Perfect Liberty to Preach the Gospel:
Women Ministers in the Church of God

David Roebuck

O, God, give us an army of men and women who will fear nothing but God. Set them on fire with such holy zeal that no cries of fanaticism, delusion of the devil, manifestations of the flesh, or anything else will check the fervor or impede the progress until this glorious gospel is heralded to the uttermost parts of the earth and the full blaze of Pentecostal power, with all its signs, wonders and divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Ghost are ablaze and utilized for the glory of God, as at the beginning of this blessed glorious gospel Age.¹

A. J. Tomlinson

Women ministers were an important part of the ministerial army of the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) in its early years. When the first list of ministers was published in 1912, women were 12.2% of their ranks. Yet, even by that time, clear and definite boundaries had been drawn to impede the activities of women in this army. Women were encouraged to preach the gospel, but they were circumscribed in governmental voice, rank and ministerial authorities. My recent examination of ministerial credentials shows that early opportunities for women were far more limited than we have previously believed. The Church of God is continually changing, however, and during the 1990s opportunities for women are increasing in some encouraging ways.

Women played a major role in the spread of the Church of God during its infancy. They served as pastors, associate pastors, church planters, missionaries, workers, teachers and exhorters.² Yet, their primary role has been as evangelists—preachers of the Word.

This limitation is not surprising in light of the early Pentecostal understanding of the role and authority of women. Elsewhere I have suggested that early Pentecostals saw the preaching of women as a direct result of the empowerment and authority of the Holy Spirit to spread the gospel in the last days. Women preached under the authority of the Holy Spirit rather than under their own authority. Consequently, while they were encouraged to preach, they were unable to transcend other limitations on the roles of women.³

³ David G. Roebuck, “Go and Tell My Brothers? The Waning of Women’s Voices in American Pentecostalism,” a paper presented at the Twentieth Annual
Exclusion of Women from Governmental Voice

A. J. Tomlinson, the first General Overseer of the Church of God, was concerned about restoring proper apostolic government, and it was within the discussion of government that women were excluded from certain ministerial roles. At least as early as 1910 Tomlinson taught an understanding of the church that excluded women from any governmental participation. In an article in *The Evening Light and Church of God Evangel*, Tomlinson wrote that Pentecostals who were opposed to church organization did not properly understand the Bible. He contended that Pentecostals should have one doctrine, one organization, and one government because there is only one law-giver, Jesus Christ. Insisting that “Jesus gave His Church for government,” Tomlinson then defined the church. “His Church means government. It is not a legislative or law-making body. It executes the laws already given. It is also a judicial body, because it applies the laws already enacted to particular cases.”

At a later point in this article Tomlinson repeated his basic definition and added the exclusion of women:

Church then means government. Christ’s government. His Church. Here then is where women are to keep silence. 1 Cor. 14:34. ... There were no women speaking in the council at Jerusalem. No one talking in tongues. They were a judicial body, searching for and applying the laws to the particular case.

This definition of church as government, with the exclusion of women from that government, created a situation in which women were encouraged to preach and pastor local churches but were not allowed to participate in any type of business meeting. In a later article Tomlinson wrote, “Let the good sisters feel at perfect liberty to preach the gospel, pray for the sick or well, testify, exhort, etc., but humbly hold themselves aloof from taking charge of the governmental affairs.” Tomlinson failed to see the inconsistency in his logic that the Spirit would properly speak through women while they were in the pulpit but would not speak through them in a business meeting. For Tomlinson, this distinction provided a way of resolving a conundrum, however, Paul clearly stated that women were to keep silence in the church. Yet other passages indicated that women were involved in ministry, and the Pentecostal experience included the ministry of many women.

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