

ORDINATION
IN THE WRITINGS
OF ELLEN G. WHITE

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Abstract

Ordination in the Writings of Ellen G. White. Among Seventh-day Adventists, Ellen G. White is believed to possess the gift of prophecy, and her writings have served in organizing as well as nurturing the Church. This article is an inquiry into the concept of ordination as it is presented in her writings. The following five questions guide the research: (1) What is ordination? (2) Why is it needed? (3) How is it performed? (4) When is it appropriate to ordain a person? and (5) Who should be ordained? A deeper understanding of her writings on the topic of ordination enables the church to avoid majoring in minors and pay the needed attention to its mission.

Keywords: *ordination, Ellen G. White, elders, women ministry, deacons.*

Resumen

Ordenación en los escritos de Ellen G. White. Entre los adventistas del séptimo día, Ellen G. White es considerada como poseedora del don de la profecía y sus escritos han servido tanto en la organización como en el desarrollo de la Iglesia. Este artículo es una pesquisa sobre el concepto de ordenación presentado en sus escritos. Las siguientes cinco preguntas guían la investigación: (1) ¿Qué es la ordenación? (2) ¿Por qué esta es necesaria? (3) ¿Cómo esta se realiza? (4) ¿Cuándo es apropiado ordenar a una persona? y (5) ¿Quién debería ser ordenado? Un entendimiento profundo de sus escritos en el tema de la ordenación permitirá que la iglesia evite enfocarse en asuntos menores y poner la atención necesaria en su misión.

Palabras clave: *ordenación, Ellen G. White, ancianos, ministerio de la mujer, diáconos.*

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1. Introduction

It was August 1873 at the Indiana Camp-meeting. According to the report by Ellen G. White, the event was “one of the largest and most successful ever held by our people in this State.”¹ In addition to the higher attendance (compared to the last meeting at the place), the various activities carried out at the meeting were impressive. One among these activities took place on Tuesday morning when Bro. Bartlett was ordained to the ministry. This is how Ellen G. White depicts the event: “The meeting upon the occasion was a very precious season. The Lord placed his signet upon the work, and blessed Bro. Bartlett, and Brn. Waggoner and Lane, who officiated at his ordination.”²

Another successful camp meeting took place at Adelaide, South Australia, in 1896. Similar to the Indiana camp meeting, ordination was to take place. Ellen G. White writes, “Last Sabbath morning Elder [C. F.] Hawkins was ordained. Elder [S. N.] Haskell gave a discourse in the early morning meeting, and certainly it was most impressive and instructive.... The ordination was very impressive.”³

These are the only two citations of ordination ceremonies in the writings of Ellen G. White. Though the events took place on different continents and within an interval of two decades, Ellen G. White portrays the ordination ceremonies with a similar tone of high regard, depicting them as *precious season*, and *impressive*.

¹ Ellen G. White, “Indiana Camp-Meeting,” *Review and Herald*, August 23, 1877.

² Ibid.

³ Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister Olsen, October 1890, Letter 80, 1890.

This paper is an inquiry into the concept of ordination as it is presented in the writings of Ellen G. White. The following five questions serve as guides in this searching endeavor:

- 1) What is ordination?
- 2) Why is it needed?
- 3) How is it performed?
- 4) When is it appropriate to ordain a person?
- 5) Who should be ordained?

2. Proper Presuppositions

Before delving into the writings of Ellen G. White to get answers for these questions, two things must be clearly put from the outset. First, among Seventh-day Adventists, Ellen G. White is believed to possess the gift of prophecy, and her self-designated title is the Lord's messenger.⁴ Consequently, her writings bear the mark of inspiration, and have served in organizing as well as nurturing the Church.⁵ It is proper, therefore, to consult her writings on the topic of ordination.

Second, while reading the inspired writings of Ellen G. White, due consideration must be given to their literary as well as historical context. Any interpretation that does not pay close attention to these contexts yields no profit. Many disservices have been done to her writings as a result of wrong interpretation, and the topic of ordination is no exception. Having in mind the inspired nature of the writings of Ellen G. White and the importance of considering their literary and historical context, let us turn to our search for answers to the above mentioned questions.

3. What is Ordination?

The English word *ordain* originates from the Latin word *ordinare*, which basically means "to put in order, appoint."⁶ Beside this, what about the concept of Ellen G. White? How did she use the word in its various forms? Using the EGW Writings CD-ROM search engine, one can find the number of occurrences of the following words: Ordination appears 93 times; ordain,

⁴ Ellen G. White to G. I. Butler, March 8, 1906, Letter 86, 1906.

⁵ "Her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction." Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe... A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 247.

⁶ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, web edition. (2002), s.v. "ordain".

22 times; ordained, 50 times; ordaining, 7 times; and ordains, 6 times.⁷ Though, her usage of these words reflects the different shades of meaning, she mainly used it to refer to an act of setting apart for ministry as it will be showed in the following section..

2.1. Ordination Accounts in the Bible as Narrated by Ellen G. White

2.1.1. The Ordination of Moses and the Seventy

When narrating the ordination of different persons down through the ages, the first person mentioned to be ordained is Moses. “Before Moses went forth, he received his high commission, his ordination to his great work, in a way that filled him with awe, and gave him a deep sense of his own weakness and unworthiness.”⁸ Next on the list are the seventy elders who were ordained by Moses to help him by sharing some responsibilities of leadership.⁹

2.1.2. The Ordination of the Twelve and the Seven Deacons

Ellen G. White writes also about the ordination of the first twelve disciples. She tells how the event was preceded by Jesus’ night of prayer,¹⁰ and followed by the preaching of the Sermon on the Mount, a teaching “given specially for the disciples” after their ordination.¹¹ Furthermore, she adds light on how Judas Iscariot joined the group while Jesus was preparing the disciples for their ordination.¹² When these Apostles continued their ministry, they also practiced this rite when they ordained seven deacons “for a special work.”¹³

⁷ The number of occurrences stated here does not exclude repetition of the same statement on compiled publications.

⁸ Ellen G. White, “The Call of Moses,” *Sign of the Times*, February 26, 1880.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 94.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 509.

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 298.

¹² *Ibid.*, 293.

¹³ Ellen G. White, *Sketches from the Life of Paul* (Battle Creek, MI: Review & Herald, 1883), 15.

2.1.3. *The Ordination of Paul and Barnabas*

Ellen G. White writes in a little more detailed manner when she narrates the ordination of Paul and Barnabas at Antioch. She explains their ordination as “a public recognition of their divine appointment to bear to the Gentiles the glad tidings of the gospel.”¹⁴

2.2. A Reconstruction of Her Conception of Ordination

Though Ellen G. White does not offer us a detailed exposition on the concept of ordination, it is possible to reconstruct her understanding from the descriptions of the above-mentioned Biblical accounts.

2.2.1. *Ordination as Rite of Ordinance not Sacrament*

Ordination, as it can be understood in Ellen G. White writings, is a public recognition of a person’s divine appointment. Thus, the divine appointment or call must precede the public recognition. Ellen G. White makes this clear when she writes: “Christ’s call, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men,’ and the power of His grace, manifested to them, was indeed their ordination, their appointment to the work of the gospel ministry.”¹⁵ Ordination is not sacramental. It does not infuse any kind of grace or virtue into the ordained person. In fact, Ellen G. White sees this understanding of ordination as the abused form of the rite.

At a later date the rite of ordination by the laying on of hands was greatly abused; unwarrantable importance was attached to the act, as if a power came at once upon those who received such ordination, which immediately qualified them for any and all ministerial work. But in the setting apart of these two apostles [Paul and Barnabas], there is no record indicating that any virtue was imparted by the mere act of laying on of hands.¹⁶

2.2.2. *Ordination as Authorization, not Enthronement*

Ordination is an authorization of a person by the Church “to perform the rite of baptism, and to organize churches, being invested with full

¹⁴ White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 161.

¹⁵ Ellen G. White to E. S. Ballanger and E. R. Palmer, February 2, 1905, Letter 63, 1905.

¹⁶ White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 162.

ecclesiastical authority.”¹⁷ According to Ellen G. White, ordination, though not sacramental, it empowers a person to act on behalf of the Church.

Ordination is not an enthronement but a call to ministry. Ellen G. White does not associate ordination to putting a person into a leadership office. Despite the fact that she does not regard the calling and ordination of a person as a simple thing, she repeatedly points out that ordination is to minister the gospel. Note the balance she maintained in the following words:

After choosing His disciples, Christ appointed them as His representatives, and gave them their ordination charge, their commission. They were to go forth as His witnesses, to declare what they had seen and heard of Him. Their office was the most important to which human beings had ever been called, and was second only to that of Christ Himself. They were to be workers together with God for the saving of the world.¹⁸

Based on this quotation, partnering with God in the work of salvation and not a kingly office was the work of the ordained apostles. Such work is described as the “most important” office and “second only to that of Christ Himself”.

Her focus on ministry puts her also in line with the early church as well as the reformers. After conducting a biblical as well as historical inquiry into the concept of ordination, V. Norskov Olsen concludes: “Ministry (service) is what the church is all about. Ordination to office is another matter and secondary in the minds of the apostles and the Protestant Reformers.”¹⁹

2.2.3. Ordination, Formal and Informal

Ordination is a formal ceremony which is carried out by the Church of Christ on earth. Commenting on the ordination of Paul, Ellen G. White writes that he “regarded the occasion of his formal ordination as... the beginning of his apostleship in the Christian Church.”²⁰

Ordination is not always formal but can also be informal, i.e., a person can be ordained by God for ministry without a church-conducted-formal-occasion. Ellen G. White repeatedly mentions “many others, upon whom

¹⁷ Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1915), 441.

¹⁸ Ellen G. White, “The Regions Beyond,” *Pacific Union Recorder*, December 4, 1902.

¹⁹ V. Norskov Olsen, *Myth and Truth Church, Priesthood, and Ordination* (Riverside, CA: Loma Linda University Press, 1990), 176.

²⁰ White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 164.

human hands have never been laid in ordination” yet who are called to act an important part in the work of saving souls.²¹ The following quotations further attest to this fact:

Have you tasted of the powers of the world to come? Have you been eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of God? Then, although ministerial hands may not have been laid upon you in ordination, Christ has laid His hands upon you and has said: “Ye are My witnesses.”²²

And I have been instructed that not a few, but many souls will be saved through the labors of men who have looked to Jesus for their ordination and orders. Such men have taken up work in the hardest parts of the field, and have labored successfully for the Master.²³

It is a most fatal mistake to suppose that the work of saving souls depends alone on ordained ministers. All who are ordained unto the life of Christ are ordained to work for the salvation of the souls of their fellow men.²⁴

Ellen G. White’s description of Paul’s ordination helps to illuminate the formal versus informal dimension of ordination as it is understood by her. As quoted above, Ellen G. White called a formal ordination what the Church did to Paul through its human agencies at the initiation of his ministry. However, she also writes that Paul’s formal ordination was preceded by the Lord’s ordination; and at times the latter may occur without the former. “Paul did not depend upon man for his ordination. He had received from the Lord his commission and ordination. He regarded his ministerial labor as a privilege.”²⁵

Ellen G. White herself is an example of an informally ordained minister, ordained by the Lord but not with human hands. “In the city of Portland the Lord ordained me as His messenger, and here my first labors were given to the cause of present truth.”²⁶

In summary, Ellen G. White’s conception of ordination can be seen as formal and informal. The formal ordination is a public recognition of divine

²¹ Ibid, 355.

²² Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1901), 6:444.

²³ Ellen G. White, “Words to Our Workers,” *Review and Herald*, April 21, 1903.

²⁴ Ellen G. White, “Christ’s Commission,” *Review and Herald*, April 26, 1898.

²⁵ Ellen G. White, “Lessons from Paul’s Ministry,” Manuscript 74, 1903.

²⁶ Ellen G. White, “An Appeal to Our Churches Throughout the United States,” *Review and Herald*, May 18, 1911.

call by the Church and authorization to perform certain special works of ministry with full ecclesiastical authority. The remaining sections of this paper will discuss the formal ordination.

4. Why Ordination?

What calls for the need of ordination? Is it really important to carry out this practice? To understand the reasons given by Ellen G. White as to why ordination is needed, it is helpful to be reminded of the historical context of her writings. The Seventh-day Adventism, which Ellen G. White co-founded, was not a movement in favor of organization in the early days of its inception. Thus, the work of organizing the Church was not easy, and Ellen G. White has played a significant role in bringing heavenly messages regarding this issue.

One of the difficulties faced by this growing movement without an organization was that “they had no way to certify clergy. The scattered congregations were at the mercy of any traveling preacher who claimed to be Sabbatarian ministers.”²⁷ In 1853 she wrote an article based on a vision she received from God emphasizing the need for gospel order.

Ellen G. White based her counsel both on the revelation given to her as well as on the revelation given in the Bible. As to the former revelation, she writes:

I saw that this door [the door that allows those traveling preachers whom God has not called into the church’s ministry] at which the enemy comes in to perplex and trouble the flock can be shut. I inquired of the angel how it could be closed. He said, “The church must flee to God’s Word and become established upon gospel order, which has been overlooked and neglected.” This is indispensably necessary in order to bring the church into the unity of the faith.²⁸

Then, following the angel’s call to “flee to God’s word”, Ellen G. White calls her readers attention to the apostles’ experience.

I saw that in the apostles’ day the church was in danger of being deceived and imposed upon by false teachers. Therefore 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. Inquiry was made of God concerning these, and then, according to the mind of the church and the

²⁷ George Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1999), 58.

²⁸ Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1882), 100.

Holy Ghost, they were set apart by the laying on of hands. Having received their commission from God and having the approbation of the church, they went forth baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and administering the ordinances of the Lord's house, often waiting upon the saints by presenting them the emblems of the broken body and spilt blood of the crucified Saviour, to keep fresh in the memory of God's beloved children His sufferings and death.²⁹

After presenting God's revelation to her through the angel and the written word, then she continues to apply the message to the prevailing circumstance of her time.

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. 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.³⁰

In summary, the following five points must be underscored from the writings of Ellen G. White in answering the question, why ordaining ministers to the gospel ministry is needed?

- To establish the church upon "gospel order"³¹
- To bring the church into the unity of faith;
- To secure the peace, harmony and union of the flock;
- To close the door by which self-sent false teachers get access to the flock;
- To keep a proper administration of ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper).³²

²⁹ Ibid, 100-101.

³⁰ Ibid, 101.

³¹ Ellen G. White portrays that "It was at the ordination of the Twelve that the first step was taken in the organization of the church." White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 18.

³² In describing how damaging it is to allow self-sent messengers to administer church ordinances, Ellen G. White writes that when the true identity of these persons is revealed, those who were baptized by them will be in a position that they "are not satisfied until they are again baptized and begin anew." White, *Early Writings*, 99.

The apostles followed God's leading in establishing order and the early church was able to function successfully. "The order that was maintained in the early Christian church made it possible for them to move forward solidly as a well-disciplined army clad with the armor of God."³³

5. How to Ordain?

How should the ordination be conducted? What are the elements of the ceremony? Is there any prescription given by Ellen G. White as to how to ordain? The search on her writings reveals that she does not prescribe nor describe how an ordination ceremony should be conducted. Yet, from her narration of some ordination occurrences we can draw some basic elements. She uses the following words to portray the ordination of the first Twelve: "When Jesus had ended His instruction to the disciples, He gathered the little band close about Him, and kneeling in the midst of them, and laying His hands upon their heads, He offered a prayer dedicating them to His sacred work. Thus the Lord's disciples were ordained to the gospel ministry."³⁴ She also adds, "After choosing His disciples, Christ appointed them as His representatives, and gave them their ordination charge, their commission."³⁵

Instruction, dedicatory prayer, laying on of hands, and ordination charge are the three elements that she points out from ordination of the apostles. Laying on of hands and prayer were present also during the ordination of Paul and Barnabas. In one of her reports to the ordination ceremony that she attended, Ellen G. White also mentioned preaching as part of the ceremony. This simple method of ordination has been followed by the Church until now.

It is also important to note that Ellen G. White as well as Seventh-day Adventists were not unique in following this method. George Knight notes that the prayer and laying on of hands elements of the ordination ceremony are also shared by other evangelical churches. "Thus there was nothing unique in the ordination service of Sabbatarian Adventists. They were quite in harmony with the practices of the evangelical churches of their time."³⁶

³³ White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 95.

³⁴ White, *Desire of Ages*, 296.

³⁵ White, "The Regions Beyond," *Pacific Union Recorder*, December 4, 1902.

³⁶ George R. Knight, "Early Seventh-day Adventists and Ordination, 1844-1863," in *Women in Ministry: Biblical & Historical Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Vyhmeister (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), 107.

6. When to Ordain?

When is a person said to be ready or qualified to be ordained? Is it important to consider this question? Ellen G. White answers this question affirmatively and while discouraging a hasty move to ordain a person, she points out some qualifications that reveal the call and character of the person.

6.1. Hasty Move to Ordination Discouraged

G. White warns of the danger of premature ordination:

In some of our churches the work of organizing and of ordaining elders has been premature; the Bible rule has been disregarded, and consequently grievous trouble has been brought upon the church. There should not be so great haste in electing leaders as to ordain men who are in no way fitted for the responsible work —men who need to be converted, elevated, ennobled, and refined before they can serve the cause of God in any capacity.³⁷

She also advised a thorough examination must be done before getting to the act of ordaining:

Hands are laid upon men to ordain them for the ministry before they are thoroughly examined as to their qualifications for the sacred work; but how much better would it be to make thorough work before accepting them as ministers, than to have to go through this rigid examination after they have become established in their position and have put their mold upon the work.³⁸

What are some of these qualifications necessary to be fit for the sacred work?

6.2. Qualifications for Ordination

Ellen G. White calls the attention of her readers to the principles “of piety and justice “that were to guide the rulers among God’s people in the time of Moses and David,”³⁹ when she talks about the responsibility of ministers of “the newly organized church of God in the gospel dispensation.”⁴⁰ And

³⁷ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1882), 5:617-618.

³⁸ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1923), 172.

³⁹ White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 95.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

she continues writing that in “the work of setting things in order in all the churches, and ordaining suitable men to acts of officers, the apostles held to the high standards of leadership outlined in the Old Testament Scriptures.”⁴¹ Then she quotes from Titus 1:7-9 where Paul has enumerated the qualification of an elder. She has also pointed some qualifications that must be looked at before laying hands of ordination on anyone. It is possible to broadly categorize them as physical, mental and spiritual.

6.2.1. Physical

For her, the physical realm of a person is as equally important as the mental or moral. And she wrote at least two qualifications for a person to fulfill for ordination. The first one has to do with cleanliness,⁴² and the second is in regards to the person’s adherence to the “testimony God has given His servants to bear in regard to diet.”⁴³ The rationale she gives to back up this advice is the fact that ministers speak to the people in Christ’s stead.

6.2.2. Mental and Moral

According to Ellen G. White, mental knowledge without moral strength to put God’s revelation into practice is worthless. Thus, she advises that a person needs to qualify in both of these realms before ordination. The following quotation confirms this fact:

There are ministers who claim to be teaching the truth, whose ways are an offense to God. They preach, but do not practice the principles of the truth. Great care should be exercised in ordaining men for the ministry. There should be a close investigation of their experience. Do they know the truth, and practice its teachings? Have they a character of good repute? Do they indulge in lightness and trifling, jesting and joking? In prayer do they reveal the Spirit of God? Is their conversation holy, their conduct blameless? All these questions need to be answered before hands are laid upon any man to dedicate him to the work of the ministry. We should heed the words of inspiration, “Lay hands suddenly on no man.” We need to lift the standard higher than we have done hitherto, when selecting and ordaining men for the sacred work of God.⁴⁴

To sum up, Ellen G. White strongly advises the church against premature ordination and admonishes that through examination be carried

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Health* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1923), 83.

⁴³ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:378.

⁴⁴ Ellen G. White, “Danger in Rejecting Light,” *Review and Herald*, October 21, 1890.

out to prove the physical, mental as well as moral fitness of the person for the ministry.

7. Who Should Be Ordained?

In attempting to answer this question another two need to be addressed: Which ministries require ordination? Is ordination gender-exclusive? One will not get direct answers for these questions from the writings of Ellen G. White. As noted above, she views ordination as formal and/or informal experience and has clearly stated that “all who are ordained unto the life of Christ are ordained to work for the salvation of the souls of their fellow men.”⁴⁵ On the other hand, though not specific, she has also written about those who should be formally ordained by prayer and laying on hands. When the question who should be ordained? is asked, it is in reference to the formal ordination.

7.1. Ordination of Ministers, Elders, and Deacons

A brief review of how ordination was started and continued to be practiced in Seventh-day Adventism during the time of Ellen G. White is crucial in understanding what she has to say about this question. Ordination of ministers to the gospel ministry by prayer and the laying on of hands became significant not until the autumn of 1853. The first ordination of deacons also took place in the same year. The method followed to ordain them was the same but their ordination was as local church officers to administer the Lord’s Supper in the absence of the minister.

George Knight relates the situation as follows:

Thus by the end of 1853 the Sabbatarians had two levels of ordained individuals: the traveling preachers who performed the work of evangelists and administered the ordinances whenever available, and the deacons who appear to have been the only local church officers at that early period. Each church appears to have had one deacon ordained by the ministers. The Sabbatarians did not have church pastors as we know them today. Rather, the preachers were traveling elders, much like the Methodist circuit riders, except there were no circuits of coordination of the labor of the ministers at this period of Sabbatarian Adventist history. In the absence of a minister—which was most of the time—the

⁴⁵ White, “Christ’s Commission,” *Review and Herald*, April 26, 1898.

deacon was in charge of the local congregation, combining the functions of both deacon and elder.⁴⁶

In 1855, another level of ordination occurred when two classes of elders were recognized by the movement —the traveling elder or minister, and the local elder. Ellen G. White clarifies the roles to be played by these two officers:

“Elders, local and traveling, are appointed by the church and by the Lord to oversee the church, to reprove, exhort, and rebuke the unruly and to comfort the feebleminded. There is no higher tribunal upon earth than the church of God.”⁴⁷

When determining the call or two brethren, as to whether it is to be that or traveling or local elders, she gives the following criteria: “If God has called them, the weight and burden of the message will rest in power upon them, and their gift will not be exercised among believers only, but the great burden of their work will be to go out in new fields and raise up a company to keep the truth.”⁴⁸ Then, she admonishes the church to follow the next instruction:

They should not enter into other men’s labors and build on other men’s foundations. This evidence will the Lord give His church if He has called men into the field in visiting the different churches. The churches are generally just as well off without these laborers. They have a duty to do, and in case ministers are absent, to baptize or administer the ordinances.⁴⁹

Ellen G. White has observed the overlapping duties of the local and traveling elders except that the later is more of an evangelist.

Later in the year 1861 and 1862, the newly organized Michigan Conference established and elaborated an ordination system that is in line with what Ellen G. White described as the role of local and traveling elders. “By 1863 the Seventh-day Adventist denomination had its ideas and practice of ordination firmly in place. Outside of traveling elders becoming settled pastors in the early twentieth century, not much has changed in the way ministers are selected and credentialed or appointed.”⁵⁰

The writings of Ellen G. White are silent on delineating the roles of a local elder and a deacon. Almost in all of her mentioning of deacons at the

⁴⁶ Knight, “Early Seventh-day Adventists and Ordination,” 108.

⁴⁷ Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister Scott, July 6, 1863, Letter 5, 1863.

⁴⁸ Ellen G. White, “Proof of the Call to the Ministry,” Manuscript 1, 1859.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Knight, “Early Seventh-day Adventists and Ordination,” 111, 112.

local church, she considers them with their partnering local elders and addresses them equally on different issues. The following citations from her writings attest to this fact:

“Those who are known to be men of well-balanced minds, who have the love and fear of God before them, should be appointed as elders and deacons.”⁵¹

“Those who were elected as elders and deacons should ever be on the alert that plans may be made and executed which will give every member of the church a share in active work for the salvation of souls.”⁵²

“Elders and deacons are chosen to have a care for the prosperity of the church; yet these leaders, especially in young churches, should not feel at liberty, on their own judgment and responsibility, to cut off offending members from the church; they are not invested with such authority.”⁵³

Studying the historical development on how the ordination system was developed both during the time of the first apostles as well as early Adventism, as it is presented in the writings of Ellen G. White, reveals the fact that the gospel order that God wants His church to achieve did not happen all at once. The apostles were ordained by Jesus Himself, and then they ordained the seven deacons. After that we find the ordination of traveling evangelists Paul and Barnabas as well as local elders and deacons.

In summary, Ellen G. White writes about a traveling elder (full time minister), local or resident elder, as well as a deacon as officers in a local church who need to be ordained formally. The roles to be played by these three, as indicated in the writings of EGW, are highly overlapping.

Who else does Ellen G. White write should be ordained by prayer and laying on of hands other than the above mentioned ministers of the Church?

7.2. Ordaining Medical Missionaries?

Consider the following statement that Ellen G. White penned in 1908:

The work of the true medical missionary is largely a spiritual work. It includes prayer and the laying on of hands. He therefore should be as sacredly set apart for his work as is the minister of the gospel. Those who are selected to act the part of missionary physicians are to be set apart as such. This will strengthen them against the temptation to withdraw from the sanitarium work to engage in private practice. No

⁵¹ Ellen G. White, “The Church Must Be Quickened,” *Review and Herald*, January 17, 1893.

⁵² Ellen G. White, “God’s Means for Diffusing Light,” *Review and Herald*, March 24, 1891.

⁵³ Ellen G. White, “Church Difficulties,” Manuscript 1, 1878.

selfish motive should be allowed to draw the worker from his post of duty. We are living in a time of solemn responsibilities, a time when consecrated work is to be done. Let us seek the Lord diligently and understandingly. If we will let the Lord work upon human hearts, we shall see a great and grand work accomplished.⁵⁴

Based on the previous quotation, what does Ellen G. White mean when she writes the medical missionary “should be as sacredly set apart for his work as the minister of the gospel”? Denis Fortin interprets the phrase “to sacredly set apart” in this context as “a form of ordination in which the church acknowledges the blessings of God upon the chosen individual and serves as a means of strengthening the dedication of the worker in his service for God.”⁵⁵ William Fagal, on the other hand, emphasizes the word “as” in the statement, arguing it is not to be set apart as a minister but “as sacredly set apart... as is the minister, gives the following interpretation: “Ordaining physicians as ministers would not be likely to have a bearing on that, but ordaining them as missionary physicians would.”⁵⁶

A closer study of this statement in its context reveals that Ellen G. White is comparing the work of a medical missionary in a sanitarium with the work of a gospel minister in a church. Her first statement in this writing states, “In all our sanitariums the work done should be of such a character as to win souls to Jesus Christ... To preach the gospel means much more than many realize. It is a broad, far-reaching work. Our sanitariums have been presented to me as most efficient mediums for the promotion of the gospel message.”⁵⁷ Then, she mentions how sanitariums are to be places of preaching and sharing spiritual publications with the sick, as well as praying for them with laying on of hands. And to perform all these gospel ministries, Ellen G. White did not call for “a minister of the gospel” or an ordained elder or deacon who is working at a church. Rather she calls for the medical missionaries to be sacredly set apart to the same ministry of the gospel.

It is obvious that these medical missionaries are not set apart to work in a local church in the capacity of the gospel minister or other church officers. Their call and ordination to the ministry is based on their gift that has to be utilized in the right method and at the right place. Thus, with her

⁵⁴ Ellen G. White, “The Medical Missionary Work,” Manuscript 5, 1908.

⁵⁵ J. H. Denis Fortin, “Ordination in the Writings of Ellen G. White,” in *Women in Ministry*, 127.

⁵⁶ William Fagal, “Ellen G. White and Women in Ministry,” in *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry*, ed. Mercedes H. Dyer (Berrien Springs, MI.: Adventist Affirm, 2000), 274.

⁵⁷ White, “The Medical Missionary Work,” Manuscript 5, 1908.

understanding of the work of preaching as broad and far-reaching, the act of sacredly setting apart to the gospel ministry is not limited to those functions at the local church.

7.3. Ordaining Women?

There has been a long discussion on the topic of women's ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A number of papers and books have been written on the issue and most of them consider the writings of Ellen G. White and try to incorporate what she has to say on the topic. Unfortunately, Ellen G. White has not much to say about the ordination of women as traveling or resident elder. Though the Church had discussed the issue in its 1881 General Conference, Ellen G. White was not present in the meeting and did not write her reflection on it afterward. Yet, could it be possible to reconstruct her conception on this issue from her understanding of the role of women in ministry as well as a due consideration to the historical context of that understanding?

7.3.1. *Ordaining Women to What?*

A thorough search of her writings yields only one statement that she made regarding the ordination of women. The statement is found in an article she published in the *Review and Herald* in 1895 under the title "The Duty of the Minister and the People." The reading of the whole article is very inspiring and gives the reader the notion that Ellen G. White believed in the priesthood of all believers.

Statements such as the following depicts her understanding clearly: "The minister and the church-members are to unite as one person in laboring for the up-building and prosperity of the church."⁵⁸ "The minister's work is the lay member's work as well."⁵⁹ "God has given 'to every man his work.' Why is it that ministers and Conference officers do not recognize this fact? Why do they not manifest their appreciation of the help that individual members of the church could give?"⁶⁰ It is in this context that she writes the following statement:

Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands. In some cases they will need

⁵⁸ Ellen G. White, "The Duty of the Minister and the People," *Review and Herald*, July 9, 1895.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

to counsel with the church officers or the minister; but if they are devoted women, maintaining a vital connection with God, they will be a power for good in the church. This is another means of strengthening and building up the church. We need to branch out more in our methods of labor. Not a hand should be bound, not a soul discouraged, not a voice should be hushed; let every individual labor, privately or publicly, to help forward this grand work. Place the burdens upon men and women of the church, that they may grow by reason of the exercise, and thus become effective agents in the hand of the Lord for the enlightenment of those who sit in darkness.⁶¹

It is true that this passage speaks about setting apart women by prayer and laying on of hands. Needless to say this rite connotes ordination ceremony. But the question is ordination to which office? Denis Fortin asserts with this statement that Ellen G. White “favored that women in gospel ministry be also set apart or ordained.”⁶² On the same line, E. Marcella Anderson argues that the ordination could be “a pastoral type of ministry.”⁶³

William Fagal disagrees with this understanding and poses three line of arguments: 1) “This ministry is part-time;” 2) “The work is something other than that which the church was already doing;” 3) Ellen G. White does not consider the women with the minister, “nor does she regard them as the officers whose responsibility it is to lead the local congregation.”⁶⁴ Though Fagal asserts that the ordination Ellen G. White referring here does not permit becoming “the pastor or the leading church officers,”⁶⁵ he does not specify to what ministry the ordination applies.

Roger Coon agrees with Fagal in affirming that there “is no documentary evidence that EGW was calling for the ordination of women to gospel ministry in her RH article.”⁶⁶ But he continues writing his position that the ordination of women referred to here is to the office of deaconesses. “The immediate internal context (‘visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor’) may suggest she had in mind the

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Fortin, “Ordination in the Writings of Ellen G. White,” 127.

⁶³ E. Marcella Anderson, “The Roles of Women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Significance of Ellen G. White Counsels,” in *Symposium on the Role of Women in the Church* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute Committee, 1984), 121.

⁶⁴ Fagal, “Ellen G. White and Women in Ministry,” 274.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Roger W. Coon, *Ellen G. White’s View of the Role of Women in the SDA Church* (Washington DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1986), 8.

work of a deaconess. The opinion of EGW's personal secretary, Clarence C. Crisler, writing within one year of Mrs. White's death, was to the effect that EGW was referring to ordination of deaconesses rather than gospel ministers."⁶⁷

Jerry Moon concurs also with Roger Coon's position that this ordination of women is to the office of a deaconess. In fact, he substantiates his view by presenting historical evidence of ordaining women as deaconess following this counsel of Ellen G. White. Furthermore, he explains that "the work of a deaconess was not confined to ritual functions at the Lord's supper and footwashing, but was rather seen as a work of practical ministry to persons in need."⁶⁸ And he claims that this is the apparent significance of Ellen G. White's job description found in this statement.

Building on this thought, Moon continues to argue that the current usage of both offices, deacon and deaconesses, is not in line with the New Testament model. "In view of Ellen White's endorsement of ordaining women as deaconesses, perhaps the significance of the New Testament precedent needs to be more fully explored."⁶⁹ As some of the first deacons of the early church went farther than the serving of the table, Moon imagines women ordained to the office of deaconess "would go on to evangelize and planting churches."⁷⁰

Having all these interpretations in mind, it is important to note that Ellen G. White does not explicitly specify to what office the women should be ordained and we do not have anything from her writings as to what the job description of a deaconess is. In fact, there is only one occurrence of the word deaconess that is found in her counsel to a minister to refer women who will feel at liberty to tell their grievances to him to the "the deaconesses of the church."⁷¹

Thus, it would be safe to limit oneself with what she actually writes — women should be set apart by prayer and laying on of hands "to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor."⁷² It would also be proper to underscore the fact that Ellen White did not confine

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Jerry Moon, "'A Power that Exceeds that of Men': Ellen G. White on Women in Ministry," in *Women in Ministry*, 202.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 203.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ellen G. White to A. T. Jones, September 1902, Letter 164, 1902.

⁷² White, "The Duty of the Minister and the People," *Review and Herald*, July 9, 1895.

the setting apart to a special work in ministry by prayer and laying on of hands to men only.

7.3.2. *The Understanding of EGW on the Role of Women in Ministry*

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail the role of women in ministry as stated in the writings of Ellen G. White. A brief overview of this topic is needful, however, to grasp some of the issues behind women's ordination.

According to Ellen G. White, the ministry areas in which women can serve, at the local church level includes the following: teaching a children's Sabbath School class, praying with children,⁷³ as local church clerk,⁷⁴ encouraging and nurturing other women by organizing small groups,⁷⁵ and pastoral work.⁷⁶ Women can also have part in the public ministry as trainers of other women,⁷⁷ assisting minister-husband in his field work,⁷⁸ conduct camp-meeting Bible classes,⁷⁹ and preach from the pulpit.⁸⁰

While writing to a brother who cherishes a feeling "in reference to the faithful sisters of the church" that Ellen G. White calls "more satanic than divine," she uses the following words: "It is not always men who are best adapted to the successful management of a church. If faithful women have more deep piety and true devotion than men, they could indeed by their prayers and their labors do more than men who are unconsecrated in heart and in life."⁸¹

Based on that, it can be stated that essentially, Ellen G. White puts no distinction between men and women when it comes to ministry, though she observes unique opportunities of service for their peculiar personalities and spiritual gifts.

⁷³ Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1952), 165.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 147

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁷⁶ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:322.

⁷⁷ Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1946), 469.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 472.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 473-474.

⁸⁰ White, *Evangelism*, 473.

⁸¹ Ellen G. White to Brother Johnson, 1879, Letter 33, 1879.

7.3.3. *The Historical Context of Her Understanding*

It should also be noted that her encouragement of women to have an active participation in the gospel work was not very popular during her days. Portraying the situation Kit Watts writes, “at the dawn of the nineteenth century in the United States, women held approximately the same legal status as children and slaves.... Women were not admitted to colleges or universities. They were not allowed to enter professions. They could not vote or hold office. And they were not permitted to speak in public.”⁸² Ellen G. White herself faced opposition from her family member when she had started preaching publicly.⁸³ Yet, she became an inspiration for many women to go to the frontline of spiritual labor and serve the Lord according to their varied gifts.

Ordaining women as pastors or elders was not a common practice during Ellen G. White time. Only few denominations were ordaining female ministers for the first time during the second half of nineteenth century.⁸⁴ Seventh-day Adventism, being organized in this period of the century, was not engaged with the issue of ordaining women as pastors or elder. However, women were serving the church both as employed and as self-supporting gospel workers, secretaries, treasurers, department directors and in other capacities. In keeping with this, the Seventh-day Adventist Church had no problem in giving license to women to preach. Furthermore, Ellen G. White writes that employed gospel workers should be paid justly from the tithe just like any other male minister.⁸⁵ But she is silent in recommending them to be ordained as pastor or elder and perform the rites of the Church. This could be seen as adherence to the polity of church rather than a belief of women to be subordinate to men.

8. Conclusion

From this brief study on the conception of Ellen G. White about ordination the following conclusions can be drawn:

⁸² Kit Watts, “The Rise and Fall of Adventist Women in Leadership: Historical Factors Affecting the Number, Influence, and Status of Women Leaders in the Past 150 Years,” *Ministry*, April 1995, 6.

⁸³ Ellen G White, “Looking for that Blessed Hope,” *The Sign of the Times*, June 24, 1889.

⁸⁴ Religious Tolerance, “Women as Clergy: Religious Sexism, When Faith Groups Started Ordaining Women as Clergy and Consecrating Them as Bishops;” <http://www.religioustolerance.org/femclrg13.htm>.

⁸⁵ White, *Gospel Workers*, 452.

1. Ordination as formal and/or informal practice whereby a person's divine calling to a special work in the ministry of the gospel gets a public recognition by the church.
2. Ordination, unlike enthronement, has nothing to do with placement of a person to a leadership office; rather it is an authorization of person to perform certain special work in the ministry with full ecclesiastical authority.
3. The formal ordination is carried out by prayer and laying on of hands. Preaching of the word, and ordination charge are also part of the ceremony.
4. The rite of ordination exists in the church policy to secure a unity of faith, peace, harmony, and union of the flock by establishing the gospel order. It also helps to keep a proper administration of ordinances. Moreover, false teachers will not get access to the flock.
5. To achieve the benefits of the rite mentioned above, hasty move to ordination must be discouraged and the physical, mental and moral criteria must be used in passing the decision to ordain or not at the time.
6. The ordination of ministers, elders and deacons is mentioned in the writings of Ellen G. White. Aside from the ministerial line, she also advises to sacredly set apart the medical missionaries for a committed service.
7. Though Ellen G. White has remained silent on the topic of ordaining women as ministers (pastors), or local elders, she encourages women to have an active role in the gospel work in different capacities.
8. Ellen G. White applied ordaining by prayer and laying on of hands to women also, though not specifically mention to what ministry they get ordained.
9. Reading Ellen G. White's statements at the backdrop of her time, particularly how the society viewed women at that time, one can realize that she was a revolutionary in shaping the picture that many had about the role of women in the ministry.
10. Ellen G. White's conception of ordination is interwoven with the mission and unity of the Church. Thus, any discussion on the topic of ordination in the writing of Ellen G. White must keep the unity of the Church and foster its mission.