**Adventist Reactions to Women’s Suffrage, 1909 to 1919**

**Introduction**

On April 11, 1892, William Gladstone, the progressive British prime minister who contributed significantly to extending suffrage to British men wrote a letter articulating his opposition to women’s suffrage. He declared that “I have no fear lest the woman should encroach upon the power of the man. The fear I have is, lest we should invite her unwittingly to trespass upon the delicacy, the purity, the refinement, the elevation of her own nature.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Many fervent religious figures who came of age in mid-Victorian English-speaking nations had similar ambivalent reactions to women’s suffrage. Some opposed women’s suffrage and did not see the dissonance between supporting women as evangelical preachers yet believing women’s appropriate sphere was the home.[[2]](#footnote-2) Catherine Booth, co-founder of the Salvation Army, during the 1840s to 60s, believed that women were subordinated to men as part of Eve’s curse due to sin. Only in later years did she actively support women’s suffrage.[[3]](#footnote-3) Some female preachers, such as Phoebe Palmer, denied vigorously any association with women’s rights.[[4]](#footnote-4) Other groups with prominent women leaders saw the coherence in advocating for women’s suffrage,[[5]](#footnote-5) but the movement’s perceived secularism that Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *The Woman’s Bible* embodied did not curry favor with Christians towards women’s suffrage.[[6]](#footnote-6) The failure of women’s suffrage in Utah in the 1870s to eliminate polygamy and reduce Mormon strength discouraged conservative and moderate Americans from supporting suffrage.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The subject of Seventh-day Adventism and the women’s suffrage movement is a glaring lacuna in Adventist scholarship, relegated largely to a scant footnote.[[8]](#footnote-8) The Adventist reception of women’s suffrage has been assumed to be lukewarm. However, the truth is more complicated. Individual, prominent church members were more supportive of women’s suffrage than has previously been acknowledged. Overall, the official response of the Seventh-day Adventist Church reflected the ambivalence of many mainstream Christians in English-speaking countries to women’s suffrage due to desire for respectability and the church’s eschatology but was not as uniform or catholic as has been assumed.

**Ellen White and Suffragettes**

Given the zeitgeist, it would be unsurprising for Seventh-day Adventists to be reluctant to embrace the women’s suffrage movement especially with the church’s eschatology. With the anticipation of the soon return of Jesus and the destruction of this mortal world’s nations, Adventists were slow to support politics, voting, and any social activism. Adventists viewed abolition, temperance, and Sunday laws as hindering human and religious freedom and, thus, participated in political activism in those specific domains.[[9]](#footnote-9) Why improve the world if its demise was so soon expected?

Ellen White made few statements directly on women’s suffrage. One of her most famous comments appears to be adamantly anti-women’s suffrage. In 1864, she states that people who "join the movement of Women's Rights, and the so-called Dress Reform, might as well sever all connection with the third angel's message. . .The Scriptures are plain upon the relations and rights of women and men. Spiritualists have, to quite an extent, adopted this singular mode of dress."[[10]](#footnote-10) Ellen White was concerned about spiritualism and the conflation of women’s rights, dress reform, and spiritualism. To avoid association with spiritualism, she disavowed women’s right and dress reform—stances she did not retain.

In 1874, while in Battle Creek, MI, Ellen White wrote a letter marked “private” to her husband James. She records a visit to Mrs. Graves:

She is desirous that women’s suffrage should be looked into by me, and she related many things of a startling character which were legalized in France and St. Louis . . . Mrs. Graves viewed the matter as I do in regard to the increase of crime and demoralization of society. She says women must vote if this law is [to be] withstood. We had a long talk in regard to temperance. I told her that my mind was unprepared for any such matter as women voting. She had been thinking and dwelling on these things, and her mind was ripe upon them, while my work was of another character.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Ellen White did not discourage Mrs. Graves from advocating women’s suffrage, but rather, that she was “unprepared” to support it. Mrs. Graves’s identity is important when considering Adventists and suffrage. Given the lack of explanation as to her identity, Mrs. Graves must have been well-known to the Whites and lived in Battle Creek. The woman fitting this description is Elizabeth Graves, wife of Leander Graves. The couple are included in the Battle Creek 1891 membership list[[12]](#footnote-12) and appear frequently both jointly and individually in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* as contributors to philanthropic causes.[[13]](#footnote-13) They were early converts to Adventism while living in Bucks Bridge, NY, in 1854. Tragically, all their children died young. As a result, they treated the Battle Creek College students as surrogate children and had over 300 students room with them. Leander was a skilled builder and helped construct the old Battle Creek Sanitarium, Review office, and other denominational buildings.[[14]](#footnote-14) This couple were prominent, philanthropic Adventists who interacted frequently with future church leaders. If such an influential woman was interested in women’s suffrage in order to promote moral values, undoubtedly, other Adventist women were involved in the suffrage movement.

As Gilbert Valentine explicates in “When President Wilson Changed His Mind About Policy for Women,” Adventist women in New Zealand were also actively involved in championing women’s suffrage.[[15]](#footnote-15) Valentine’s article focuses on Margaret Caro, a dentist working in Napier, New Zealand who converted to Adventism in 1888. Caro was a well-known social reformer and participant in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and women’s suffrage movement. Ellen White met her during her visit to New Zealand. During that stay in 1894, Caro was given a ministerial license by the New Zealand Conference.[[16]](#footnote-16) Ellen White praised Caro and her work[[17]](#footnote-17) and retained this friendship for years after.[[18]](#footnote-18) No mention is made of her ties to women’s suffrage, but Ellen White must have been aware of this connection as she utilized interest in temperance (which as in the United States was tied to the women’s suffrage bill) in New Zealand to increase interest in evangelistic meetings.[[19]](#footnote-19) Clearly, Ellen White no longer felt that participation in women’s suffrage was incompatible with church membership. Many of Ellen White’s statements arguing for acknowledgement and pay for female church workers were written during her time in New Zealand and Australia.[[20]](#footnote-20) In 1894, Ellen White wrote that a woman “is not to be dictated to and ordered about as a servant, but to stand beside her husband as his helper—equal in rights and doing her work as intelligently as himself.”[[21]](#footnote-21) In the same years Ellen White was writing such statements, New Zealand and the states of Australia were granting women suffrage.

Women involved in the temperance movement often became active in women’s suffrage. Through involvement in the WCTU, women saw moral imperative for women’s involvement in social reform and recognized their strength in changing society. Thus, the WCTU became an entering wedge into the fight for women’s rights.[[22]](#footnote-22) It was not a coincidence that the 18th and 19th Amendment followed each other in quick succession. Ellen White urged participation in the WCTU. In 1908, she wrote that “The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union is an organization with whose efforts for the spread of temperance principles we can heartily unite.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Ellen White’s advocacy of WCTU bore fruit with the conversion of Mrs. S.M.I. Henry, a prominent WCTU preacher. Henry favored women taking leadership roles and to be “ready to occupy all posts, to lead all charges, to storm all strongholds of the enemy to fight all battles.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Upon the death of Frances Willard, the founder of the WCTU and famed for her promotion of temperance and women’s suffrage, Henry wrote a hagiographical piece on Willard for *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* extolling Frances Willard as “the greatest woman” and God’s “appointed agent.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Following her conversion, at Ellen White’s urging, Henry remained active in the WTCU.[[26]](#footnote-26)

**Institutional Response to Suffrage from 1909 to 1919**

As Ellen White’s view for more equal women’s rights appeared to expand, the same expansion did not seem to occur on a corporate level. During the crucial decade of 1909-1919, the Seventh-day Adventist church faced a crisis.[[27]](#footnote-27) The founding members of the Adventist church were elderly or dead. In 1909, of the three original founders, only Ellen White remained, and she died in 1915. Without a living prophet, the church had to come to terms with its new identity. In May 24, 1909, Mrs. R. F. Avery requested to speak in front of the General Conference Committee on the topic of women’s suffrage. Her request was rejected ostensibly due to lack of time.[[28]](#footnote-28) As only one other item was on the agenda, their excuse has little merit. This same committee voted missionary licenses to single women and appointed women as delegates to the General Conference,[[29]](#footnote-29) so pure misogyny does not satisfactorily explain Avery’s dismissal either. More likely, the General Conference leaders did not want controversy.

The denomination’s publications overall similarly sidestepped women’s suffrage with few entries on the topic. The tone on the topic varied greatly from critical to positive. In 1911, *Present Truth* references California’s adoption of women’s suffrage as a “notable gain.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Two years later, a *Review* writer expresses concern about violent unrest in England over women’s suffrage instigated by the Pankhursts. The writer equates this violence with a peaceable march for women’s suffrage in the US and concludes that “both England and America are threatened with, not a civil war, but a domestic war, which seems certain to add to the turmoil of the world.”[[31]](#footnote-31) 1913 merited the most frequent mentions to women’s suffrage with four entries in that year alone but comprised mostly of excerpts from other newspapers. Most expressed concern about the Pankhursts and their violence.[[32]](#footnote-32) The Pankhursts’ form of suffrage did not appeal to Adventists but did not dissuade all. That same year another church periodical, *Life & Health*, comments on the presumably positive correlation of states granting women’s suffrage and giving pensions to widowed mothers.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Once women’s suffrage began to be granted by individual states, the general tenor of comments in official publications changed, indicating that the church aligned itself with larger cultural norms. After a hiatus of three years, suffrage appears again in denominational publications. Kansas is mentioned as a progressive state for its women’s suffrage and prohibition of alcohol and, therefore, a good field for Christian education.[[34]](#footnote-34) Subsequent references to suffrage appear to be positive correlating women’s suffrage with democracy. Australia is deemed the “most democratic” of all nations for granting women’s suffrage as early as 1894.[[35]](#footnote-35) Subsequent announcements mention that Iowa granted women the right to vote for president.[[36]](#footnote-36) Even the conservative *Signs of the Times*, that in 1911 recommended compulsory domestic service to dissuade women for agitating for the right to vote[[37]](#footnote-37) and seemed pleased with the defeat of women’s suffrage in Arizona,[[38]](#footnote-38) seemed to acquiesce and accept women’s suffrage when it printed a picture of Vice President Marshall signing the resolution for women’s suffrage.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Not all church periodicals were so ambivalent about women’s suffrage. The *Lake Union Herald* took a more activist approach. Starting in January 29, 1919, S.B. Horton, a prominent religious liberty advocate, urged women to vote on the temperance issue, reassuring women and men that voting for prohibition was an appropriate cause and enlisting Ellen White’s statements for support.[[40]](#footnote-40) This article was given prominent front-page coverage. On February 5, 1919, he reiterated his admonishment to vote and included complete instructions for women from the *Battle Creek Evening News* on how to register to vote.[[41]](#footnote-41) On February 19, 1919, Horton assured women that although women’s suffrage had not been nationally extended, Michigan women still could vote.[[42]](#footnote-42) *The Canadian Messenger* in 1921 openly advocated women’s suffrage prior to Canada granting women full suffrage, too. It called women’s suffrage “one of the most significant developments in democracy.”[[43]](#footnote-43) The author contended that “women are mentally as capable of grappling with public problems as are men”[[44]](#footnote-44) and that only heathen cultures viewed women as inferior while the Bible establishes as women equal to men and capable of leadership.

Educational institutions found women’s suffrage fodder for debate and apparently reached conclusions. English classes at Washington Missionary College held debates on women’s suffrage.[[45]](#footnote-45) On March 5, 1919, G.H. Simpson reported that women’s suffrage was debated at Cedar Lake Academy as part of their literary program. Although he leaves the decision to women, he urges everyone, including ostensibly women, to vote for prohibition.[[46]](#footnote-46) A gossip column in the *Educational Messenger* reported that the students of Miss Garret’s English class had also debated on women’s suffrage and, “of course, the affirmative side won.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Although the gossip column was humorous, it showed the changing tide of attitude towards women’s suffrage, not coincidentally, as the issue was gaining ground statewide and nationally. Once women’s suffrage became accepted across the nation, official publications advocated suffrage, especially with the imprimatur of some within the Fundamentalist movement. *The Youth’s Instructor* reprinted a fundamentalist work that urged men to marry women interested in voting to offset votes by saloon keeper’s wives and Catholic women.[[48]](#footnote-48) Horton even more urgently urged women to vote on November 2, 1920.[[49]](#footnote-49)

As Laura Vance argues in *Seventh-day Adventism in Crisis*, sects, especially those with revolutionary new beliefs, often begin with women in leadership with a measure of equality, but as they mature and transition from sect to denomination, women are pushed to the margins and into domestic roles.[[50]](#footnote-50) This phenomenon has also been observed in revolutionary political movements.[[51]](#footnote-51) Despite or more likely because of the Seventh-day Adventist church’s revolutionary theological ideas, the church has tended to a more traditional or neutral stance on social issues in order to engender cultural acceptance. Official church publications (and by extension church administration) during the years 1909 to 1919 were generally slow to embrace women’s suffrage, openly supporting suffrage when it became culturally acceptable, but as illustrated in the church publications, the Adventist response was mixed with some openly advocating women’s suffrage all along and others reluctant supporters after the national vote.

**Conclusion**

A plethora of reasons exist for the church’s reaction to women’s suffrage—a desire for respectability, the church’s eschatology, the belief that social and political issues distracted from the central mission of the church, the loss of identity with the death of its founders, and conflation of the women’s suffrage movement with other movements considered antithetical to Adventism like atheism, spiritualism, and violence. Additional external social stressors included World War I and the underappreciated impact of the influenza epidemic of 1918. Amid the external and internal chaos, Adventist leaders likely wished to avoid divisive issues in order to support missional unity. Despite the absence of official rhetoric, church members in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and, undoubtedly, elsewhere, some quite prominent and in church publications, did support women’s suffrage. To truly understand Adventist history and its relationship to women’s rights, these men and women’s voices must be heard.

1. Samuel Smith, *My Life-Work* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1902), 568. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/> pt?id=uc1.$b42653&view=1up&seq=640. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Olive Anderson, “Women Preachers in Mid-Victorian Britain: Some Reflections on Feminism, Popular Religion and Social Change.” *The Historical Journal* 12, no. 3 (1969), 484. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Anderson, “Women Preachers,”483; "Booth, Catherine (1829 - 1890)." In *The Penguin Biographical Dictionary of Women*, (Penguin, 1998). <http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/> penbdw/ booth\_catherine\_1829\_1890/0?institutionId=720 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Anderson, “Women Preachers,” 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ronald D. Graybill, “The Power of Prophecy: Ellen G. White and the Women Religious Founders of the Nineteenth Century” (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1983), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Daily, “The Irony of Adventism,”157-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sarah Gordon, “’The Liberty of Self-Degradation: Polygamy, Woman Suffrage, and Consent in Nineteenth-Century America,” *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 3 (December 1, 1996): 823. <http://search.proquest.com/> docview/224912819/. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For example, in the *Ellen White Encyclopedia*, the issue of women’s suffrage is lumped under “Women’s Issues. See Kit Watts, “Women’s Issues,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2014), 1283-88; Steven Daily, “The Irony of Adventism; The Role of Ellen White and Other Adventist Women in Nineteenth Century America” (DMin diss., School of Theology at Claremont, 1985), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a more nuanced discussion of Adventists’ record on social issues and voting, see Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Involvement of a Major Apocalyptic Movement* (Knoxville, TX: University of Tennessee Press, 2001); Douglas Morgan, “Politics and Voting,” in *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2014), 1037-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ellen G. White. *Testimony for the Church* *No. 10*, (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1864), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ellen G. White, Lt 40a 1874, July 10, 1874. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church of Battle Creek, Mich., As it Stood Nov. 1, 1891; with Names of Officers, Committees, Trustees, Meetings, Church Covenant, etc.* (Battle Creek, MI: N.P., 1891), 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 2, 1868, 384. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. S.H. Lane, “Graves,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 10, 1903, 23; G.C. Tenney, “Graves,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 25, 1913, 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Gilbert Valentine, “When President Wilson Changed His Mind,” *Spectrum Magazine* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 72-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ellen G. White, *Daughters of God* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1998) 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See for example, Ellen G. White, Ms 22-1893, July 12, 1893; Ellen G. White, Lt 117-1893, July 12, 1893; Ellen G. White, Lt 17-1893, September 5, 1893. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See for example, Ellen G. White, Lt 146-1908, May 9, 1908. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Valentine, “When President Wilson Changed,” 72-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See for example, Ellen G. White, “The Duty of the Minister and the People,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 9, 1895, 433-34; Ellen G. White, Ms 47-2898, March 31, 1898; Ellen G. White, Ms 431-1898, March 22, 1898. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ellen G. White, Ms 110-1894, April 27, 1894. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For examples, see Edith Kirkendall Stanley, “Woman’s Christian Temperance Union,” in *Dictionary of American History*, ed. Stanley I. Kutler (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003), 496-97, Gale eBooks;

    Jane Ann Wilkerson, "Little Rock Woman's Christian Temperance Union, 1888 to 1903" (master’s thesis, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2009), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; Barbara Anne Springer, “Ladylike Reformers: Indiana Women and Progressive Reform, 1900-1920 (Temperance, Suffrage, Housing)” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1985), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; Rachel Elizabeth Bohlmann, "Drunken Husbands, Drunken State: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union's Challenge to American Families and Public Communities in Chicago, 1874–1920" (PhD diss., The University of Iowa, 2001), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ellen G. White, “Disseminating Temperance Principles,” *Review and Herald*, June 18, 1908, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *The Signal*, Feb. 24, 1881, 9. Quoted by Rachel Bohlmann, “Drunken Husbands,” 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. S.M.I. Henry, “Frances E. Willard,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 1, 1898, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Grace Durland, “W.T.C.U. National Convention,” *The Bible Echo*, January 29, 1900, 74-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Michael W. Campbell, *1919: Adventist Struggle with Fundamentalism* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2019) for a deeper discussion on the identity crisis. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. General Conference Committee, 360th Meeting, May 24 ,1909, 622. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. General Conference Committee, 358th Meeting, April 23, 1909, 619-20; General Conference Committee, 359th Meeting, May 8, 1909, 620-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. “Notes & Comments,” *The Present Truth,* November 2, 1911, 697. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. C.M.S., “Demanding the Ballot,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 6, 1913, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. “Woman Suffrage,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald,* April 17, 1913, 11; “Woman Suffrage in England,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 90, April 24, 1913, 13; “News and Miscellany,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 1, 1913, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. “Mothers’ Pension Laws,” *Life & Health: The National Health Magazine*, September 1913, 426. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. W.E. Howell, “Among the Schools,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 28, 1916, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Cecil H. Pretyman, “Australia and Polynesia,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 26, 1918, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. “News and Miscellany,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 15, 1919, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. “Frau Pauline Woerner,” *Signs of the Times*, 1911, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. “Our Correspondent, Mr. J.F. Blunt,” *Signs of the Times*, 1912, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Signs of the Times*, August 5, 1919, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. S.B. Horton, “The Saloon-Business Spirit Still Lives,” *Lake Union Herald*, January 29, 1919, 1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. S.B. Horton, “To Our People in Michigan,” *Lake Union Herald*, February 5, 1919, 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. S.B. Horton, “Important Notice,” *Lake Union Herald*, February 19, 1919, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. “Women in Politics,” *The Canadian Watchman*, April 1921, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. “Women in Politics,” 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. “Washington Missionary College Notes,” *The Columbia Union Visitor*, January 7, 1915, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. G. H. Simpson, “Cedar Lake Academy,” *Lake Union Herald*, March 5, 1919, 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. “Polly Says,” *The Educational Messenger*, February 1919, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. James Gordon, “The Woman Worth While,” *The Youth’s Instructor*, October 28, 1919, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. S.B. Horton, “A Word to Women Voters,” *Lake Union Herald*, October 27, 1920, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Laura Vance, *Seventh-day Adventism in Crisis: Gender and Sectarian Change in an Emerging Religion* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Thomas Laqueur, “Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology,” *Representations*, no 14. (1986), 18. doi:10.2307/2928434. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)