UNSERSTANDING ONE ANOTHER

The Meaning of Our Words

It seems it would be so much simpler if words had only one exact meaning, and everyone knew and accepted that precise definition. But this is just not the way it is. Not only are there multiple meanings to words, but there are also multiple perceptions of those meanings. Actually, it is not words that have meaning. It is people who bring meaning to the words. And perception is reality to the perceiver. It is in this conundrum of language and perception that we struggle to understand one another in different social settings, different languages and different emotional reactions to our words.

Not only do words have different meaning to us in the present, but they also change over time. An example of this is the usage Ellen White often makes of the word “nice” compared to how we use it today. She says that the church needs “nice work of wise laborers” (9T 117). While we are inclined to use the definition of pleasing or agreeable for the word, the original intent here is one of careful or delicate work. And if such a word can change in meaning like this over one hundred years or less, we must cautiously reflect on how the meaning of the word “ordination” can change over time, as well as in different cultures and languages.

As listed in *Young’s Analytical Concordance to the Bible,* the word “ordain/ordained” is translated in the KJV from eleven different words in the Old Testament, and from 13 different words in the New Testament. Multiple things are referred to as being ordained, such as sun, moon and stars (Psalm 8:3), an executioner (Daniel 2:24), a prophet (Jeremiah 1:5), a priest (2 Chronicles 11:15), peace (Isaiah 26:12), twelve followers (Mark 3:14), a preacher (1 Timothy 2:7), elders (Acts 14:3), and many others items as well. Yet with all these uses and options for the word, what the church today has come to recognize as “ordination” in the context of ministry, does not occur in scripture. Furthermore, the English word comes as a loan word from Latin, reflecting its use in sacerdotal hierarchy of the church of the middle-ages. Thus the translation of the 24 words in the KJV as ordain/ordained, have no relation to the Latin loan word in English which arises long after the writing of Scripture.

Seeking to make this KJV translation an imperative as to how ordination should be practiced today is not valid. In actuality, it is a practice that developed as church institutions grew in structure long after New Testament times. Having said this, it should be made clear that while institution may be a valid expression of how the church operates, yet institutions are not the church. All the institutions we form are human institutions, whether they be IBM, or General Motors, or Microsoft, or the Government, or the Seventh-day Adventist Church. They all are human organization, and as such they require structure and governance which humans devise and manage. That does not necessarily mean they are somehow bad or evil. It just means they are human.

We might rightfully, or at least hopefully, expect that the institution of the church would be more God oriented and righteous than other business enterprises, yet to make the assumption that whatever the institutional church decides or structures is God derived and His will, is clearly demonstrated over ages of experience to be not only untrue, but at times, dangerous and maybe even blasphemous. In this context we may think Sadducees and Pharisees, or dark ages persecution.

It is in the reality of this humanness of institutions that we need to examine our version of the institution of church, where it came from, and how it operates today. In order to understand how the Seventh-day Adventist church operates, it is important to know how the structure of the denomination functions and from whence its institutional authority is derived.

Structure of the Church

There are four principle documents governing the church, and four constituent groups in its structure. The four documents are the 28 fundamental beliefs, the Constitution and Bylaws, the Church Manual and the General Conference Working Policy. The four constituent groups are the local church, the local conference, the union conference and the General Conference. Divisions are not constituent organizations, but rather are segments of the General Conference, providing leadership and direction in defined geographic territories.

The 28 fundamental beliefs, the Constitution and Bylaws, and the Church Manual are determined and modified only by vote of the General Conference in session. The General Conference Working Policy is determined and modified by vote of the Annual Council of the General Conference Committee.

These four constituent groups have authority over specific functions of the church that are assigned to and belong only to them. These functions may not be usurped nor countered by the other constituent groups. The local church is the only constituent level which can take action regarding membership issues, church officer election, appointment and ordination of elders, deacons and deaconesses, local church budgets and finance and other such local church functions. The local conference is the only constituent level that can take action regarding the sisterhood of churches, its pastors and employees, institutions and finance. It also votes to recommend to the union, individuals for ordination to the gospel ministry. But it does not have the power to authorize such ordination. Authority regarding ordination is vested in the union level of governance, along with the directions of its institutions and employees.

The General Conference sets the policies and doctrines of the church, including the criteria for membership, employment and ordination. This distribution of authority and responsibility is described in policy B 05, point 6:

Different elements of organizational authority and responsibility are distributed among the various levels of denominational organization. For example, the decision as to who may/may not be a member of a local Seventh-day Adventist Church is entrusted to the members of the local church concerned; decision as to employment of local church pastors is entrusted to the local conference/mission; decisions regarding the ordination of ministers are entrusted to the union conference/mission; and the definition of denominational beliefs is entrusted to the General Conference in session. Thus each level of organization exercises a realm of final authority and responsibility that may have implications for other levels of organization.

While the General Conference does set the criteria for membership and employment, it does not have the authority to determine who is fit for these roles. That is reserved for the local church regarding membership, and the union regarding ordination. So firm is the placement of responsibility and authority regarding membership with the local congregation, that no action regarding acceptance, transfer, discipline or even the recording of death, may be transacted by any other level of church structure.

Likewise, the authority regarding the selection of individuals for ordination is firmly placed with the union level. In a rather strange and contradictory document released by General Conference Secretariat in August of 2015, an attempt is made to counter the obvious meaning of this policy as noted below:

GC WP B 05, no. 6 is not a specific policy on ordination but rather is given as an example of church structure. The authority it references is not absolute or inherent to each union but is delegated by the General Conference itself. This means that each union’s actions regarding ordination must be in accordance with those of the General Conference since it is the source of the authority.

The authority given to the unions is not only delegated, but also limited. Unions have the power to *select* those to be ordained from among candidates proposed by conferences who meet the criteria set by the World Church. Authority to determine the criteria has *never* been delegated from the General Conference to any other organization—it does not belong to the work of the union but rather the criteria were voted by the World Church and are part of the GC Working Policy in the “L” section entitled “The Ministry and Ministerial Training.” In particular, the L 35 section outlines specifically the “Qualifications for Ordination to the Ministry” which have been voted by the World Church during Annual Council.

Policy B 5, point 6 is in the policy book and is a policy. How is it logical to reason that it is not a policy by calling it only “an example of church structure”? If this were the case, would we assume that the other provisions in this policy are not really policy either, such as issues regarding membership, pastors and denominational beliefs? Actually these examples are selected because they are among the most obvious delegations of authority designated to each of the constituent groups. Would secretariat like us to believe, for example, that the designation of doctrine to the General Conference level is not really a policy but merely an example? Further, as noted in more depth later in this document, the fifteen criteria listed for ordination do not mention gender as one of the requirements.

So firmly has ordination been understood in policy as belonging to the union level of governance, that is was deemed necessary to grant an exception to this rule in policy L 45, point 4 to allow division and general levels to authorize ordination for their own employees without having to seek such authorization form the union. As it states:

The division and its institutional boards will submit names recommended for ordination to the division committee. The General Conference and its institutional boards will submit names to the General Conference Executive Committee.

There would be no reason for including this variance if it were not so solidly obvious that ordination approval is assigned to unions. In order that the divisions and general levels would not be required to process their selections for ordination through unions where by policy it is assigned, it was deemed necessary to make these exceptions a part of policy.

Policy, Practice, Precedent and Perception

In a document released by the General Conference on August 9, 2012 responding to the July 29, 2012 action of the Columbia Union it is stated that “It is not accurate to say that policy follows practice.” Unfortunately, for the point of the August 9 document, this statement undermines its own attempt to indicate that the Columbia Union action is against General Conference policy because of the fact that there is not, nor has there ever been, such a policy regarding ministerial ordination requiring that only males may be ordained or that females are forbidden from being ordained.

As the August 9 document indicates, the General Conference does establish “the criteria for ordination….” There are fifteen such criteria listed in policy L 50, none of which refer in any way to gender. If, therefore, any individual approved by the union meets these criteria, the General Conference authority has been satisfied. Given that there is no gender reference in these fifteen requirements, the union is acting within its authority as stated in policy B 05.

Policy exercises the ultimate governance over practice. But in the case of gender issues in ordination, there is no policy. However, over a century of practice has created the perception that there is policy on this matter, and one hundred years of practice certainly does establish precedent. But it remains that policy is the issue in ordination, not practice, precedent, nor perception.

The August 9 document indicates that “policy itself is based on Seventh-day Adventist principles found in Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White.” This statement is in interesting contrast to one made in the June 29, 2012 letter of the General Conference Officers and Division Presidents addressed to the Officers and Executive Committee Members of the Columbia Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. This letter states, “Decisions (1975, 1985, 1990, and 1995) to withhold ministerial ordination to women have been made on the basis of negative impact to unity rather than on the basis of compelling evidence from the Bible or the Spirit of Prophecy.”

The point here is that these decisions are not policy, nor are they formed on what is the stated basis of policy, leaving one to wonder what they were based on – practice, precedent, perception, or perhaps prejudice? The question as to the authority of the General Conference to address these matters is raised in the August 9 document, and indeed the General Conference in session is free to consider anything it wishes. But unless it changes the policy and takes away the authorization given in B 05 to other levels of governance such as the local church regarding membership, or the local conference regarding employment, or the union regarding ordination, it is not free to intrude in these areas. Thus its attempt to counter the union authority in the area of ordination is a violation of its own policy.

If the General Conference wishes to address the issue of gender in ordination to ministry, it may do so, but only by changing its policy to a straight forward requirement that ordination is male gender exclusive, forbidding the ordination of females. There is no such policy presently in existence, nor has there been in the history of the church. Practice, precedent, perception and even prejudice do not constitute a policy. Only straight forward, clearly articulated policy governs the issue of gender inclusive ordination.

There is a perception existing that the General Conference cannot violate policy, that whatever it does constitutes policy, but this is not so. The General Conference can violate policy just as well as any other level of the church if it acts contrary to the provisions of policy. Unless and until the General Conference changes policy by vote, any action contrary to policy is a violation. Thus, the unions are not the entity that is out of policy on this matter of gender inclusiveness in the ordination of ministers, the General Conference itself is out of policy.

Another instance of the General Conference taking actions in areas where it does not have authority is in the authorization of the ordination of women to serve as elders in the local church. Several decades ago, action was taken to authorize this procedure, but given that there was no prohibition of such ordination previously, there was no reason to take such an action. While it may have been good to give counsel regarding this matter, it was an invasion into the territory of local church authority to officially grant permission for churches to do what was already in its purview.

Suppose it was proposed that the General Conference take an action to allow women to serve as church treasurer, or church clerk, or Sabbath School teacher, or director of the children’s Sabbath School Division. Such a suggestion would likely be dismissed as irrelevant, given that there is no policy prohibiting such an appointment. Likewise, the granting of permission to ordain women as elders was an unneeded invasion of church authority.

Further in the context of this action, divisions resistant to implementing this idea were granted a variance allowing them to ignore the policy if they so chose. Thus the notion of divisions needing to stay together in actions regarding the ordination of women, is shown to be irrelevant when it is used to prevent variance regarding ordination to ministry, but allowed for those who do not wish to ordain women as elders. Likewise, the argument that ordination to ministry is for the world church is also spurious, in that ordination as an elder is also for the world church. One ordained as either an elder or minister is eligible to serve in any church world wild where they are invited or assigned to do so.

A Policy to Allow Discrimination

It is clearly stated that General Conference Policy BA 60 05 opposes discrimination. “The church rejects any system or philosophy which discriminates against anyone on the basis of race, color, or gender. The Church bases its positions on principles clearly enunciated in the Bible, the writings of Ellen G White, and the official pronouncements of the General Conference.” Not only is this policy clearly stated, but it is represented as being supported by both scripture and Ellen White, leaving little room for argument.

This strong position is continued in the following section, BA 60 10 which states, “The world Church supports nondiscrimination in employment practices and policies and upholds the principle that both men and women, without regard to race and color, shall be given full and equal opportunity within the Church to develop the knowledge and skills needed for the building up of the Church. “

Thus far, the policy holds together. But the next sentence undermines and contradicts the position that has been clearly made and authoritatively supported. It states, “Positions of service and responsibility (except those requiring ordination to the gospel ministry\*) on all levels of church activity shall be open to all on the basis of the individual’s qualifications.”

This statement has been represented at times as prohibiting the ordination of women to the gospel ministry. However, it is not a policy forbidding such ordination. Rather it is a policy granting permission to exercise discrimination against certain classes of people. It is significant to note that the policy does not state who might fall into this category. It has been clearly stated in the policy that “race, color, or gender” are the issues being addressed, but it does not say who might be affected by this discrimination. Therefore, it could conceivably be equally applied to any one of the three categories wherever such discrimination is being practiced.

The underlying premise of the policy is one of granting permission to discriminate where such a policy exists. Thus the onus is on those who seek to discriminate, to establish such a position in their territory, not on those who do not, leaving them to proceed in harmony with the policy as it reads. The asterisk in this policy refers to a note at the bottom of the page which reads, “The exception clause, and any other statement above, shall not be used to reinterpret the action already taken by the world Church authorizing the ordination of women as local church elders in divisions where the division executive committees have given their approval.”

This policy establishes two matters which bear on the issue of the current discussion of the ordination of women. First, the policy establishes that the position it takes is discriminatory. The issues of gender, race and color are delineated as being covered by this policy, but it then selects one of these, gender to be specific, as an exception to the policy, thus indicating that discrimination is officially acceptable in this instance. One can imagine the justifiable outcry if either race or color, which also are mentioned, were selected as a valid reason for discrimination, which brings up the question as to why gender discrimination is acceptable and the others are not.

The footnote establishes the second issue relevant to the discussion. A major point in the argument against unions moving ahead with what is by policy their official domain of decision, is the call for unity in the world church. However, this policy indicates that the unity claim has already been officially breached among the divisions in the matter of the ordination of women as elders. As it states, this issue is to be decided by where “the division executive committees have given their approval.” Thus it already officially exists in the context of the ordination of women, that the divisions have gone their separate ways by authority of the General Conference Policy. This makes the argument of unity of no effect, given that it already does not exist by official sanction in the very area of the ordination of women as elders.

Likewise, the argument that ordination to ministry is for the world church, so it must be uniformly accepted, is also spurious in that ordination as an elder is also for the world church. One ordained as either an elder or minister, as noted above, is eligible to serve in any church world-wide where they are so invited. Furthermore, there is no gender restriction regarding serving as officers of the local church at all. It may be that in given churches or territories, there are local objections to openness in gender inclusiveness for church leaders, but this is not now, nor has it ever been a policy of the church.

In policy L 50, which outlines the fifteen qualifications for ministry, gender is not included. It has been observed that in the preamble to these fifteen qualifications, the words “man” and “he” are employed, thus indicating such matters apply only to males. There are two problems with this notion. First, the GC Policy book, prior to the late 1980’s was full of such gender language. It was decided at that time to edit out such usage of male gender terms which were typical of documents in that era and before. When this work was done, it changed the language in all but this policy. But to assume that such an omission was an intentional policy to exclude women is not valid.

Second, if we are to extend that line of reasoning to the 10 Commandments, then the tenth commandment clearly does not apply to women, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife ….” Furthermore, the admonition in Revelation 2 and 3, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches” would apply only to men. Further, the promise of Revelation 21:7 referring to the New Jerusalem, “He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son” would not apply to women.

Finally, this official recognition and granting of permission to discriminate against one of the classes of people listed in the policy is a direct violation of one of the Fundamental Beliefs of the church, Number 14, which states:

Unity in the Body of Christ. The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope, and reach out in one witness to all. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God, who has adopted us as His children.

Policy, Practice, Precedent and Perception

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Ordination authority is clearly defined in General Conference policy. Regarding the approval of persons designated for ordination as noted above, policy B 05 states, “decisions regarding the ordination of ministers are entrusted to the union conference….” Regarding such decisions, the policy further states, “each level of organization exercises a realm of final authority and responsibility….” Thus, in the selection and authorization of such individuals, the General Conference has no authority over the union decisions so long as these decisions are in harmony with the criteria established for ordination by General Conference policy.

As the August 9 document indicates, the General Conference does establish “the criteria for ordination….” There are fifteen such criteria listed in policy L 50, none of which refer in any way to gender. If, therefore, any individual approved by the union meets these fifteen criteria, the General Conference authority has been satisfied. Given that there is no gender reference in these requirements, the union is acting within its authority as stated in policy B 05. This has been so since this assignment was made in the early 1900’s as a result of the 1901 and 1903 establishment of unions.

The August 9 document indicates that policy exercises the ultimate governance over practice. But in the case of gender issues in ordination, there is no policy. However, over a century of practice has created the perception that there is policy on this matter, and one hundred years of practice certainly does establish precedent. But it remains that policy is the issue in ordination, not practice, precedent nor perception.

The August 9 document indicates that “policy itself is based on Seventh-day Adventist principles found in Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White.” This statement is in interesting contrast to one made in a June 29, 2012 letter of the General Conference Officers and Division Presidents addressed to the Officers and Executive Committee Members of the Columbia Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. This letter states, “Decisions (1975, 1985, 1990, and 1995) to withhold ministerial ordination to women have been made on the basis of negative impact to unity rather than on the basis of compelling evidence from the Bible or the Spirit of Prophecy.”

The point is that these actions are not policy, nor are they formed on what is stated as the basis of policy, leaving one to wonder what they were based on – practice, precedent, perception, or perhaps prejudice? The question as to the authority of the General Conference to address these matters is raised in the August 9 document, and indeed the General Conference in session is free to consider anything it wishes as noted above. But unless it changes its policy and takes away the century old authorization referred to in B 05 regarding other levels of governance such as the local church regarding membership, or the local conference regarding employment of pastors, or the union regarding ordination, it is not free to intrude in these areas. Thus its attempt to counter the union authority in the area of ordination is a violation of its own policy.

If the General Conference wishes to establish the issue of gender in ordination to ministry, it may do so, but only by changing its policy to a straight forward requirement that ordination is male gender exclusive, forbidding the ordination of females. There is no such policy presently in existence, nor has there been in the history of the church. Practice, precedent, perception and even prejudice do not constitute a policy. Only straight forward, clearly articulated policy can govern the issue of gender exclusive ordination.

There is a perception existing that the General Conference cannot violate policy, that whatever it does constitutes policy, but this is not so. The General Conference can violate policy just as well as any other level of the church if it acts contrary to the provisions of policy. Unless and until the General Conference changes policy by vote, any action contrary to policy is a violation. Thus, the unions are not out of policy on this matter of gender inclusiveness in the ordination of ministers, the General Conference itself is out of policy.

The General Conference Secretariat has produced multiple papers on this issue of policy on ordination. These are helpful and thorough reviews of the history of ordination policy and procedure in the church as it has been practiced and as it has morphed into the present policy. That secretariat has authority to express an opinion on this issue is valid. In fact, it has a responsibility to express opinions on issues. However, they are just that, opinions. These opinions are neither rules nor policies. They may be correct, or they may be in error, just the same as anyone else who expresses opinions. Without question the opinions of secretariat are weighty, but that does not make them necessarily accurate, nor does it prevent other opinions from being expressed. Unless and until this issue is made into a specific policy it remains in the zone of opinion.

How Did We Get Here?

The issue the of ordination of women was discussed by the General Conference officers as far back as 1950, at which time it was decided to appoint a committee to study the matter and report back to the officers. Again in 1970, a committee was appointed to study the issue and to report to the Autumn Council of the General Conference Committee later that year. In 1973, the report of the Mohaven Committee on women in ministry was accepted by the Annual Council, authorizing continued study. In 1974, the Annual Council voted to continue studying the issue. In 1985, the General Conference Session voted to study it further. In 1988, North American Division Leaders voted to end the discriminatory actions affecting women in ministry.

Beginning on July 12, 1989, a large, but unofficial group made up of church leadership from the world Divisions and General Conference met for five days of study and reflection on women in ministry at Cohutta Springs, Georgia. The purpose of the event was to bring a recommendation on the issue to the Annual Council which was to follow beginning on October 3. There was divergence of opinion on making the ordination of women a world church practice, but the consensus of the meeting was to recommend that such a practice was valid and acceptable in some portions of the church, but not all at that time.

Following this meeting, upon returning to the General Conference Office, which at that time was still located in Takoma Park, President Neil Wilson called a meeting of the officers and departmental staff of the office. This was prior to the time of the establishment of the North American Division as a separate entity, which occurred at the 1990 General Conference Session in Indianapolis. At this time, members of the GC departmental staff were assigned to serve specifically in North America, and members of the GC officers were likewise assigned to serve the North American territory. Thus those designated to serve North America were scattered in the four buildings which served as the office cluster for the General Conference. With no central office space and identity, the matter of working together as a division was complex.

It was at this staff meeting following the Cohutta Springs gathering that the ordination issue began to seriously go off track. Contrary to the opinion of some in North America, Wilson advocated that this issue must go to the General Conference Session in 1990 for a vote. Those who held to the idea that the selection of persons to be ordained was by policy up to the division, were overruled by Wilson who insisted that the matter be processed to the General Conference Officer group who would send it on to Annual Council for inclusion on the agenda of the upcoming General Conference Session in Indianapolis.

While it is proper for such bodies and the officers, the Annual Council, and the General Conference Session, to consider such matters and give counsel to the world church, what is not proper is for any of these bodies to take action usurping the authority assigned to other entities without first changing the policy which assigns such authority. For example, any of these bodies would be seen as totally out of line in seeking to take action regarding church membership which belongs exclusively to the local church. No other level may take any action regarding admission, dismissal, transfer or even the recording of the death of a member other than the local church. And no other level may use funds in any way other than what the individual donor has specified.

While it is true that the General Conference sets the standard for membership, yet the decision as to who may be a member of the church rests with the local church. Thus, the two most basic sources of what make up the church – membership and finance – both are controlled at this local level. The other levels of the world church have neither members nor money. As such, the concept of authority and power in the church as coming from the top, is turned on its head, and it is clear that the other three constituent levels are in place for the purpose of making the local level capable of functioning well. Without the local level, there is no church.

All this serves to demonstrate that any attempt to violate the assigned authority of any other level is a violation of long standing policy. Though the General Conference does provide the criteria for such matters as participation in membership, leadership, pastoral assignment and ordination, it does not have authority as to who may be selected for these positions, so long as the criteria are met.

At the 1990 Session of the General Conference, the report of the Role of Women Commission and the action of the 1998 Annual Council was given and accepted. The action reads as follows in the minutes of the Session:

While the Commission does not have a consensus as to whether or not the scriptures and the writings of Ellen G White explicitly advocate or deny the ordination of women to pastoral ministry, it concludes unanimously that these sources affirm a significant, wide ranging, and continuing ministry for women which is being expressed and will be evidenced in the varied and expanding gifts according to the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

Further, in view of the widespread lack of support for the ordination of women to the gospel ministry in the world Church and in view of the possible risk of disunity, dissention, and diversion from the mission of the Church, we do not approve ordination of women to the gospel ministry.

Given that there existed no action or policy of the church defining ordination as gender exclusive, therefore, the General Conference had no authority in this action to tell the unions whom they may or may not ordain. The General Conference would be within its right and responsibility to give council to the unions, but not to usurp the decision process which belonged to the union level.

It is important to be clear on the action taken in this matter at the Indianapolis meeting. It was not, as often represented, a vote forbidding such ordination, but rather the failure of an action to proceed with ordination. Thus the effect of this vote was simply that the proposed action went away. In fact, another action was taken granting performance of the functions of ministry to women pastors. This was done under the authority of a “Commissioned Minister” credential which, for women pastors, paralleled the “Ordained Minister” credential.

It is this word game, seeking to avoid the prejudiced and sacerdotal implications attached to the term ordination which come from the middle ages of the church, that makes the church today appear foolish in its actions. Playing with the words “commissioning” and “ordination” makes no sense, when both terms allow women and men to function in the same capacity as ministers in congregations and both receive the same ceremony, often at the same time. Both also receive credentials that vary only in containing the title of Ordained or Commissioned Minister.

Resisting the notion of sacerdotal significance in the ordination ceremony, Ellen White comments on the ordination of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch as recorded in Acts 13:1-3:

God foresaw the difficulties that His servants would be called to meet, and, in order that their work should be above challenge, He instructed the church by revelation to set them apart publicly to the work of the ministry. Their ordination was a public recognition of their divine appointment to bear to the Gentiles the glad tidings of the gospel. Both Paul and Barnabas had already received their commission from God Himself, and the ceremony of the laying on of hands added no new grace or virtual qualification. It was an acknowledged form of designation to an appointed office and a recognition of one's authority in that office. By it the seal of the church was set upon the work of God.

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, there is no record indicating that any virtue was imparted by the mere act of laying on of hands. There is only the simple record of their ordination and of the bearing that it had on their future work. (AA 161 & 162).

Much has been made of male gender terminology used in the whole of Policy L regarding The Ministry and Ministerial Training, seeking to use this as an indication of gender exclusiveness. However, even in this policy, the mix of gender is evident. L 20 point 1 and 2 state, “The purpose of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary is to provide, in harmony with the educational principles of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, professional education for the gospel ministry…. It is recognized that God does call men and women from various professions or vocations into the work of the ministry.”

The matter continued to be under discussion for the five years following the Indianapolis Session and was again placed on the agenda of the 1995 General Conference session in Utrecht at the request of the North American Division. At this meeting it was recognized that there was no biblical or theological support for a position forbidding such ordination, and the vote there did not forbid it, but rather stated that to avoid division in the world church, the request should be denied.

Neil Wilson, who was chairing that meeting, indicated a desire to speak in favor of the motion and so stepped down from the chair, turning it over to Calvin Rock, while Wilson took his place in the long line on the floor of those wishing to speak regarding the matter. There were two lines of such speakers, one for the motion, and the other against. These lines were of approximately the same length and comments were taken alternatively from each line.

It was of interest to observe that Neil Wilson was in approximately the same location in the pro line as was his son Ted Wilson, a Division President at that time, in the line opposing the motion. Slowly they both made their way to the floor microphones to express their opposing views. After a considerable length of time in discussion, Rock called for a vote on the motion proposed by North American Division request. It reads as follows:

The General Conference vests in each division the right to authorize the ordination of individuals within its territory in harmony with established policies. In addition, where circumstances do not render it inadvisable, a division may authorize the ordination of qualified individuals without regard to gender. In divisions where the division executive committee takes specific actions approving the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, women may be ordained to serve in those divisions.

The motion failed to pass, meaning that is simply went away. However, the assumptions of many is that it was an action denying ordination of women and establishing a male only policy for ordination. This is clearly inaccurate. Failing to pass a motion does not imply or establish the opposite of the failed motion. The result was that no voted action was taken or recorded. Everything remained the same as it was prior to the motion. And prior to the motion there was no policy to forbid the ordination of women. So, likewise, there was no such action or policy following the vote.

The issue continued to be debated for the following fifteen years and both the Pacific and Columbia Unions in North America took action to proceed with ordination of women in what they perceive to be their proper right according to policy. Following the 2010 General Conference session, a plan was initiated stating, “Biblical Research Committees in all divisions have been asked to conduct a study on the theology of ordination and its implications. In addition, during 2012, the General Conference Administrative Committee will appoint a Theology of Ordination Study Committee, with representation from all divisions, to oversee and facilitate the global discussion process and to prepare reports for presentation to the General Conference Executive Committee. The Annual Council 2014 will determine what action, if any, should be recommended to the 2015 General Conference Session.”

At the 2015 session, the vote on the ordination issue was stated in such a manner that divisions would have authority to authorize the ordination of women if they so choose. This action, like others before it, was out of harmony with policy which places such authority with the union level of church structure. Furthermore, divisions are not constituent entities and are, therefore, the wrong place for investing such authority, which by policy, resides at the union level.

Once again, the action failed to pass, which as before means that it simply went away. Ted Wilson stated it accurately at the close of the vote, indicating that nothing changed as a result of the failure of the action, including specifically the ordination of women as elders. But once again, there was the persistent perception that the General Conference had established a policy forbidding the ordination of women, which is inaccurate. Since no such policy existed prior to the vote, the result was as Wilson stated. Nothing changed.

There continues, however, to be a determination on the part of some to bring disciplinary action against unions that are perceived as being in rebellion to General Conference authority. The proposed action, depicted as a pastoral approach, with its probationary time frame, seems to see only submission on the part of the union conferences in order to avoid being subsumed by the General Conference as union missions, which removes the autonomy from the constituency and places control in the hands of the General Conference.

There is no precedent for such an action relating to segments of the church of this magnitude. Policy B 95 addresses the Involuntary Dissolution of a union, but this drastic action is reserved for unions “in rebellion” which hardly seems to be the case over an issue that is recognized as not being scriptural, not one of the fundamental beliefs, and is debatable as to whether the union or the General Conference has acted out of policy.

Likewise, Policy B 75 which addresses Adjustments in Organizational Status, is primarily designed to reflect changes in financial and territorial issues. As such, for much the same reasons as stated above, it does not fit the issues involved. The policy indicates a rather lengthy process to be initiated by the division officers and the Division Executive Committee which requires the calling of a constituency meeting and actions of the General Conference Executive Committee at Annual Council or Spring Meeting. If it is determined to proceed with the dissolving of the union, the action do so, according to B 95 requires taking the matter to the General Conference Session. These processes hardly seem reasonable or likely over such a matter that is recognized as being neither biblical, nor a fundamental belief.

The Crux of the Matter

In summary, the crux of the matter comes down to five points that need to be recognized and addressed:

1. It is not unions that are out of policy on this matter. It is the General Conference, both at the office level and at the session level, that are out of policy. While the General Conference does have responsibility to study, investigate and advise on such matters, it does not have authority to run counter to duly authorized responsibilities that are delegated to other constituent bodies of the church, including the local congregation, the local conference and the union. Doing so seeks to turn back the 1901 and 1903 of the General Conference sessions actions to establish unions in order to prevent this very kind of action and violation of policy. And it reignites the issues over which Ellen White stated that the General Conference, in its dictatorial actions, was no longer regarded by her as the highest authority on earth.
2. The issue of ordination, over which this authority matter has arisen, has again and again been stated, even in General Conference Session minutes, not to be derived from either biblical or Ellen White positions, but from the issue of unity. But this raises the question as to why is it only unity if those opposed to the ordination of women are allowed to assert their will on the church. Such a false definition does not resolve the issue, but rather exacerbates it. The purported notion that ordaining a woman in a church somewhere in North America will undermine and destroy the world church is nonsense. If that were the case, why has the group of ordained women pastors in China serving in very large congregations, not destroyed the church both there and in the rest of the world?
3. The issue of the ordination of women is not one of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs of the church, but the authorized policy of discrimination against women is a direct violation of belief number 14 which clearly rejects such action.
4. Those who seek to rectify this wrong in their territory are not seeking to impose their will on other regions of the church. Rather, they recognize that other cultures and settings may not be prepared to go with this concept “at this time regarding the ordination of women to the gospel ministry” as recorded in the 1985 General Conference Session Minutes. (1985, July 5 GC Bulletin 9).
5. Those who are opposed to the ordination of women to the gospel ministry actively seek to impose their will on others who live in different societies and perceive the matter in vastly different perspectives regarding the rights and proper treatment of men and women as equals in the sight of both society and God. Differences in perspective and the needs of the church in different areas, were precisely the reason that unions were established over one hundred years ago. The wisdom of that establishment must be preserved lest we destroy one another and the church in a rigid, top down, authoritarian structure that impedes the advancement of the mission of the church, or even undermines its ability to function as the body of Christ it is called to be.