Female Leadership in the Davidian and Branch Davidian Traditions: Failure and Success

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for CESNUR Conference

Baylor University

June, 2004

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The phenomenon of female leadership in small American sectarian and cult movements has persisted for well over 200 years. Mother Ann Lee led the Shakers; Ellen White salvaged the Adventist movement; Mary Baker Eddy founded Christian Science; Catherine Booth led the Salvation Army; and Aimee Semple McPherson popularized the Foursquare Gospel.

In this paper I reflect on the two women leaders in the Davidian and Branch Davidian tradition, Florence Houteff and Lois Roden. I am primarily interested in three questions relating to their leadership: (1) How did they get power? (2) What were their policies as leaders? (3) What impact did their policies have on the movements?

Adventist Precedents: William Miller and Ellen White

The Davidians are Adventists whose origin is in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Adventist founder William Miller was preoccupied with computing the time of Christ's return. He saw the Bible as a coded book. He believed that if he understood the numerology and symbolism of the text, he would have the key to the future. Miller held that the key to calculation is found in the book of Daniel. Daniel writes of the 2300 days. Miller held that these are in fact years, not days. He then found the significant date to be 457 B.C., associated with return to Israel and renewal of the Temple. Thus in the late 1830s and early 1840s he predicted Christ's return for 1843. Expectation was high, but the prediction failed, and the group suffered its "Great Disappointment."[1]

Ellen White's interpretation helped save the movement, declaring that the time was right, but not the place. Christ's investigative judgment had occurred in heaven, not on earth in 1843. Adventists further elaborated their teachings. They said that the ten commandments have not been abrogated. God's people must worship on Saturday, not Sunday; they must never take another life, and hence they will be conscientious objectors in war. And finally, they must devote themselves to healthy eating, especially by abstaining from meat.

White is called the prophetess of the movement. A prolific writer, she is a

1. For the Millerite movement see Ron. L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millennialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993).

second founder of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. She taught new insights. White was keen to argue that the spirit of prophecy did not end with the Biblical era; it continued in Luther and Wesley--and will continue to the end of time.[2] Future Adventist leaders appeal to scripture and to "Sister White" to support their teachings. They call her "the Spirit of Prophecy." Ellen White drew her authority from her writing; her interpretation persuaded her followers.

Thus in the founding era of the Adventist tradition significant patterns emerge:

(1) First, leadership is established through convincing Biblical interpretation.

(2) Second, Adventists were open to female as well as male leadership.

(3) Third, the spirit of prophecy (the power to interpret) may be expected today as fully as it was during the Biblical dispensations.

Victor Houteff, Davidian Founder

Victor Houteff, Davidian founder, immigrated to the United States from Bulgaria in 1907. He was captivated by Adventist teachings and converted from his Bulgarian Orthodox faith. He devoted himself fully to his new faith and taught a Seventh-day Bible class in his church in California. However, he believed that the Seventh-day Adventists had compromised with the world and lost their way. It had become a Laodicean or lukewarm church. He called for Adventists to reform their lives. He taught that at the end of the present age God would have a remnant of 144,000 true followers. By 1929 the Seventh-day Adventists had reached over 300,000. Clearly they could not all be God's special elect. He criticized seminary-trained pastors, mixed bathing, and other forms of compromise with the world.[3] Seventh-day Adventist church officials responded by excommunicating him.

In 1935 Houteff moved from Los Angeles to two miles outside Waco, Texas, and established a thriving community of about sixty people. Many worked in town; others worked on the Davidian property. In the evening community members listened to his teachings. He published his teachings in tract form to serve as evangelistic tools. Houteff's reform group came to be known as the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, or simply Davidians.

Houteff derived his power principally through his teaching. He was working with Biblical texts and illumined them for his followers. His view of his work is

2. Ellen White, *Life Sketches* (Waco: Religious Liberty and Temperance Association, n.d.) 2, 9-10, 16. This is a reprint of an except from Ellen White's original 1915 publication.

3. Victor Houteff, *The Shepherd's Rod* (Waco, TX: Universal Publishing Association, 1930), Vol. 1: 52-53.

instructive. He said that in every generation a prophet shed more light on the Bible. He said it is like reading a scroll never before read. Thus, as one unrolls the scroll, new insights are revealed to the interpreter. Teaching the new interpretation of scripture was his task and his gift. This is what gave him power among the Davidians. Here is a clear example of Davidian leadership. The leader must have the gift of prophecy and other Davidians must recognize this leadership. His teachings will carry weight in the future among both Davidians and Branch Davidians.[4] His followers expected Victor to be the new Elijah who would usher in the new kingdom. They were devastated when he died in 1955. His wife stepped into his leadership role.

Ellen White claimed the Spirit of Prophecy, and Victor Houteff announced "Present Truth." This prophetic teaching gift is clearly essential for Davidians. But there are also dynamic social and personal factors at work in creating Davidian leaders. What is the role of kinship, key friends, and money in selecting a new leader? And what is the nature of opposition that might arise in shaping Davidian leadership?

Florence Houteff, Davidian Leader

Florence Houteff, Victor's wife, became the first female leader of the Davidians. Her parents, the Hermansons, provided $10,000 to the group early in its history to purchase old Mount Carmel. Florence thus apparently achieved leadership by virtue of her marriage to Victor, the financial influence of her family, and her dedication to Davidian teaching. Followers thought of her as genuinely devoted to the Davidian faith and practice, and she took over in a crisis moment. It may be argued that she lost power by her policies. Her brief tenure was marked by two major decisions. She sold the original Davidian property for real estate development and bought the second Mount Carmel for much less money in a rural setting, thereby generating substantial cash. Secondly, based on her interpretation of Ezekiel 9, she was expecting judgment on the Adventist Church and removal to Jerusalem to share in the new kingdom. The months following this non-event discredited her leadership.

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4. "As Branches we cannot fail to give credit to all Davidian groups who are publishing the works of Brother Houteff and making them available to the public. In this they are doing a good work!" Lois Roden, "Field Report 1979, Atonement Day, October 1, 1979, Waco Branch Davidians: Mark Swett Collection, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

Achieving Power

When Victor Houteff died in February 1955, Davidian leadership experienced severe crisis. In the Davidian constitution, *The Leviticus*, the presidency was reserved for the Davidian prophet, and Florence did not claim to be a prophet. However, she did name herself the Davidian leader, and the Executive Council elected her to the office of Vice President. Florence faced formidable opposition. M.J. Bingham had been head of the Mount Carmel school, but was sent away for sexual misconduct.[5] He returned to seek leadership but could not muster sufficient following to displace Florence. M.W. Wolfe, director of the Davidian ministerial courses in the on-site seminary, also publicly challenged Florence to prove that Victor had appointed her to be the next leader. She undermined the challenge by noting that Executive Council members could not prove their legitimacy since their terms ran for only one year and had expired.[6] E.T. Wilson, Victor Houteff's Vice President, was another potential rival, but age and illness prevented his serious consideration. Florence overcame all rivals. Not claiming prophetic status had its costs. Davidian member Glen Green observed, "Brother Houteff was the prophet, and when he said something people [did] it. You know what I mean." But "Sister Houteff, . . . was not a prophet and they would question her authority."[7]

Policies

Victor talked with Saether about selling Old Mount Carmel and began by selling the peach orchard. Florence stepped up the sales. The property was the focus of serious controversy. Many of the Davidians opposed the sale.[8] She sold 200 acres following Victor's death, and completed the sale in 1957. The land brought between $600,000 and $700,000. The Davidians bought new Mount Carmel in 1957 for $85,000 and built sixteen new houses. By 1959 there were eighteen houses, eleven barracks, a dairy, a church, a tabernacle.[9]

5. George William Saether, "Oral Memoirs," interview by Daniel B. McGee, 26 July 1975, interview 3, p. 337, transcript, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

6. Minutes of the Executive Council, 7 May 1955, p.3. Robert Darden Collection, GADSDA: Minutes and Proceedings, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

7. Glen Green, "Oral Memoirs," 2 Feb. 1985, interview 2, p.44, transcript, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX..

8. Rebekah Ann Crowe, 2004, "Because God Said I Was! A History of the Power Struggles within the Davidian and Branch Davidian Sects of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church," M.A. Thesis, Waco, TX: Baylor University, p. 15.

9. Saether, 378.

Following Houteff's death, Florence looked to scripture for guidance. Seven and its multiples or fractions were important in Adventist numerology and calculation. In the November 1955 *Symbolic Code* Florence announced that the new age would commence in 42 months (3-1/2 years), which worked out to Passover of 1959. The Davidians were careful not to announce the return of Christ; this kind of direct announcement had discredited William Miller. But they did tell reporters that they expected an important event in international history: war in the Middle East, the restoration of Israel's power, renewal of commitment in the Adventist church, or some other sign to mark the beginning of the age in which Christ would come to rule. Davidians gathered in large numbers (estimates vary between 600 and 900) at new Mount Carmel in anticipation of the great event.[10] When nothing happened, the Davidians experienced their own Disappointment, and most followers left Mount Carmel. By 1960 there were only about fifty people living at the Davidian site.

Influence on the Davidians

The sale of old Mount Carmel and purchase of the new land was not in itself a problem. However, the money generated proved a huge distraction in the later history of the Davidians. Florence spent money on improvements at Mount Carmel. Who would get the remaining money? Florence perhaps thought she was entitled to some of it since her family had given funds to establish the group in its beginning. The report was that she had taken $20,000 to restart her life in California. Her mother took an additional $10,000. Some Davidians such as Don Adair resented this development.[11] But others defended her handling of the funds. Glen Green's view was that she went to Mount Carmel at age seventeen in 1935 and had served for over twenty years, working many more hours than anyone else. He said that he thought she deserved the money she got.[12] Many followers had paid a double tithe in order to create a fund to care for them in retirement. They claimed this money, but the Davidians looked to their lawyer Tom Street and the courts to administer the funds. Hence the funds were partially dissipated by court costs and lawyer fees over the next generation.

Davidians generally did not blame Florence for the unhappy developments.They saw her as devout and dedicated. Some blamed Victor for creating an unreliable expectation. But from an outsider's perspective, Florence's term as

10. "Over 600 at Davidian Sessions Here," *Waco Times-Herald*, 20 April 1959, p.1.

11. Don Adair, *Interesting Facts and Worthy Information*, vol. 1 (Salem, S.C.: Mount Carmel Center, 1991), 40. He thought members of the Executive Council embezzled money received from the sale of the land.

12. Green, Interview No. 2, p. 45.

leader is usually reckoned to be a failure. Her new teaching was bold and gave her sufficient authority to attract hundreds of followers to come to Mount Carmel. But her prediction was unsustained by developments, and her control of funds was a source of controversy. In the end Florence made the decision to dissolve the Davidian organization in 1962. This step was unprecedented. She based her resolution to dissolve the group on "diversity of viewpoints on fundamental issues."[13] Disillusioned people had left Mount Carmel. Victor Houteff's teaching was called into question and so was the leadership of Florence. She thought it best to dissolve the association. This action left the movement in crisis.

Lois Roden, Branch Davidian Leader

But the failure was not fatal. Another dedicated Davidian arrived on the scene in 1955. Ben Roden essentially said that he knew the Davidians had been looking for a sign, and that he had a new teaching. He declared that Jesus was named "the Branch" in Zechariah 6:12, and that his followers would thus be called Branch Davidians. Some Davidians followed him, but most waited to see what would come of Florence's 42-month prediction. During the debacle of 1959-1961, additional members turned to the Branch Davidian founder for answers. One leadership failure provided an opening for success in a new direction. Ben Roden had successfully recruited significant followings in Texas, South Carolina, Virginia, and Florida.[14] In 1977 his wife Lois received a vision and was recognized as his co-prophet for one year. Ben died in 1978, and Lois became his successor. She did not have family money like Florence did, but she was married to the man who had led them for over twenty years (1955-1978).

Achieving Power

Following Ben Roden's death Lois took steps to consolidate her leadership among the Branch Davidians. In a circular letter titled, "Numbering the People," dated March 14, 1979, she wrote, "They appoint Lois I. Roden president of said association [and] signify that she has met the requirements of and is vested with the

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13. For example, debate arose over "whether the *Bible* or *The Shepherd's Rod* writings should be the final authority on matters of belief." See "Resolution to Dissolve," 11 March 1962, Robert Darden Collection, GADSDA: Minutes and Proceedings, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

14. Interview by author with Clive Doyle, July 9, 2004.

Gift of the Spirit of Prophecy."[15] The document then takes on a legal tone when it describes her full authority: "She holds in her sole possession all legal, moral and Scriptural ownership and rights to the Association, all its assets and holdings, and to operate the same for the furtherance of the association's work at home and abroad: to execute and administer the entire business of the Association. . . ." The letter closes with a place for members to sign their agreement with her claims to leadership.[16]

Policies

Lois Roden articulated new revelation, thereby demonstrating the gift of Prophecy and thereby achieving leadership status. She published her ideas in her journal, *SHEkinah,* and in booklets. Her most important new teaching centered on the gender of God. She affirmed that the Holy Spirit is feminine. Lois reminds the readers that the passage "let us make men in our own image, male and female" specifically mentions female gender as part of God's image. Therefore she concludes that God is female as well as male. She supported the truth of her teaching by appeal to a divine vision. She said, "There appeared, a fireball of direct revelation to Lois I. Roden in 1977 that the Holy Spirit is, indeed our Heavenly Mother."[17] Claim to divine revelation is critical in establishing authentic teaching. Lois goes beyond scriptural interpretation to direct divine authentication. If the leader affirms that through a vision "God told me," and the followers accept it, there can hardly be any more powerful legitimation of authority in religious circles.

In addition to revelation through vision Lois makes reasoned argument for her new teaching. She suggests, "The simplest clue to the gender of the Holy Spirit is to answer the question of how it is possible to have a Father, much less a Son, without a Mother. The term Father would be meaningless . . . without the means to produce the family image."[18] In other words, the notion of father and son in the godhead is sensible only if there is also a mother. Again, she affirms that this

15. "Numbering the People," p. 3, Circular Letter to Davidians, 14 May 1979, Waco Branch Davidians, Mark Swett Collection, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX

16. "Numbering the People," p. 3. This document was modeled on a letter previously drafted and sent to Branch Davidian followers by Ben Roden.

17. Lois Roden, "By His Spirit" (Bellmead, TX: Living Waters, 1980), p 4. This is a pamphlet, not to be confused with her three-part longer study by the same title. Roden elaborates on the description of her vision in Lois Roden, *In Her Image*, part 1 of *By His Spirit* (Waco, TX: Living Waters, 1981), p.18.

18. See the commentary on Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* in *The Shekinah*, August 1981, p. 10.

understanding "would seem more rational" than to understand God as three male personages.[19] Her "present truth" is to declare that God is both male and female.[20] She says, "We see two mediators, two intercessors, two sacrifices for sin. . . . Jesus . . . [and] the Holy Spirit. There are two members of the godhead, male and female. Both are working for the salvation of mankind."[21]

Lois' second major emphasis was to legitimate female leadership in the church. She took control of the Branch Davidian movement after feminism was well established in North American culture, and she found many contemporary sources which supported her interests. She also appealed to perspectives in the history of her tradition, reminding followers that women served as leaders early in Adventist history. She notes, for example, that in 1844 Ellen G. White, a young woman of only 17, received the Gift of the Spirit of Prophecy.[22]

Lois reproduced numerous articles on women's roles in religion from other journals as well as carrying new articles by Branch Davidians. She wrote of the "dark ages" of women's suppression and contrasted it with God's original plan in creation whereby BOTH male and female were equally authorized to lead.[23] She noted that in the history of Christianity the church and the state conspired to move the day of worship to Sunday, but it was a woman, Ellen White, who taught the Adventists to observe the Sabbath and thereby restored true observance of the fourth commandment.[24] She argues that the Bible nowhere prohibits women priests. Moreover, she campaigned for her ideas. For example, she went to the fifty-third World Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists in 1980 to lobby for the denomination to accept women into the ordained ministry.[25]

Lois traveled extensively, teaching and evangelizing, using the resources of the group to communicate her message. For example, she saw the papal visit to the United States in 1979 as a potential threat to religious liberty, and she orchestrated a huge tract distribution campaign against yielding to papal influence on the nation.[26]

19. Lois Roden, *The Shekinah*, August 1981, p. 10.

20. John Ashing, "The U.S. Woman Sees Holy Spirit as Female Figure, " in *The Shekinah,* August 1981, p. 21.

21 . Lois Roden, *Behold Thy Mother*, part 3 of *By His Spirit* (Bellmead, Texas : Living Waters Branch, 1980), 3: 6.

22. Lois Roden, "By His Spirit" (pamphlet), p.2.

23. Lois Roden, "By His Spirit," p.2.

24. Lois Roden, "By His Spirit," p.3.

25. Rita Halliburton, "Centexan: Holy Spirit Female," *Waco Tribune Herald,* 26 April 1980, p. 5B.

26. Lois Roden, "Field Report, 1979."

Her upbeat reports of her witness from Alaska to South Carolina indicate confidence that her message is being accepted.[27] When quizzed by reporters she said that thousands believed her teaching. Not all Branch Davidians accepted her new insights. Sidney Davis opposed her teaching and convinced a group of about one hundred people in New England that her teaching on the Holy Spirit was erroneous, and thereby created a major schism among the Branch Davidians.[28]

Influence on the Branch Davidians

Lois had influence not only in her new teaching and her evangelizing, but also special influence in the making of her successor. The natural choice would have been her son George.

George Roden, son of Ben and Lois, aspired to be the next Branch Davidian leader and thought he should inherit the position. The conflict was serious between mother and son. George had already rejected his mother's message, and on his father's death had tried to take control of the movement. He attacked her positions point by point on the equality of women, female priesthood, and nature of the Godhead.[29] George was opposed by most Branch Davidians.[30] Lois' group formed the majority in this conflict.

Vernon Howell/David Koresh came to Mount Carmel in 1981, proved himself an able teacher in 1983 and won the support of Lois Roden. George turned his venom against this usurper. He claimed that Howell raped Lois. Also he blamed "that Satan worshipper" Howell for burning down the administration building at New Mount Carmel in 1983. By the mid-80s the rivalry with Howell was intense and bitter. George wrote of "vile Vernon," who was his great rival.[31]

In 1984 George asserted his authority and also brandished weapons and occupied the church. Vernon Howell and his followers met away from the Mount Carmel grounds for their worship services, and over the next several months left for

27. Lois Roden, "Dear Heirs of the Kingdom," Letter, 29 August 1980, Waco Branch Davidians, Mark Swett Collection, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

28. Interview by author with Clive Doyle, July 9, 2004.

29. George Roden, "Female Dominance" [Typescript], n.d., Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX, 6.

30. George Roden, "Brief History of the Conflict Between George B. Roden and Vernon V. Howell Since 1981" [Typescript], 19 January 1988, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX, 1.

31. George Roden, "To Brother and Sister Cochram," 16 November 1985, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX, 2.

Palestine, Texas. Howell returned with armed followers in 1987, and a shootout ensued. A trial was set for 1988. George eventually pronounced a curse of herpes and AIDS on the judges and ended up in jail. Howell had the money to pay back taxes, and the judge awarded the property to Howell's group in 1988. Financial resources and legal demands helped establish the Howell/Koresh faction in power.

Conclusions

Both achieving power and exercise of power are crucial in the stories of the Davidians and Branch Davidian leaders. Critical to each leader's authority was religious authentication through the notion of "Present Truth," a new body of interpretation added to the work of earlier leaders. Branch Davidians accepted this underlying concept and thereby invited and legitimated new leadership. Florence Houteff did not claim the gift of prophecy; Lois Roden did. But both had important agendas critical to Davidian identity in their time. Numerous additional factors influenced their rise to power, including marriage ties, financial resources, devotion to the mission of the group, and willingness of the group to accept women leaders.

The policies of these two leaders had important and lasting effects on Davidian life. The old Davidian tradition is alive, but it suffered severe setbacks following events of 1959 and 1962. Florence's legacy weakened the Davidians at a critical juncture and thereby allowed for the establishment and growth of the Branch Davidians under their founders Ben and Lois Roden.

Lois Roden supported Vernon Howell against her own son. Her influence was instrumental in leveraging him to power. Thus the account of her leadership includes not only dimensions of achieving and holding her own power, but also of transmitting it. She helped legitimate David Koresh's leadership with her blessing. Lois Roden's successful leadership is not merely interesting, it is key to understanding the following stages of the Branch Davidian story.

Leadership transition among the Davidians and Branch Davidians almost always invites competition, conflict, struggles and schism. Yet the movement cannot go on without leaders. Adventists have curtailed introduction of new ideas; Branch Davidians, on the other hand, have expected a new teaching from a new prophet. Hence the abundance of ideas expressed in Branch Davidian life.

These reflections raise the question of who will lead Davidians and Branch Davidians today and into the next generation. The Davidians and Branch Davidians themselves must identify their next leaders.