

## "Pentecostal Women in Ministry:

### Where Do We Go From Here?"

By

Sheri R. Benvenuti

Pentecostal women who are called to ministry walk a fine and often precarious line. We, on the one hand, are not radical feminists who demand certain fights, suspicion patriarchal hierarchy as the greatest of all human evils, or refer to God as "she" at every turn. However, on the other hand, we are not simply passive about our call to ministry. We do notice the "man's world" in which we must function, and we understand that the "female," too, helps make up what we know about the image of God. We are not women who wish to displace men, nor do we view women who are not called to ministry as being in any way inferior. We are women who simply and humbly ask that we be given room to be obedient to the Lord who has called us. We are certainly not the first generation of Pentecostal women who have pursued such an opportunity.

When one reads about some of the great women in our history such as Aimee Semple McPherson, Alice Belle Garrigus, Maria Woodworth-Etter, Marie Burgess, Kathryn Kuhlman, and Mae Eleanore Frey, it is encouraging to know that these extremely gifted women ministered with great success at a time in history that did not make life easy for them. Their call to preach seemed to supersede everything else in their lives, motivating them to pay a difficult price to fulfill God's will. Their faithfulness is of great encouragement to every Pentecostal woman in ministry today.

However, there is some disappointment at the present state of women in ministry in our Pentecostal fellowships. While there are indications that a few of our denominations are experiencing a small increase in the total amount of women who serve in those fellowships<sup>(1)</sup>, the figures reveal that there will be a slow upward climb ahead for women who are called to serve.

I must confess that I have a vested interest in the issue of women in ministry, not only from an academic perspective, but also from a personal point of view. I have been a Pentecostal minister for the last twenty-five years. During this time the discussion of Pentecostal women in ministry has come to the point where much work has been done both biblically and historically to redefine the opportunity for women in ministry positions. However, my experience still causes me to resonate with the great Assemblies of God evangelist, Mae Eleanore Frey who once said, "... for God-fearing, intelligent, Spirit-filled women, upon whom God has set his seal in their ministry, to have to sit and listen to men haggle over the matter of their place in the ministry is humiliating to say the least."<sup>(2)</sup> In addition to this difficult personal situation for women, there is also the greater

reality of a world desperately needing every anointed person to preach the gospel, while the Church busies itself with unending doctrinal debate over who is qualified to minister in what position. We are, in a sense, watching the house burn down while arguing about which fire truck to use. The time has come for Pentecostal women in ministry to leave the arena of debate and simply be who they are and do what God has called them to do.

In view of the need for practical solutions which will work to encourage women in this endeavor, the historical context from which we function is vitally important for Pentecostal women in ministry simply because it not only sets precedent for what we do, but also because history has a way of teaching some invaluable practical lessons. With this in view, there are at least three important needs that can be identified to justify a place for Pentecostal women in ministry.

### *The Need for Pentecostals to Return to Their Roots*

The moment this statement is made, one must assume that Pentecostals have indeed strayed from their initial identity. The fact that the participation of women in ministry is even an issue within the context of Pentecostalism suggests this to be true. There are at least two things which have contributed to this change from the early days of Pentecostalism.

First, as Pentecostal denominations began to formalize their structure, women who were active in every type of ministry position were simply left out of denominational leadership roles. Up to this point, in fact, there is little to suggest that women doing the work of the ministry, holding positions as pastors, teachers, and evangelists, were even questioned in the validity of their function. Men and women of that day seemed to be grounded in the understanding that because God chose women to participate in the New Testament Holy Spirit baptism experience, it was only logical that they, too, should carry the message of the gospel. In the words of Mae Eleanore Frey, "God Almighty is no fool--I say it with all reverence--Would He fill a woman with the Holy Ghost--endow her with ability--give her a vision of souls and then tell her to shut her mouth?"<sup>(3)</sup>

In their insightful article concerning this idea, Charles H. Barfoot and Gerald T. Sheppard hold that in those early days, three factors were responsible for the equality of the sexes in Pentecostal ministry:

1. The importance of "a calling."
2. The confirmation of the call through the recognition of the presence of ministry gifting in the person by the community.
3. The community's eschatological belief that they were experiencing the "latter rain" in which "your sons and your daughters will prophesy."<sup>(4)</sup>

Barfoot and Sheppard suggest, however, that "as routinization and regimentation of community relationships set in, reactions did occur against the [Pentecostal] movement's prophesying daughters."<sup>(5)</sup> One vital reaction to which Barfoot and Sheppard refer involves the whole question of authority. That is, should women in ministry have positions of authority over men? As Pentecostal fellowships moved from the pioneer phase of their development into the formalization of church structure, a shift began to take place in the minds of the early framers of these groups. Where once women were free to function in any ministry gift, now some were unable to fulfill their call by being relegated to newly defined "feminine" roles, while others paid a great price to remain true to their call. That the idea of authority should be at the center of the discussion not only determined the path that early Pentecostalism was to take, but was a direct reversal of the position taken by the early pioneers of the movement.

In early Pentecostalism, authority was never the issue; rather, servanthood was always the focal point of one's ministry calling. Even the manner in which the church services were conducted suggested that early Pentecostals fully believed that the Holy Spirit himself held absolute authority, and the Spirit anointed whomever he chose to serve the body of believers. Frank Bartleman describes those early days:

Brother Seymour was recognized as the nominal leader in charge. But we had no pope or hierarchy ... The Lord Himself was leading ... We did not honor men for their advantage, in means or education, but rather for their God-given 'gifts...' The Lord was liable to burst through any one. We prayed for this continually. Some one would finally get up anointed for the message. All seemed to recognize this and gave way. It might be a child, a woman, or a man.<sup>(6)</sup>

While deconstruction of structural organization is not what is called for, what is necessary is a return to the biblical, and early Pentecostal, understanding that all authority is defined by the degree to which one serves. That is to say, for the Pentecostal, authority is not derived through position alone, as some may assert, but rather is found in the individual who serves the body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. With this understanding, the gender of the individual in question becomes irrelevant, for no one ever debates which gender is qualified to serve.

The second contributing factor is what Cecil Robeck calls "the 'evangelicalization' of Pentecostals."<sup>(7)</sup>

While Pentecostals have achieved a sense of acceptance and respectability through their relationship with the National Association of Evangelicals, "as evangelical values have been adopted by Pentecostals, the role of women in ministry has suffered."<sup>(8)</sup> Pentecostal denominations have traditionally allowed women much greater freedom in ministry roles than their evangelical counterparts. A return to our Pentecostal roots, in this case, would mean a return to the theology and experience that make us who we are: a diverse, yet

unified group of individuals who are each empowered by the Holy Spirit to function in ministry gifts.

Each of the women who were involved in ministry in the early days were women who were incredibly and undeniably gifted. These were women who reaped a great harvest. Many people were converted, many were healed, denominational boundaries were broken, and men, women, and children received the outpouring of their own personal Pentecost. Edith Blumhofer asserts that:

In the early Pentecostal movement, having the "anointing" was far more important than one's sex. As evangelistic bands carried the full gospel across the country, women who were recognized as having the anointing of the Holy Spirit shared with men in the preaching ministry ... A person's call-- and how other believers viewed it--was far more important than [ministerial credentials].<sup>(9)</sup>

For a Pentecostal, one's call to ministry is confirmed by the gifting. While denominational ordination is an important factor in validating one's call, it is simply that, a validation of the ministry one is already doing through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.<sup>(10)</sup> Consequently, women in ministry who are Pentecostals should be just that, Pentecostals. They should be encouraged to pray for the sick, preach, teach, evangelize, and do the work of the ministry, understanding that their validation comes through the gifting of the Spirit, as well as the corresponding ordination of the Church.

### *The Need for Role Models*

There is no greater example of the necessity for women to have role models than that found in the life and ministry of Aimee Semple McPherson. After 10 years of grueling evangelistic work, McPherson decided to settle down in Los Angeles in 1921. She purchased property near Echo Park, designed and built Angelus Temple, dedicating the new building on January 1, 1923. By the time she was thirty-three years old, Aimee Semple McPherson had established the first Christian radio station in the United States, a 5,300 seat auditorium in which thousands of people were saved and healed, a Bible College, and ultimately a denomination, all of which are still in operation today.<sup>(11)</sup> The International Church of the Foursquare Gospel now has well over 1.9 million members, with over 31,000 churches and meeting places in 72 countries around the world.<sup>(12)</sup>

While McPherson was uniquely gifted and greatly used of God, she did not exist in a vacuum. Other influential women had begun to pave the way for her, providing many models to follow and, as a result, a certain level of acceptance for women in ministry that she otherwise may not have enjoyed. The number of women providing a legacy of leadership in the Pentecostal movement were numerous. In addition to those women addressed in the articles under consideration, there were others such as Maria

Woodworth-Etter, who by the end of 1885, was drawing an estimated 25,000 people to her camp meetings. Also active in the Movement was Marie Burgess, who after having been baptized with the Holy Spirit in 1906 under the ministry of Charles Parham, began preaching in Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan, eventually founding the great Glad Tidings Hall in New York.

McPherson herself was not unaware of the impact she would have upon women in ministry, and in fact encouraged other women to follow her lead. In a lecture to one of her Bible School classes, she stated:

This is the only church, I am told, that is ordaining women preachers. Even the Pentecostal works, in some cases, have said, "no women preachers." But I am opening the door, and as long as Sister McPherson is alive, she is going to hold the door open and say, "Ladies, come!"<sup>(13)</sup>

She was evidently true to her word, for by 1944, the year of her death, women accounted for 67% of the ordained clergy in the denomination which she founded, the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. Following her death, however, a change in the number of ordained women began to occur. By the late seventies, the figure had dropped to 42%.<sup>(14)</sup> By 1993, the number of ordained women had decreased to approximately 38%.<sup>(15)</sup> While this ratio is relatively high compared to other Pentecostal denominations, it must be noted that a great percentage of these ordained women are wives of ordained pastors who do not necessarily function in legitimate church leadership roles, with only a handful of these women functioning as senior pastors of a congregation.

Even more interesting is the lack of women found within corporate leadership in the denomination. Because all executive offices are appointed, using senior pastors as the pool of possible candidates, coupled with the fact that there are few female senior pastors in the denomination, of the 34 executive council members, only 5 are women, with two of these women serving in traditionally female roles as Assistant Secretary and Director of Women's Ministries. Further, of the 166 divisional representatives, none are female.<sup>(16)</sup> While there may be other contributing factors, the lack of women in high-profile positions has surely made a strong contribution to the decrease of women who hold senior ministry positions within the Foursquare Church. Could it be that the absence of a powerful example such as Aimee Semple McPherson has contributed to this decline?

This phenomenon has not gone unnoticed by some of the leaders in the denomination. In fact, in February of 1995, the International Church sponsored the first National Women's Leadership Conference in Fort Worth, Texas. The 900 women who were in attendance strongly responded to the theme of the conference: Catch the Vision: Create a Legacy. These women obviously believe that it is not only important for Pentecostal women in ministry to fulfill their call in the present, but that by doing so, they will also create greater opportunity for future female leadership as well by modeling Spirit empowered ministry to the next generation of women.

## *The Need for Affirmation*

Pentecostal women who are called to ministry have need of affirmation from three specific sources. Harvey Cox, in his *Fire From on High*, has noticed the high value Pentecostals have put on "direct revelation." In his chapter that concerns Pentecostal women in ministry, Cox says of a testimony he heard:

It went a long way in answering my question about how so many women win the right to preach in a church which, at least technically, forbids it. It clearly demonstrated why Pentecostals, who take the authority of the Bible very seriously but also believe in direct revelation through visions, have opened a wider space for women than most other Christian denominations have. What the Bible says is one thing, but when God speaks to you directly, that supersedes everything else.<sup>(17)</sup>

While it is true that Pentecostal women in ministry have had a tendency to base the validity of their ministry on the "call" experience alone, one must consider that the call itself requires scriptural basis. Women must first function in ministry with the validity of their call resting in scripture, not in spite of it. Pentecostals must hold to the truth that gender bias runs in direct opposition to the entire message of the gospel. While it is true that in the old fallen order, sex discrimination is practiced, redemption in Christ has set us free from the practice of using gender as the criteria for determining positions of leadership within the Church. Paul declares that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Paul declares this rather radical statement within the context of a discussion with the Galatians concerning the futility of their attempts to satisfy the Old Testament law (particularly circumcision) by their own works, while continuing to maintain that they are living by grace. In Paul's view, circumcision, specifically a male rite, had fulfilled its purpose in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, however, the old rite has been replaced by the rite of baptism, in which **all believers**--male and female, slave and free, Jew or Greek--can participate. Stanley Grenz says of this passage in Galatians that,

Paul indicates that the transition from circumcision to baptism has destroyed the significance of the distinctions between persons which formerly were used to establish social hierarchies. These include appeals not only to ethnic heritage (Jew and Gentile) and social status (free and slave) but also to gender differentiations (male and female). Therefore the hierarchy of male over female introduced by the Fall is now outmoded ... <sup>(18)</sup>

For Pentecostals to live according to any hierarchical structure which exalts one race, one social group, or one gender over another is to bring ourselves under a bondage that was never purposed for us in Christ. That is not to say that organization is not necessary, it certainly is. However, we must live according to the New Testament injunction to "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21). All human relationship within the context of the community of God must always be guided by equal submission.

Further, looking to scripture as the foundation for ministry means that the "problem passages" must be wrestled through, using all of the academic tools available. My personal experience has been that once these issues were dealt with, in a manner true to hermeneutical principles that provided solid answers, I felt a confidence in my ministry that had not been experienced up to this point. In addition, not only is it important for the Pentecostal female minister for her own benefit to understand that she is functioning in ministry because of a scriptural foundation (not in spite of it), this knowledge will also serve to neutralize opposing doctrine, thereby opening a greater opportunity for women in official ministry positions.

Secondly, women are entering Bible Colleges and Seminaries in staggering numbers. In fact, according to 1993 statistics, 25-30 percent of the students enrolled in seminary degree programs in the United States are women.<sup>(19)</sup> Clearly, women are sensing the call of God to full-time ministry; as a result, they are responding to their call by pursuing formal education. It is vital, then, that our Pentecostal colleges offer education concerning women in leadership within the context of the Pentecostal distinctive. However, this education must not be in any way limited to women or to the subject of women in leadership, but should encompass both historical and Biblical analysis arising from a Pentecostal tradition. In short, young Pentecostals need to be taught the distinctives of their Pentecostal heritage and identity, which include the scriptural validation of ministry for women. This effort will not only give female students great confidence in their call through proper understanding and equipping, but will also serve to inform our young male Pentecostals, as well, preparing them to deal with the reality of the female ministers they will surely encounter in their ministries.

Last, the call of God, in addition to the act of ordination for female Pentecostals, becomes a moot issue unless ministry opportunities are available to women. Today, I can not look across my desk at a young female who is about to graduate with a degree in Pastoral Ministry and confidently say to her that there will be a position open to her in the local church for which she has been called and trained. For example, in the Assemblies of God in 1993, 15.2% of credentialed ministers were females, but 40.2% of that number were 65 years or older. And, only 1.06% of all credentialed ministers were female senior pastors. Further, there are some Pentecostal denominations that do not yet allow women full ordination. Because women who are called to ministry cannot be disobedient to the will of God for their lives and must be true to their calling, this lack of opportunity within the Pentecostal ranks will, I fear, cause many of our brightest and best ministers to defect to non-Pentecostal denominations where their fire and zeal is most welcomed, regardless of their gender.

Therefore, our Pentecostal fellowships must be willing to give equal opportunity to those women who are called to ministry, not merely allowing them the more traditional female roles in the church, but recognizing the possibility that no position in church/servant leadership is gender restricted.

### *Conclusion*

Today, Pentecostals find themselves asking what it means to be truly Pentecostal. With a new appreciation for education rising within their ranks, young Pentecostals, both male and female, are beginning to notice that in the early days of the Movement, Pentecostals were involved in the women's suffrage movement, were conscientious objectors, and were vitally involved in many areas of social reform. Further, there are some who are now calling for an abandonment of much of the evangelical theology which is diametrically opposed to the original Pentecostal experience, while at the same time holding to a form of biblical literalism, which is in effect, having the result of the development of a Pentecostal hermeneutic which is more in line with the Pentecostal experience.

Ideally, as women become more assured in their calling to ministry, more confident in their gifting by the Holy Spirit, and are affirmed in who they are biblically and historically through the process of education and ministry opportunity in their fellowship, these women will rise to the occasion.

"If..women are [no] less capable than men of piety, zeal, learning and whatever else seems necessary for the [ministry], then why ... should the church not draw on the huge reserves which could pour into the priesthood if women were here, as in so many professions, put on the same footing with men?"<sup>(20)</sup>

Why, indeed?

1. For specific statistics on two Pentecostal fellowships, the Assemblies of God, and the Church of God, refer to "The Contemporary, State of Women in Ministry in the Assemblies of God" by Deborah M. Gill, and "Perfect Liberty to Preach the Gospel: Women Ministers in the Church of God" by David Roebuck in *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 17/1 (Spring 1995) 25-36.

2. Mae Eleanor Frey, "Selected Letters of Mae Eleanore Frey," Comp. by Edith L. Blumhofer, *Pneuma* 17/1 (Spring 1995) 78.

3. Ibid. 77.



4. Charles H. Barfoot and Gerald T. Sheppard, "Prophetic Vs. Priestly Religion: The Changing Role of Women Clergy in Classical Pentecostal Churches," *Review of Religious Research* 22/1 (September) 4.
5. Ibid. 4.
6. Frank Bartleman, *What Really Happened on "Azusa Street"?* (Northridge, California: Voice Christian Publications, 1966) 32-34.
7. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., "National Association of Evangelicals," in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 635.
8. Ibid. 635.
9. Edith Blumhofer, *The Assemblies of God: A Popular History* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1985) 137.
10. Refer to the ordination of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13. Both men were already leaders in the church at Antioch when "the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'"
11. Rolf K. McPherson Interview, San Dimas, CA. October, 1992.
12. 1995 Ministry Report, International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.
13. Class Notes on the Book of Acts, LIFE Bible College, Los Angeles, N/D.
14. Barfoot and Sheppard, 15.
15. 1993 Ministry Report, International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.
16. 1995 Ministry Report, International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.
17. Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in The Twenty-first Century* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995) 131.
18. Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995) 178.
19. Gordon A. Wetmore, "God-Called Women," *The Seminary Tower* 49/1 (Fall 1993) 1.
20. Paul K. Jewett, *The Ordination of Women* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980) 14.