had to be examined in the flow of the larger argument in the passage and connected with the author's intent. Apparent meaning was compared with other statements a biblical author had made on the same point or related issues. Assuming authorial consistency, they insisted that everything an author said must be "harmonized," or understood in light of the author's overall teachings. The presupposition that the Bible possessed an internal consistency led early Adventists to believe that the burden of finding the unifying threads was left to the reader, or the community in study, as guided by the Holy Spirit. They felt the responsibility to "harmonize" apparently conflicting texts to find their consistency and obtain fuller understanding of the Word. Failure to wrestle with "problematic" texts would result in the "discordant theories" that Hewitt warned against.

Additionally, they insisted that serious study had to place Paul's counsels on women's public speaking alongside the information given on his recorded practice as he spread the gospel and commended women as co-workers.³³ I. Fetterhoof, in a detailed article entitled "Women

³¹ One example of the use of scholarly sources is found in the article by J. A. Mowatt, "Women as Preachers and Lecturers," introduced by Uriah Smith, *Review and Herald* 18, no. 9 (July 30, 1861): 65-66. Extracted from the *Portadown News*, Ireland, of March 2, 1861. Mowatt sets up his argument as a dialog with a previous writer who called himself "An Admirer of Woman in Her Proper Place," which Mowatt abbreviates to the term "Admirer." After reviewing the effective work that women have done for good, he examines the biblical texts used to keep women silent, often supporting his exegesis by citing Dr. Adam Clarke's commentary. Dr. Clark was considered a trustworthy authority in Christian circles during that time.

³² D[avid] Hewitt, "Let Your Women Keep Silence in the Churches," *Review and Herald* 10, no. 24 (October 15, 1857): 190.

³³ In one article, M. W. Howard looked at the role of Priscilla and Aquila as Paul's co-laborers and travelling companions and teachers of Apollo, another minister of the gospel. Howard observed that we do not "glean from what follows that this servant of God, this minister of the gospel, felt any depreciation of his self-esteem, or was held in less repute by the brethren for having been 'instructed in the way of the Lord more perfectly' by such instructors." M. W. Howard, "Woman as a Co-Worker," *Review and Herald* 32, no. 9 (August 18, 1868): 133.

“Laboring in Public,” asked, “What did those women do, of whom Paul said that they labored with him in the gospel? How could they have labored with him in the gospel, if they did not join in the same work that he was engaged in, that is, urging the people to leave their sins, and receive Christ?” Fetterhoof listed Paul’s co-laborers by name, commenting, “We learn from this that Christian women, as well as men, labored in the ministry of the word.” This ministry of the word he described as the “duty of the preacher, to teach, exhort, edify, and comfort,” the same descriptors used to define the gift of prophecy. Clearly Paul’s command to keep silent did not apply to the teaching and preaching ministry of the church. “Would Paul contradict himself thus?” he asks. And just in case anyone misses his point, he answers, “No.”³⁴

Where apparent discrepancies between texts surfaced, reasonable explanations were explored and the cultural contexts of the verses “at variance” were considered to determine whether certain instructions were specific to particular locations or situations or were applicable to all believers at all times. Early Adventist leaders (and scholars) incorporated the investigation of the cultural context as a necessary step in the endeavor to understand the Pauline verses and used contextual arguments to explicate the biblical soundness of women’s spiritual leadership.³⁵ One clear example of this practice appeared in an 1879 article, “May Women Speak in Meeting?” where J. N. Andrews carefully explained his methods of interpretation of the key Corinthian text used against women’s public speaking, asserting vigorously that the text “can have no such application.” He demonstrated that the careful scrutiny of both letters to the Corinthians established that the counsel was given to address the “state of great disorder” in the Corinthian church, and was situation specific. “So that what the apostle says to women in such a church as this, and in such a state of things, is not to be taken as directions to all Christian women in other churches and in other times, when and where such disorders do not exist.”³⁶ The *Review* also published other articles also addressing Paul’s forbidding statement in its cultural context as a necessary step in understanding Paul’s meaning.³⁷

³⁴ I. Fetterhoof, “Women Laboring in Public,” *Review and Herald* 38, no. 8 (August 8, 1871): 58-59.

³⁵ A similar argument for the analysis of the context of biblical statements may be found in, “How do You Read the Prophets?” *Review and Herald* 9, no. 19 (March 12, 1857): 145-146, where the author instructs, “There is also incalculable benefit in searching into *the times and circumstances* in which a prophecy was written, *the occasion* which called it forth; and in receiving every word as from God, worthy of God, and certainly in harmony with all else he has revealed.”

³⁶ “Now it appears from the fourteenth chapter that when they were assembled in meeting, the women threw everything into confusion by talking among themselves, and acting with such indecorum as to be a matter of shame to them. So that what the apostle says to women in such a church as this, and in such a state of things, is not to be taken as directions to all Christian women in other churches and in other times, when and where such disorders do not exist.” J. N. A[ndrews], “May Women Speak in Meeting?” *Review and Herald*, 53, no. 1 (January 2, 1879): 4.

³⁷ An anonymous article published in 1871, echoing James White’s concern for common sense, cited the inconsistency in allowing women to sing hymns in church while forbidding them other forms of speech and attributes the illogic to a misunderstanding of Paul. The author begins, “Among some Christian sects it is considered disorderly for women to speak or pray in a public assembly. Of course they quote 1 Cor. 14:34,35, as deciding the case.” He goes on to discuss the situation in Corinth as revealed in the rest of Paul’s epistle and Paul’s concern for order, adding his conclusion that, “nothing is proved by this in regard to what is proper in orderly, sober assemblies. Because it is very improper for women to take part in such meetings as they had at Corinth, it does not follow that they may not take part in orderly religious meetings.” “Shall Women Speak in the Church?” *Review and Herald* 37, no. 13 (March 14, 1871): 99. Reprinted from the Free Will Baptist journal, *Morning Star*. Clippings from journals of other denominations indicated the wide reading of *Review* editors as well as the existence of this conversation in other denominations.

In this and other articles, Andrews addressed the task of harmonizing the “restrictive” verses with other statements Paul made concerning women in the worship context. Andrews drew the attention of the reader to the text in 1 Corinthians 11:5, where Paul instructed women how to dress when praying and prophesying in church, which he presented as “positive proof” that Paul did not forbid women to pray and prophesy in the church. He cited Paul’s definition of prophecy, “he that prophesieth speaketh unto men, to edification, exhortation, and comfort” (1 Cor. 14.3) and concluded, “It was not a shame for women to do this work. Therefore Paul did not refer to such acts when he said, ‘It is a shame for women to speak in the church.’”³⁸ Further, church scholar Andrews was not alone in his effort to draw the attention of the Bible student to the need to step back and integrate particular verses into the total picture provided in Scripture. Several authors challenged the readers as to whether they believed that Paul was inconsistent in either his thought or the application of his teachings to his actual practice (“Does Paul contradict Paul?”) As one inquirer asked, “Did Paul forbid women to pray and prophesy in public, and then give them directions as to how they should appear to honor the gospel when they did pray and prophesy in public?”³⁹ As this could not be the case, the reader had to read what was being said in light of the complete picture given. In a reasoned approach that trusted the integrity of the Bible, women’s worship leadership did not violate either the orderly speech that Paul sought for the church nor Paul’s command that women are not to teach usurp authority over men cited from 1 Tim 2:11-12, the other text often used to silence women. They understood the command here also as dealing with the disruptive “loquacity, impertinence, arrogance” that worked against gospel order, “but that does not prove it improper to speak in a proper manner.”⁴⁰

After doing the work necessary to identify a particular author’s (in this case Paul’s) stance on a topic, that view was then compared with the guidance offered by other biblical authors. Again, the assumption that God had inspired the entire Bible demanded the effort to create a harmonious picture on the whole scope of the topic. The writings of one author could not be selected to support a position that contradicted the general trend of the biblical writings. Even after harmonizing the statements obviously addressing the issue, the view had to be scrutinized for its consistency with the larger picture of God’s redemptive plan, the records of his past actions, and promises for “the last days.” The articles frequently cited examples of women’s leadership roles in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Deborah, judge and prophetess who had “dominion over the mighty”⁴¹ and Miriam, Huldah, Anna, and the four daughters of Philip, who communicated God’s will to his people, were frequently cited as evidence that God’s choice of women to lead his people is consistent throughout salvation history. I. Fetterhoof concluded, “Thus we see that under the old dispensation God gave of his Spirit to women, and made prophetesses of them, and directed them how to speak, and God’s

³⁸J. N. Andrews, “May Women Speak in Meeting?” *Review and Herald* 53, no. 1 (January 2, 1879): 4.

³⁹ “On Keeping Silence,” *Review and Herald* 13, no. 4 (December 16, 1858): 27. A Congregational minister’s wife asks the question in a series of rhetorical questions reprinted from the *Golden Rule*.

⁴⁰ Looking back to Paul’s instructions to the Corinthians on proper decorum, Adventists understood his concern to be that of the context. “Women who pray and prophesy in public should follow the custom of society, and have their heads covered. If it was wrong for them to speak or pray in public, why give these directions? The only difference made between men and women, is that men are to uncover their heads, and women and to cover theirs, when they speak or pray.” “Shall Women Speak in the Church?” *Review and Herald* 37, no. 13 (March 14, 1871): 99.

⁴¹ I. Fetterhoof, “Women Laboring in Public,” *Review and Herald* 38, no. 8 (August 8, 1871): 58-59.

will was made known to men through them, and God was honored. And truly God doth respect women as much under the gospel as he did under the law.”⁴² Similarly, after a thorough review of women’s effective witness in the Old and New Testaments, S. C. Welcome concluded,

Seeing that females were admitted to the high office of prophecy under the old dispensation, and in the promise of the more general effusion of this gift, the daughters and handmaidens were equally included with the other sex, that they were among the first messengers of the gospel, and after the churches were formed and settled received particular instruction how to conduct themselves in the church, in exercise of their gifts, it is strange that the privilege should have ever been called in question.⁴³

Finally, it must be noted that various authors noted the negative effect of imposing silence on women and restricting the roles they could play in the church. Various appeals, some of them gender specific, were made to stimulate readers to examine the ways these restrictions hindered both the functioning and spiritual development of God’s people. Welcome also addressed the spiritual impact that the imposed silence had both on women and the total church community. When he compared this enforced silence to bondage in 1860, he utilized an image that created an immediate response from the primarily Northern readers of the work. Not only did Adventists possess a clear stand against slavery, they were familiar with the arguments that it was unbiblical, immoral and harmful to all parties involved. His arguments employed the general hermeneutical approach utilized by Adventist leaders and presented the same conclusion: the restrictive texts “had no relation to the exercise of a gift which God had given them [women] to use for the advancement of his cause.” He observed that select women have the same God-given abilities as do men to preach the gospel, and appealed to the church to “let no stumbling-block be thrown in their way, but let them fill the place that God calls them to fill, let them not be bound down to silence by church rules, but let their tongues speak forth the praises of God, and let them point sinners to the Lamb of God, and grieve not the holy Spirit by silence in the congregation.”⁴⁴

Holding Fast to the Good: Historic Adventist Hermeneutics and the Future of Adventism

A review of the work and writings of the church founders is significant for the clarity it adds concerning the roots and practices of our church: the pioneers’ concerns, intentions, and understandings need to be recognized and treated honestly in the histories we produce and teach. We do well to “hold fast to that which is good” in the theological and practical legacy that the early Adventists left for us. The positions they adopted were the result of careful study and prayerful dialog. When we disregard our heritage, we compromise our integrity as scholars and Christians.

Even as we faithfully present our faith ancestors’ conclusions on various topics, we must be carefully to distinguish their issues and problems from our own. The literature we produce and the presentations we make must acknowledge the fact that each historic era produces its own

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ S. C. Welcome, “Shall the Women Keep Silence in the Churches?” *Review and Herald* 15, no. 14 (February 23, 1860): 109-110.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

questions out of its own challenges and social context. The nineteenth-century discussion of women's spiritual leadership, for example, centered on the question of whether or not it was proper (and biblically permitted) for women to speak in the public sphere (including a church meeting), let alone, preach, and/or teach adult males, as any of these leadership activities was counter-cultural during this period. The articles in the *Review* published in that era addressed the questions as they were shaped during that period. The authors' expositions remain helpful when similar questions emerge today, especially where traditional social contexts have limited women's public and religious roles, and can be directly applied to these questions. At the same time, we need to exercise scholarly discipline and preserve clarity as to the limits of these articles and early Adventist practices: they cannot be used as a final answer for questions they were not designed to consider.

These articles, and our careful treatment of them, are particularly important in ongoing struggles concerning the question of the legitimacy of women's ministry. The popular understanding of the same Pauline passages that troubled Adventist converts earlier also complicates the church struggle over an additional question in the 21st century: is it proper ("permitted") for the church to ordain women in ministry? For church leaders of every description, including preachers, teachers, evangelists, and administrators, this leaves a vital question: Do our church founders have helpful (useful) counsel for us today as Adventism meets the questions and the challenges of a diverse, worldwide church in the 21st century?

It is essential that Adventists know the work early Adventist leaders did on the issue, even though the principle of progressive revelation demands that we subject those earlier beliefs to scrutiny and repudiate them if and where further "light" has emerged. As Ellen White declared in 1892, "Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation."⁴⁵ We retain, as part of our Adventist heritage, both the right and responsibility to examine and move away from where the church may have "settled" previously on the issue of women's spiritual leadership. The future of Adventism will be shaped not only by the answer we give to this (and other pressing preoccupations), but by the way we arrive at our conclusions. It is vital to monitor the way we process the biblical materials and establish beliefs as we wrestle with contemporary theological and practical matters. The Adventist heritage is as much in the method of procedure as in the final "answer" produced by the discussions.

The careful hermeneutic used by the Adventist pioneers established a church grounded in sound interpretation of Scripture. Their hermeneutic prevented the simplistic reading that avoided the hard work of biblical scholarship and asked the deeper questions of what the text said and how it should be applied. It avoided pointing to one text at the expense of others and prevented basing church practices on a limited understanding of the Bible or the use of one text without harmonizing it with all the others that might pertain to the subject. Their commitment to moving towards God's will for human conduct enabled them invest in "kingdom living," and abandon cultural patterns of relationship that their Bible study helped them identify as remains of the traditions of men and social convention. They did not pretend to fully comprehend every passage in Scripture or the changes that might yet be asked of them as they continued their pilgrimage, but they had faith that God would continue to lead them to further truth. Perhaps the

⁴⁵ Ellen G. White, "Christ Our Hope," *Review and Herald* 69, no. 50 (December 20, 1892): 785-786.

most significant legacy that they left for their spiritual heirs was their faith in the process of careful study and God's continued guidance as they journeyed towards him. Whether or not we hold fast to that heritage may be the most critical element in the shaping of the future of the Seventh-day Adventist church.

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