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Women of God: Women's Empowerment in the Words of Women in the Church of God in East Tennessee

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Women of God:

Women's Empowerment

In the Words of Women

In the Church of God

In East Tennessee

Misty Lizarraga

August 5, 1998

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Introduction

The purpose of this study has been two-fold. First, I began my search into local church communities in order to find evidence of women's spiritual experience and knowledge. I was looking for a tradition that incorporates an egalitarian sense of social order which may also be traditional. It was my contention that the language of feminism is not necessary for these women to find spiritual fulfillment and empowerment, even within a tradition which has often sustained patriarchy. These women often may not have been informed by or felt very conducive towards feminist ideology. They have been open to and informed by the egalitarian messages attributed to Jesus.

Second, I have long felt that the recording of women's voices is vital in order to gain an understanding of women's experiential insights. It would seem that often the insights of women have been more inferred than actually heard and examined. This phenomenon may be true of many categories of people, but as a woman, I have been particularly sensitive to assumptions concerning women. Elaine Lawless, Pamela Crant Owens, and others are also concerned with the gathering of women's ethnographies for similar reasons (Lawless 1988) (Owens 1993,thesis). Lawless asserts that there has traditionally been a lack of recognition of the importance of women's voices

in gathering ethnographical evidence within the field of Anthropology. Her focus in her works is to transcribe women's voices to more fully incorporate women as informants into ethnographies. Owens is also concerned with the lack of women as informants in many traditional anthropological studies. Despite her focus on Baptists, her thesis was important to my study for methodological guidance.

Growing up in the East Tennessee region, I noticed the effects of religion on the women around me. It seemed that the women who were the most serenely self-confident were those women who were closely involved with a church. As I matured, however, I began to reject the teachings about women that were preached in my Baptist church. Even as a child I could not accept that I was inherently inferior to males. Although the promotion of God's grace and brotherly love appealed to me, I finally rejected the church due to the views on women. These attitudes about women are not confined to Appalachian religions, but I did feel that Appalachian society, as a whole was repressive towards women. In my late teens I attended my first Pentecostal service at an independent church. Here I saw women take charge of worship in a manner I had never seen in my past experience. These same women were strong women within their home and social spheres. They did not speak strongly enough for my feminist tastes.

However, the impression of this sort of religious egalitarianism was not lost on me. I have subsequently made friendships over the years with women who have been influenced by this religious tradition. Many times I have noticed that these women seemed freer of dogma than their Baptist sisters did. I decided that I wanted to try to discover how these women were empowered through their faith. After reading about Pentecostalism, I became even more interested in this tradition. Many books and other writings support the notion that women have been allowed freedom of religious expression within Pentecostal traditions that is not often seen in mainstream denominations. This freedom often has been expanded to allow for women in positions of leadership within the church hierarchy.

After attending several different church services, I began to see that the Church of God women best exemplified what I was looking for. I have found that, in a traditional sense, the Church of God followers exhibit a strong egalitarian spirit among the members. The women seem to be strongly influenced by this spirit. Possible effects of the feminist movement are thus not always easy to discern. For instance, in more than one case where I had just explained briefly that I was doing a study on women in the church, a woman voluntarily brought up certain of Paul's passages concerning women. These passages were then explained in a way that

would have made Rosemary Radford Ruether or Phyllis Tribble proud. Were these interpretations due to the effects of feminist rhetoric on the general populace, or is this evidence of an older, biblical-based spirit of egalitarianism that is vital to either the traditions of this church or the traditions of this Appalachian region? Have these women incorporated this sense of their equal importance in society because of a commitment of their church to honor the literal messages of the Bible? I hope that this study can contribute to the answering of these difficult questions, although I realize that further research is needed.

Why Pentecostal?

Pentecostalism gets its name from the biblical account of Pentecost. Pentecostals believe that the promise made by Jesus to his followers that he would not leave them comfortless is proof of the validity of a belief in the Holy Spirit. In a later biblical account, tongues of fire and the wind of the Spirit that came down to the apostles during Pentecost caused the group to exhibit signs of the indwelling Spirit. According to Susan Lindley, “Twentieth-century pentecostalists believed that the Christians of their own day could and, indeed, must experience similar gifts of the Spirit, especially speaking in tongues and healing.” (1996, p.332) In the words of one of my informants, “It was like I was taken out, like some people talk about this out-of-body experience. I couldn’t see myself like they say. But I couldn’t feel anything but this..suspended, beautiful feeling of being totally lifted up. And I thought that has to be God. Has to be the Holy Spirit. That it’s saying that I’m in charge of your life that you’re in my hands. And that I can see what you are asking for, what you want. I just felt like He knew my whole heart (tearfully). And the next thing I knew someone was telling me that I was speaking in tongues.” (p. 12J-13J)

In the initial days of the Pentecostal movement (1890's to the early 1900's), Pentecostals were strongly negative toward worldliness and modernism. Many were antipolitical, antiwar, antidemocratic, anticapitalist, antiunion and a "force for social conservatism in that it abstained from social involvement and disparaged all social ameliorative efforts by others." (Anderson 1979, p.201) Many were also antidenominational, anticlerical, antitheological, antiliturgical, antisacramental, and antiecclesiastical. These attitudes ricocheted from radical social discontent to social conservatism. Anderson asserts that this tension was due to the disinherited status of most of the church members. In more recent times these attitudes seem to be diminishing, which may be a sign of the move from sectarian to denominational standing (Poloma, 1989). Poloma sees this move to be evident in the beginnings of many religious movements, early Christianity and the Pentecostal movement being prime examples. She notes that most Pentecostal churches have gone through this transition to a greater conservatism. In addition, as Anderson states, "when Pentecostals began to experience improvement in their social circumstances and to move into the middle classes, [after W.W.II] ...their intolerant assault on other religious groups and their fratricidal brawling decline(d)." (1979, p.222)

The impact of feminism on American culture as a whole may also have played a part in the attitudes of women who embrace a Pentecostal faith today (Stacey and Gerard 1990). Such may have been the case when a woman told me after church service one evening, “we wouldn’t even have had a need for women’s liberation if it hadn’t been for all those ‘macho male-chauvinist pigs.’” (see p. 27 below) Stacey and Gerard show in their work that much of what is taught in these churches has gone through a transition to more “feminized” interpretations. Scanzoni and Setta have also shown that this “feminized” re-interpretation was evident in the beginning of the movement. They have included in their work documents of women in that time period (Scanzoni and Setta, 1986).

There seems to be a dichotomy within the belief system of Pentecostal organizations. The tension is between the view that all are equals and one in Christ and the need to hold on to a reverence for a hierarchical worldview. Poloma states that, “[t]he experience of God can readily give way to dogma, ritual, and organization, with a religious group becoming more intent on perpetuating the institution than the religious experiences which birthed it.” (1989, p.6) According to Lawless, “The Pentecostal religion is egalitarian in its belief that all ‘saints,’ both male and female, have the right and even the obligation to openly express their joyful worship of God,” however, “the

belief that men have been placed above women in a heaven-inspired hierarchy” may be “more firmly entrenched than the belief that anyone can be a preacher.” (1988, p.110) My findings seem to support this view. Each woman that I interviewed upheld some sort of orderly hierarchy involving women and men. However, each one did see instances where this authority could and should be usurped. One of them said, “But after that, if you’re married, after that you answer through your husband to the Lord. But if your husband isn’t a Christian then you’re the head of the house. Because he’s dead. You see what I’m saying? Um, you’re born again when you become a Christian. And if you aren’t a Christian you’re dead to begin with.” (p. 7B)

I believe this is evidence of how women work out the conflict between their personal spiritual authority and their perceived social position as women. Each woman continually processes this conflict in order to define herself in relation to her religious tradition.

Lindley points out the existence of a pattern among Pentecostal groups in the late twentieth century: “(1) women ministers do, indeed, still exist, but (2) they face a good deal of opposition, and (3) they themselves do not identify female religious leadership with general support for feminism. Most pentecostalist women preachers self-consciously repudiate what they

regard as 'radical' feminism." (1996, p.338) Factors 2 and 3 may be why I had difficulty getting interviews with the female preachers I found.

The prominence of women as followers and as leaders in the growth and divergence of Pentecostal traditions has been recognized by many scholars. For example, Aimee Semple McPherson founded the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. Alma White was the founder of the Pillar of Fire Church. Some early evangelists in the movement were Mary Cole and Lena Shoffner. Women were accepted as teachers and pastors. In 1922, for instance, Bessie Hittle Byrum was named head of the missionary department at the Anderson Bible Training School. Many Church of the Nazarene pastors were women, including Mary Lee (Harris) Cagle, Lucy P. Knott, Mrs. A. F. Reynolds, and Mrs. Delance Wallas. (Anderson, 1979) Nevertheless, in many cases within the Pentecostal movement, women's authority was often limited due to a belief in a biblically inspired hierarchy.

Why Church of God?

The history of the Church of God is tied to this region.

Anderson states that “In Appalachia, the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) was a struggling Holiness group with fewer than a dozen congregations clustered at the juncture of Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia when it embraced the Pentecostal movement [in 1908]... Under the dynamic leadership of the newly Spirit-baptized Tomlinson, the Church of God grew rapidly, planting or absorbing congregations all through the southeastern states from Kentucky to West Virginia to Florida, though its center of strength remained in the Appalachians and the surrounding Piedmont country. By the early 1930’s the Church of God was the second largest Pentecostal communion.” (1979, p.115-119) In the years following, schisms developed, which seemed to follow a pattern common to the entire Pentecostal movement.

There are three reasons why I chose to interview Church of God women. I found the greatest female participation in the Church of God churches. At first glance, a visitor to the Church of God churches would be struck by the greater number of women compared to men. The active participation of women throughout the service is also very noticeable.

Women participate as speakers, musicians, testifiers, and healers. I saw women lead in the singing and in the preaching. These women are expressive and dynamic.

My second reason is that Church of God is a good example of a sect becoming a denomination. I became interested in examining whether Poloma's assertion was valid. She says that in the move from sect to denomination, many churches have historically shown gradual reductions of women in positions of power within the developing institutional hierarchy (Poloma 1989). According to Lindley, "During the 1920s, as the denomination became more organized and its ministry more formal in terms of education, official sanction, and hierarchical structure, women were increasingly excluded from the higher ranks of leadership and from more 'priestly' functions." (1996,p.334-335) Scanzoni and Setta also express this view (1986, p.233).

Third, I wanted to assess the assertion by Stacey and Gerard that feminism has made an impact on modern interpretations of the Bible, regardless of the claims of literalism (1990). The Church of God, which claims literalism, would be a good test case.

Pentecostal Women in Appalachia

A study of religious experiences within Pentecostalism should take into account what is significant to women. As Owens states, “A frequent problem with research on religion and the role it plays is the emphasis placed on the male experience as being representational of both the male and female experience.” (1993, thesis, p. 12) Lawless points out that, “Within the context of Christian religion in the United States, Pentecostalism offers creative religion to its members; the denomination has a history of breaking with long-standing Christian beliefs and rituals, of offering an arena for a participatory, charismatic religious experience.” (1988, p.8)

Historically the female experience has been important in the development of Pentecostalism. Lawless reminds us that within many faiths “female religious expressions lie in the realm of the traditional rather than the official. In Pentecostal church services, on the other hand, women testify, preach and pray. They have developed a forum for religious expression, and they use it to fashion the faith that means so much to them.” (1988, p.6)

Friedman notes that the general constraints of Appalachian society upon women seemed to have become suspended within the context of

Pentecostalism even in the early years. In her words, “In a society that valued conformity it seems strange that women’s struggle toward self-definition and social integration followed no set course. Each woman chose to accept, reject, or modify evangelical precepts according to her own individual need.” (Friedman 1985, p.129) Another aspect which Friedman brings up is that women in the South and Appalachia have been under more economic necessity to work than have women elsewhere in the U.S. I found that the women in my study emphasized individual salvation and sanctification. They made a point of not wanting to judge others, beliefs or faithfulness. All of them believe that they are called to attend closely to their own faithfulness. This view is closely tied to a belief in the importance of the indwelling experience of the Holy Spirit. The path these women follow in order to attain this holy union is informed by tradition, yet makes use of much personal interpretation.

Dorgan describes in detail the way in which an Appalachian woman in the Pentecostal tradition delivers her testimony. “As is traditional for much of Appalachian preaching, she begins her exhortations in prose but drops to a rhythmical chant once she reaches the quickened pace that she says flows from ‘anointment,’ the condition of spiritual empowerment that comes as a result of the ‘possession by the Holy Spirit’... Rhythm, of

course, is the main factor in this process as her Appalachian homiletic chant develops.” (1993,p.173) Dorgan believes that the “women of McDowell County—and perhaps elsewhere in Appalachia—undoubtedly find some comfort in the Holiness-Pentecostal codes that allow them to take charge of their religious institutions and practices... Readers familiar with Appalachian ‘old-time’ Baptist subdenominations will recognize that such gender-role shifts are not at all easy in those religious environments. In Appalachian Holiness-Pentecostal settings, however, Blankenship finds plenty of support for her acceptance of Joel’s proclamation ‘and your daughters shall prophesy.’” (1993,p.200)

The ‘call’ thesis, which is a strong tradition in Appalachian religion, is the “idea that God summons the believer to all factors of his or her spiritual life.” (Dorgan 1993,p.200) This aspect seems to be a call to freedom of religious worship for women as well as men. With the backing of God women express themselves at all levels of church participation. One of the women preachers at whose church I attended, made a comment during her sermon that she didn’t need the authority of those people in Cleveland, TN (the home-base of the Church of God organizational body). She and God knew that she was right with God.

The testimonies of women are vital elements to the life of a church. Participation in this realm deserves close attention. Lawless is interested in “how we might understand the political power of religious speech for the female members of the religiocultural community by examining their spoken testimonies.” (1988, p.8) It is my hope that this study can add on to such an enterprise by recording the words of women during private interviews.

According to Hardesty, Dayton and Dayton there are "six factors that help explain the general receptivity to women's leadership and public ministry among Holiness groups: (1) a theology centered in experience (conversion and sanctification as a second work of grace); (2) biblical authority along with subjective interpretation of Scripture in line with experience; (3) an emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit; (4) freedom to be experimental; (5) a reformist or revolutionary outlook that questioned the status quo; and (6) a tendency to form sects with organizational flexibility and that recognized the need for the gifts and leadership women offered.” (Hardesty, Dayton and Dayton, 1979, p.241-248)

Another contradictory aspect to Appalachian Pentecostal women’s religious involvement is the constraints which the church’s authority structure has regularly attempted to place upon women. Poloma states “that as prophetic Pentecostalism increasingly lost ground to its priestly cousin

[this occurred off and on through the early 1900's], women had to overcome institutional obstacles and unequal allocation of resources in order to demonstrate the fruits of a genuine 'call.'" (1989, p.106) Poloma also notes that the evidence of periodic re-affirmation of women as pastors shows a healthy tension within the church organization between fundamentalist factions and the desires of women within the church. Although I found no evidence of this tension at the local church level, I was not able to explore whether Poloma's statement is valid at a higher level of organization. I did find evidence that some members might not be as open as others might to women as authority figures in the church.

Plan of Study

In order to begin my study I began attending several Pentecostal-type churches in the Knox and Sevier County areas. These areas are close to my home and contain authentic examples of small Pentecostal churches with congregations consisting largely of Appalachian women. The people that attend these churches often hold on to the ideal of a rural life style that is, in the modern world, not the isolated existence of former years. I went to some non-denominational churches, to a Foursquare church and to an Assembly of God. The Church of God churches are where I found the flavor of the Appalachian temperament I had experienced in my youth. I also saw much female involvement and energy. I chose to focus on Church of God and began to attend more services and to take notes.

Next, I chose women whom I could interview. I chose those women whom I saw to be active participants in the church. These women also led deeply spiritual lives. One of the women in my study was no longer able to attend church regularly due to her physical ailments. However, she was very committed to a personal attachment with God and a study of the Bible. The two female pastors whom I met seemed receptive at first, but I was unable to secure dates for interviews with them.

I chose to use a tape recorder for the interviews so that I could more fully capture the voices of these women. Lawless explains why the use of a tape recorder to capture the words of believers is so important. She writes, "Verbatim transcripts have been invaluable in this study and should form the basis of any study of folklore traditions." (Lawless 1988,p.xii) She explains that "a 'folk church,' then, is not a folk church because its members are poor or marginal or psychologically unstable, but because the theological premises on which it stands, the order of the service, the plan of salvation, the practices and rituals performed at each service, are all established, maintained, and performed orally by the collective group involved." (Lawless 1988,p.4-5) I felt that the women who I interviewed spoke in a way that is reflective of the folkways of Appalachia and Pentecostalism. The storytelling aspect of making a point was often invoked, especially by B. The inclusion of documents written by women within the book Women and Religion in America impressed me as a truly scholarly approach (Scanzoni and Setta, 1986).

The questions I asked were focused on the beliefs peculiar to Pentecostals, the importance of religion to each informant, and the notions of authority and male/female relations. I also asked about the limitations for women in the Church of God. Some of my questions concerned the

millenium and the coming of Christ. My intent was to see if our social ills were being blamed on women or feminism. I also wanted to discover the relevance of certain notions of Christian feminists who "contend that the inspiration for the notion that women are the equals of men is not the affairs of the world, but the teachings of the New Testament." (Stacey and Gerard 1990,p.101)

Church Services

The church-goers whom I met in these churches often shy away from the label 'fundamentalist', yet ascribe to a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible and a distrust of modernism. Subjective interpretations of Scripture in conjunction with personal messages from God are generally accepted. These aspects, however, fall behind the emphasis on spiritual piety through the experience of grace. The born-again experience is necessary for salvation. The "good news" and a specific datable experience of spiritual rebirth are of utmost importance, which is directly followed by a warm-hearted piety. The churches I selected for my study ascribed to Holy Spirit baptism, glossolalia, and divine healing. It was my thesis that in such churches where doctrine was less important than the experience of God, women would have more freedom within the church and within their social and home spheres.

Some definition of terms may be necessary. When believers speak of the "rapture" or the "harvest" they are referring to the time when Jesus will return to gather up the faithful. "Out in the world" is a phrase to describe the state of unbelievers. When one is "speaking in tongues" one is filled with the Holy Spirit and begins to utter

sounds, which are taken to be a foreign language by the others. "The interpretation of what someone 'says' in tongues is thought to be the highest gift of all, but is rarely practiced, for it is agreed that interpreting is subject to the greatest risk; the burden of a mistaken interpretation lies with the interpreter, whereas the tongue-speaker is possessed and is not responsible for what is spoken," according to Lawless. (1988,p.52) This may be why I did not see any interpreting going on at the services I attended. Other behaviors whereby the members are "actively involved in exalting God and invoking the spirit to move among the members," are crying, jerking, and dancing in the spirit. (Lawless 1988,p.53) I saw ample evidence of these behaviors.

"Testifying is one verbal activity that all members are expected to perform within any given church service; a member is expected to rise at the pew and give extemporaneous testimony of faith in God or God's particular goodness to him or her." (Lawless 1988,p.53) "As folk performers, the verbal experts stand and deliver performances that are subject to critical evaluation by the other members of their group; prayers, testimonies, and sermons are all under scrutiny. Inappropriate performances will be scandals; appropriate deliveries

will elicit favorable responses from the audiences; in fact, audience approval is often signaled by overt audience behavior--dancing, singing, shouting." (Lawless 1988,p.8-9)

Seymour Church of God

I went to the Seymour Church of God on Mother's Day, May 1998. Several women and a young man went up front to speak on behalf of their mother's good works and influence. They each sang a song for their mother that they had personally chosen. A woman was the announcer for this ceremony. This took up most of the service. The pastor was Jeff Odom. The Adult Sunday school was led by a man. The next time I returned to the church was on Wednesday night of June 10. The first person I talked to was the pastor's wife. Very smiling and welcoming, she was young with two small children, one a baby. It was a small church with only three extra rooms and the bathrooms. As we entered the nursery near the front entrance, I explained my project to her. She was very interested. I asked how this church and Church of God felt about women preaching. According to her, the ministry is open to all. She explained that five others in her church were on the way to becoming ministers. Two of those were women, although they had not yet come forward to preach. The two men had. She voluntarily

explained that the injunction to women to be silent in church by Paul was due to a specific instance in which some women were gossiping in the back at church and that is why he said what he said. In her mind, this is not a proscription for all women for all time. I asked about the passage “and all your sons and daughters shall prophesy”. She agreed with the notion that this passage more accurately describes the way the church is meant to be. She seemed to feel very at ease with her conception of the church’s attitude towards women.

The church service was comprised of two-thirds women. Three women played music on piano, drums, and electric guitar. Anyone who wished was called up to sing in a choir, most were women. A man named Elvis who was married to Rose Mary lead the choir. First, he chose a song, which they sang, then asked if the choir had any requests. Different women in the choir chose some songs. Then they stepped down and a woman was called up to sing solo. Prayer requests were then called for. Many requests came from women. The pastor spontaneously called up a woman in the front row that was visibly emotional. He, the woman, and a few other women prayed around her. She trembled, jerked, and wept. Next, an offering plate was passed around. The children then went to other rooms for children's service. Then the sermon began on Acts, chapter 3: being

emboldened in the Spirit. There was much give and take between congregation and pastor. They frequently said "Amen," "Praise God," "Bless him, Jesus," and murmured "Jesus" repeatedly. The pastor even asked for these responses periodically in order to accentuate his points. Many raised their palms upward and towards those at the altar during the service and especially at significant utterances. During the altar call, many came forward. Mostly women but nearly every man came forward, although the men were very few. Three men and four women received direct hands on healing with oil directly applied to their bodies. Some received oil blessed on a cloth in order to deliver it to another. The others laid hands on the requester in support. As the prayers began, many different prayers from all around could be heard at once. Glossolalia occurred frequently by pastor and lay alike. In one cluster, three different women began speaking in tongues with the pastor, swaying and jerking with arms outstretched and hands laid upon one another. Then one woman was "slain in the spirit." She fell back to the floor while others eased her down and she lay prone while continuing to speak in tongues. The other women continued to speak in tongues and say prayers as the pastor moved to the other side of the altar to pray for another. After the last person came forward to be blessed, the women who had been most emotional testified as to their experiences with

the Lord. Two women had been in conversation together for the past two days over the telephone and shared Holy Spirit-filled experiences together. As one put it, "He came upon us and I don't know where she ended up but I was laid out between the micro-wave and the cabinet." This elicited laughter. The woman who was "slain in the spirit" related how she was driving to work when she was filled with the Holy Spirit, praising and talking to God, waving her arms and arriving to work with the help of Jesus. She had to sit in her car in the parking lot as she continued to receive God's word. Others said, Bless her, Lord. She also brought several prayer requests written down, many from her co-workers. These were put into a box at the altar and were prayed over with the same intensity of swaying and body jerking and glossolalia. People were beaming and weeping. The atmosphere was charged with good will. After service, all were smiles.

I spoke with Rose Mary while we were standing at the pews. While explaining my project to her, she said that the part where it says, "wives submit to your husbands," well it also says, "husbands love your wife as Christ loved the church." In her opinion if a man is not living up to this high standard then neither should a woman submit and be mistreated. According to her, the reason "women's lib" came about was because of all the "macho male-chauvinist pigs" that had misused the Word of God. She believes that

a woman would have no problem submitting to her man out of love if only he would uphold his end of the bargain to love and treat with respect the wishes of his wife. But where are the men like this, she asked? She said too many men just look at the "submit" part and think that they can act all macho and in a domineering fashion. She has been married to the same man for many years and they have two grown sons. I asked if she felt that the Promise Keepers promoted the right attitude for men. She said she had no personal experience with the Promise Keepers, but her brother had and as far as she could see by him, the P.K. did promote the right attitude for men. She said that a woman pastor was at another Church of God nearby. Next, we talked with Helen who is beginning a Food Ministry program with the church. Helen has always been very active in the church. She has six grown children, twenty-six grandchildren, and twelve great-grandchildren. She said that once a man said to her that he loved to see her pull up in her car as it was like opening a can of sardines. All the children (hers, neighbors, etc.) would pile out. She could pack twelve into her little station wagon.

Kimberlin Heights Church of God

Rebecca Milligan pastors at this church. She is known as Becky. The first time I went was on a Sunday evening, June 5. Many youth were present of both genders. Two-thirds of the attendees were women. There were over 50 present. Becky was out of town at a revival in Kentucky. Two men were prominent in the service. One man began the service and asked for prayer requests. Another man preached. Both he and his wife are working towards becoming pastors. His wife had bleached blonde hair, red fingernails, and a black dress. A young woman with an exceptional voice sang. A young man sang another song, and although he wasn't very good, the church vocalized encouragement. The people said Bless Him, Lord (or Jesus), Halleluah, and Praise God. The atmosphere was developed by singers, pastor, and church members. They whipped one another up. The next time I went was on a Wednesday, June 8. Becky was there, conservatively dressed. I told her of my work and she was interested and told me that she had an acquaintance that was doing a similar study for her Ph.D. Fewer people were there and there were fewer youth. Becky played the piano and sang while a man played the drums and a woman with a microphone accompanied. Becky is lively and has a strong voice. She really seemed to enjoy the piano and

singing. Others got up to sing, also. The crowd was mostly women. At one point Becky asked the women to get up and sing. About four got up front and sang in beautiful harmony. Then she began to preach. She read 1Corinthians 9:13. She was quite skilled at bringing in other passages of the Bible to illustrate any point she was making. She hollered and swung her arms as she strutted about. She stirred the congregation to an emotional pitch then eased them off with a gentle word or joke. At some points, she came to tears herself. One of her points was that we are on a journey and we must always be ready for the coming Christ. She talked about the little things we do daily in our encounters with one another, the store clerk, our co-workers, and families. She talked about how many of us probably hate our jobs, but we keep going because we have to with kids to feed and clothe and house payments to make. She comforted us with the statement: even if we falter, God does not. He has made a covenant with us forever. She emphasized our covenant and our individual journeys. The meeting ended with a powerful and emotional healing. Some one brought out that a troubled young man, whom the congregation knew, was becoming murderous and suicidal. They had known this boy all their life. They prayed long over him and spoke in tongues, although he was not present. A woman who had hurt her back and had been denied a x-ray because of

having the wrong insurance card moved Becky visibly. They all prayed over the woman to heal her. In addition, Becky said through tears, "God doesn't need no insurance card." It was a two-hour service. Becky said, "I'm going to shut up now." As some laughed she said, "You can say Amen to that, I know you want to." Several laughed and said "Amen".

Interviews with Notes

Transcribing from a tape recorder is difficult. I wanted to capture the flavor of oral speech since the sentences were constructed extemporaneously during the interview. Thus, it was not possible to follow typical rules of grammar. I decided then to place commas and periods where the pauses and stops in the speech dictated. If I had tried to clean it up the flavor and the meaning would have been lost. In addition, sentence fragments were too numerous.

The beliefs these women have in common are: a non-judgmental attitude and forgiveness, the centrality of God's love and His commandment to love one another, and a desire to maintain a deep and personal relationship with God.

Informant B.

She grew up in south Knoxville and Gatlinburg. She got married around age 18 and had four children. She was widowed young while she resided in Indiana. She returned to East Tennessee to raise her children near her family. She subsequently married four more times while living in Tennessee and Florida. She is in her fifties and still married. She has worked primarily at factory jobs and at times was able to stay home with her children.

She owns the King James and the Holy Bible translations. She also reads other religious writings such as the Mormon Bible and Watch Tower pamphlets, in order to compare.

She seems reluctant to address women's issues. Only when pressed will she elaborate on women's specific concerns and rarely does she color women's social positions in a negative light. She also does not like to disparage men.

She seems comfortable with a biblical-based hierarchy of God-Jesus-man-woman-child. However, she emphasizes an individual personal relationship with God and is able to illustrate ways in which the hierarchy is subverted.

She revels in storytelling. This is her preferred method of discourse.

She believes she has the gift of interpreting. However, since she does not attend church now due to her speech defect, she cannot test this idea.

Her speech defect has developed in her later years and is an embarrassment to her.

Her main source of holy inspiration comes from reading the Bible.

She feels that when reading, she connects with God and He reveals things to her.

Her deeper commitment to God is relatively recent, although she has periodically attended a Church of God throughout her lifetime.

Informant R.

She married relatively late when she was 28. She has been married to the same person for 26 years. She has two grown sons. She is in her early 50's. She has been a member of a Church of God since her childhood. She has always maintained ties with a church and with God. She grew up in West Virginia. She has lived in Texas, Tennessee (East and West), and Arkansas. She has musical talent and has taught piano for many years. She owns several Bible translations and is fond of the many translations.

Her outlook is very open and accepting. Her view is that we are commanded to love one another and help one another without judgement. She seems to live this.

Her views on male-female relationships seem to fit in with Christian feminist rhetoric. She agrees with equality for women.

She loves to tell stories.

Informant J.

She is 49 years old and has been married to one man since she was 18. She has three biological children, another child that was raised but never adopted, and a few foster children. She works as a dorm mother for the Church of God Home for Children in Sevierville. She grew up in Virginia and lived there most of her life. She has worked mainly at factory jobs. Her Bible sources are: King James (preferred), Amplified Bible, Living Bible, Nelson Study Bible, and New King James.

She takes a harder line on divorce than the other two. However, she emphasizes love and forgiveness as examples of Christ, which we commanded to follow.

She tells her life story as one that has been mainly a search for a connection with the Holy. She gets emotional when she relates her deep, personal experiences with the Holy Spirit. She has been "slain in the spirit" and has "talked in tongues." She has been able at times in her life to put aside her Self so that she could be closer to God. She has been able to dedicate her life to service.

She has no problem with her religion-inspired hierarchy. She does not like to see women as pastors. She believes a man should always be head of

the house. As much as her faith has allowed her personal expressive freedom, she does not like the freedom that women have demanded in the world. It is interesting, however, that she believes we have come too far to deny women their rights.

Conclusion

My study was limited in that the number of informants was small. Rather than canvas a broad section of women with a limited questionnaire I chose to do in-depth interviews with a few informants. I feel that this approach is important for a fuller understanding of how people (mostly women) construct personal religious meaning. In this regard my goal of recording authentic women's voices was achieved. In order to be able to draw more specific conclusions about what typical Church of God women believe, I would need to gather more women's stories together. I hope to be able to continue this work.

I was able to gather evidence on the discourse through which a few women view their place in society and in their interpersonal relationships in relation to their religious views. The language of Christianity has been for these women more empowering and fulfilling than the language of feminism. Not all of them, however, are averse to all feminist rhetoric. One informant was open to women's equality, although she would not call herself a feminist (p. 26R). She misses the "special treatment" women used to get, but believes we have gained a lot and deserve equal pay (30R). She reminded me of the old commercial where the woman sings "I can bring

home the bacon, fry it up in a pan....” She said that when it first came out she loved it, then as she was overwhelmed with all the responsibilities of motherhood she decided she hated that song. I took this to mean that she was rejecting the “superwoman” persona, which was popular in the 80s. Her views concerning women pastors and teachers was very accepting (26R and 31R). This woman told me about the pastor Rebecca Milligan. Her views on divorce were also very accommodating. She knows many divorced people and does not condemn them. Her son was married and divorced within a year. She is proud that her church accepts divorced people (16R). Her parents were divorced when she was a child, understandably so as her father was a violent alcoholic (24R). Another woman misunderstood the issue. She assumed I meant femininity when I used the word feminist (p. 6B-7B and 21B-22B). She did, however, say that women can be pastors. In her view if the Lord lays it on your heart to preach, whether male or female, you must preach (16B-17B and 23B-24B). This informant is the woman who had been married and divorced several times and she thinks divorce is necessary at times. Another informant seemed angry with the women's liberation movement (18J-19J). This woman feels that women were given the freedom to be educated through the Christian faith and that the women's liberation movement was the wrong way to get our freedom. She said she

would like to "punch the sow in the mouth who first started women's lib" (18J). However, this same woman feels that we have been given so much authority by our men that we cannot revert without a disruption of society (16J-17J). She feels that women should not become like men or try to be equal to men, as she was not meant to be his equal (19J). This woman cannot condone women pastors. She also cannot condone divorce. She believes that a woman need not submit to abuse and can leave her husband, but the marriage vows cannot be revoked (20J).

I saw evidence of a contrast between their egalitarian religious views and their views of women's place in a social and spiritual hierarchy. One of the informants seemed to contradict herself on this aspect and finally even questioned Paul's motives for writing his proscription against women speaking in church (22B-23B). She readily found a loophole for the injunction by Paul that women are to keep silent and answer to their husbands. She says that we can all pray silently, thus a woman can pray directly to God or Jesus through her heart (19B). This same woman subverts the hierarchy in her home by saying that she is the head of the household because she is the Christian and her husband is not (7B). In her interpretation, her husband is dead to Christ and thus he is not the head of their home. Another informant spoke using Christian feminist rhetoric,

although she was not acquainted with such writings. She interprets Ephesians 5: 22-33 to show that there are more directives for how men should treat their wives than how a woman should submit (26R-27R). She did not present a hierarchical worldview. The other respondent described the authority structure as originating with Adam and Eve. Adam gave up his authority too easily, here is a cause for many of our troubles (19J). She believes that women are allowed to speak, prophesy, and perform church functions only by the granting of authority by the men of the church (21J). She explains that she is given the authority to express herself through the Holy Spirit by the church hierarchy. Her female friend as an evangelist has been given the authority to marry people by the male pastor of the church (22J-23J).

The literalism that they subscribe to is not as fixed as one would assume. There is recognition of room for revelation from God. As one put it, she becomes connected to God when she is reading the Bible. The reading becomes a holy experience. God reveals different things to you at different times (8B-9B and 10B-11B). She questions Paul's motives in writing, "let your women keep silence in churches.." (22B-23B) Another informant told me that it does not change the meaning to use different words. She loves all the different translations of the Bible. She also

believes every word of the bible is true (29R). The other woman sees a differentiation between what was written into the Bible due to inspiration from God and what was inserted due to a more historical style of fact gathering (15J). She stresses that we each need to search ourselves to see which part applies to us. She also sees the literal interpretation of the Bible as often too unrealistic for us to apply to ourselves today (17J).

This discussion of literalism leads us to a discussion of personal interpretation. My first informant gave several examples of her free use of interpretation. As she narrated the biblical story of Ruth she injected personal interpretations while pointing out that she was doing so (1B-2B).

This woman often goes to scripture for personal revelation. She talks about reading the bible thoroughly in order to gain the full meaning. It is not always proper to pull out one or two verses in isolation (18B). In her interpretation of her status as head of household due to her husband's disbelief, she shows how personal revelation has empowered her (7B).

Like Brenda Blankenship in Dorgan's study and other women I talked to, she has attached a culturally and temporally specific connotation to 1 Corinthians 14:34 (1993,p.170-171) (23B). She does not see that this scripture means that women cannot be preachers. Another informant explains her take on Galatians 6:1 which commands us to help others when

we are spiritually strong and they are weak. She expands her definition to mean that we are not to be judgmental (18R-19R). She has obviously given much thought to the verses in Ephesians where many people pick out the “wives submit to your husbands” part and ignore the rest. She takes offense at what she calls this “twisting” of the scriptures. She pointed out that following the beginning quote, there are several directives towards husbands on the proper treatment of his wife. In her mind, if the man does not live up to his end of the bargain the woman does not have to submit (26R-27R). She often goes to scripture for answers to her problems. The other woman in the study did not talk to me about receiving answers through the reading of the scriptures. She translated the scriptures in a manner consistent with traditional conservative doctrine.

Personal empowerment for these women is drawn from several different avenues. At times, these women are empowered through the personal reading and interpretation of scriptures. Sometimes the public expression of their faith is the avenue of empowerment. The experience of being connected to God, whether through these avenues or through the actual indwelling experience of the Holy Spirit, seems to be the preferred experience of empowerment. However, they are not completely averse to worldly empowerment. One woman made note of her feeling of

peacefulness and her lack of fear when she made the full commitment to God (23R). She is also able to accept an empowerment that comes through the worldly struggle of women for equal rights. Another woman put much emphasis on her empowerment due to her connection with the Holy Spirit. She said that she needed the Holy Spirit within her in order to be able to live more fully in this life (11J). Her work with emotionally disturbed children has been trying. She attributes her ability to work in this field as a power that comes from God (13J). She describes the Holy Spirit as a comforter. The Spirit alleviates her fear (14J). She does not look to worldly measures as an avenue to empowerment.

Christian love and Christian duties towards one another were frequent topics for all of the women in my study (16B, 15R-16R, 24J). They all see that Jesus' main message is to love one another. An example of how we are further commanded to care for one another is in one woman's telling of Galatians 6:1. She believes that we are commanded to help one another without being judgmental. She further elaborates on this theme by pointing out that we are not infallible and we are all prone to sin at some point in our lives (18R-19R). Her interview shows that she fully believes in forgiveness. The aspect of forgiveness is also important to the other women. Tolerance is important to these women also. According to the first woman I interviewed,

she cannot say that there is only one way of being saved (11B-12B). She reads different versions of the Bible and even the Mormon's bible and Jehovah's Witness tracts. She says she does not want to miss out on anything (17B). She believes we are all one in Christ (24B-25B). Another woman points out that her church does not have a monopoly on the truth (15R). She is proud that unwed mothers and divorcees are accepted at her church. She illustrated this acceptance by telling me about her niece who was shunned at another church for becoming pregnant out of wedlock but was accepted at her church (17R). Furthermore, a granddaughter of one of the members of her church became pregnant out of wedlock twice. They proceeded to give her a baby shower. She pointed out that they were not condoning her actions they were just showing acceptance of her (17R-18R). Another woman told me that it is not our outward appearance but the fruit we bear that God notices. She told how people used to be taken off membership roles for sinning. She thinks it is good that this does not happen anymore. Our primary objective is to love and rescue one another (23J). She believes we are all one in Christ and that Pentecostalism is not for everyone. Pentecostalism is her "icing on the cake" (28J). She stresses forgiveness (29J).

Storytelling was quite important for two of these women. One of the important topics for one woman was her healing experiences and stories of others healing experiences. She had an experience of healing by the hands of a female prophet of another denomination (4R-10R). This experience has made a big impact on her. Many of her narratives concerning other people were on the topic of healing (12R-13R, 13R-14R, and 14R-15R). This woman enjoyed the storytelling method of making a point. She used stories to show how people were converted after their salvation experiences (22R-23R and 24R-25R). The other woman who used storytelling in order to make a point made a story out of an every day experience such as picking beans. She was able to show how God blesses us through our willingness to praise Him and accept our gifts from Him (9B). In her story of Ruth which comes from the Bible, she makes use of embellishments and tells us that she is doing so (1B-2B). These stories are one of the reasons I was grateful that I had used a tape recorder.

In order to be able to examine more fully the effect of social factors on the outlooks of these women would require more gathering of other women's stories. The other studies that I read did take note of these factors; however, my study was too limited to make any strong connections. The

correlation I can make between social factors and personal views are sketchy but sometimes suggestive.

All of these women have been wage earners for most of their lives. They mostly worked out of necessity. One woman has talent as a piano player and has worked teaching children and adults. Her work has been more of a calling than for economic necessity. This woman is more open to feminist concerns. She also spoke more about the need for a man to treat his wife properly, and less about blind faith. The suggestion is that there may be a correlation between economic necessity and a lack of freedom to accept feminist views.

Two of these women moved around frequently to many different states, either as children or as adults. These same two women were Church of God members for most or all of their lives. The other woman who moved around frequently within a fairly narrow radius of her hometown in Virginia, was the one who explored many denominations of Christianity before settling on Church of God. After her commitment to follow God's directive, she moved to Sevierville, Tennessee. This woman was the one who would not accept re-marriage as sinless and could not accept women as pastors. She had a significant Baptist upbringing and her husband did. Here is a

possible correlation between a Baptist background and less acceptance of women's liberation.

They all claimed a humble country lifestyle as children. They all have lived and been raised mostly in the Appalachian regions and by parents who lived in these regions.

All of these women are in their late 40s to early 50s. They are of the same generation. I would like to be able to compare differences between generations of Church of God women. However, I was drawn to these women because of their maturity. The greater extent of life experiences allows them to be able to reflect more fully on what they perceive to be the meaning of their tradition for them. It would be interesting to compare the wisdom of women of this age group across many religious traditions.

Two of these women took some college courses, one of them receiving a degree. These two were more versed in the meanings of terms that I used, such as feminism and fundamentalism. They also understood feminist rhetoric. They all, however, were equally well read when it came to the Bible. They all made it a point to study the holy text for personal meaning.

Two of these women were married one time to one man. The woman who was married 5 times was the one who was least educated. She was the

one who was reluctant to address feminist issues and reluctant to disparage men. She did, however, make allowances for women to be heads of households, to re-marry, and to be pastors. One of the women, who had been married to one man for many years, was more adamant about women's place in a social hierarchy and in the church. She was the one who came later in life to the Church of God tradition. The one with the most education and the musical talent was the most liberal of the three concerning women's rights.

The degree to which each woman experienced God daily and within church service seemed to be a personally empowering factor. I do not see that this factor leads necessarily to a broader acceptance of women in leadership roles. J. had significant indwelling experiences of the Holy Spirit, yet did not like to concede too much power to women as a group.

A comparative study that takes into account women's viewpoints in the Church of God tradition throughout the history of the church is needed. This type of study could shed some light on whether and how much mainstream ideas today have affected the outlooks of the women in the Church of God, or whether, as Christian feminists assert, "the inspiration for the notion that women are the equals of men is not the affairs of the world [i.e., secular politics and social and economic changes], but [rather] the

teachings of the New Testament." (Stacey and Gerard 1990, p.101) I can see evidence in this small study that supports the latter view in the fact that how each woman interprets the scriptures correlates with her acceptance of women as leaders. In addition, as in the case of R., knowledge of significant Bible heroines may allow for a more liberal view of women.

My findings have shown a correlation with most of the six factors of Hardesty, Dayton, and Dayton that may explain receptivity to women's leadership and public ministry among Holiness groups. Two of the women cited the primacy of experience and a calling as being greater than the social prescriptions of "woman's place." It is interesting that the woman, who was relatively late to this religious tradition, was more adamant about the hierarchy that puts man as authority over woman. All of these women seem to accept a subjective interpretation of Scripture. The two that were involved with Church of God most of their lives were the most open to this concept. These two also were less focused on church hierarchy and were more receptive to experimentation. They all strongly emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit. They did all question the status quo to some degree, however, the one who was the late comer was more angry with "worldliness." The other two did more readily recognize the gifts and leadership of women. It would possibly better reflect the deeper meanings

of the Church of God tradition to focus my studies on women who have been immersed in the tradition since childhood.

I hope to continue this type of study in order to expand the store of knowledge concerning women's religious experiences, especially within the Church of God tradition. I would like to gather the words of younger women in this tradition. In addition, it would have been very beneficial to this study to be able to interview the women pastors. Due to the nature of their calling to be gatherers of souls, they may have much relevant information for my study. They would also be able to shed some light on the experiences of women as pastors within the church organization. They may have felt more adversity towards them as usurpers of authority and may be reluctant to open themselves to scrutiny.

I see my work as being an important first step toward a greater understanding of the significance of Pentecostal traditions for women in our world today. The recording of women's words is vital to this understanding.

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