CHAPTER 1

Women in Ministry: A Pentecostal Reading of New Testament Texts

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Introduction

As the daughter of a Pentecostal pastoral couple, I grew up in the church. My mother, who along with my father received ordination in the Foursquare Church, did not feel a call to the preaching ministry. Her ministry, although she would not have called herself a minister, revolved around playing the piano and organ, directing the choir, teaching the women's Sunday school class, leading the women's ministry program, and serving as church secretary. As a child and teenager, my own involvement in ministry mirrored my mother's involvement; that is, I played the piano, sang, and, as I grew older, taught both children and adult Sunday school. It was in the area of teaching that I began to receive significant affirmation from the congregation. After I graduated high school, I attended Evangel College to prepare for a career in public school teaching. While I enjoyed learning about teaching and felt that it was certainly my calling, I did not find the same sense of satisfaction in teaching English and literature as I did when I taught the Scriptures in those Sunday school classes.

When my husband began his first pastorate and enrolled in graduate courses I attended one of his classes on hermeneutics. The professor lectured on Scripture, and I felt my spirit explode within me. I knew that this was what I wanted to do with my life; I knew that this—Scripture—was what I was called to teach. Never had I been told that I could teach the Bible or pursue ministry. I enrolled in the graduate program the following semester and began an academic track that enabled me to begin a career in college and graduate teaching with students preparing for ministry. Ultimately (and many years later) I completed both a ThM and PhD in the New Testament. While this testimony sounds very positive, I discovered along the way as my husband and I served as pastors of three congregations (two of them being classical Pentecostal churches) that my calling to ministry was not always well-received or even tolerated by some congregants or fellow-ministers. The reasoning was always the same: “The Bible says that women are not to teach in the church or have authority over the men.” No amount of reasoning or examples of women serving in ministry in the New Testament or in church history would change
their minds on the issue. They felt that the Bible proved that women must not be in ministry or church leadership. To argue against that position by suggesting that there were examples of women in ministry in the Bible was, in their minds, to argue against the inspired Scriptures.

Pentecostal women who have a calling to ministry or denominational leadership find themselves looking longingly at other denominations that have opened their doors, pulpits, and denominational leadership positions to women. I personally know of Pentecostal women who have joined these denominations in order to fulfill their ministry calling, yet my heart grieves for our Pentecostal denominations that have denied them leadership positions because of their gender.

Fortunately, Pentecostal scholars have published monographs and journal articles affirming women in ministry and challenging male hierarchy. Unfortunately, this scholarship is often largely unknown to Pentecostals outside of the (Pentecostal) academy. Organizations such as Christians for Biblical Equality International (CBE) work hard to educate the church on the important issues of equality and egalitarianism; yet many Pentecostals find an affinity with the views expressed by the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which adheres to the ‘Danvers Statement’ that calls for female subordination based upon an alleged biblical mandate.

Is there a way forward for Pentecostals? I would suggest that key for Pentecostals should be their understanding of the Spirit and the Spirit’s working in the community. For this reason, Acts 2 can be appealed to as a paradigmatic


2 See http://www.cbeinternational.org/.

3 CBE also publishes the The Priscilla Papers and Mutuality.