

WOMEN, PENTECOSTALS AND THE BIBLE:
AN EXPERIMENT IN PENTECOSTAL HERMENEUTICS

John Christopher Thomas*

Church of God School of Theology,
PO Box 3330, 900 Walker St NE
Cleveland, TN 37311, USA

I

Perhaps few topics have generated the kind of discussion among Pentecostal scholars over the past few years than that which has emerged around the issue of 'Pentecostal hermeneutics'. Scholars who have entered into this debate range from those who deny the need for a distinctive Pentecostal hermeneutic, preferring to follow current evangelical models, to those who are in dialogue with a number of methodologies that have come to the forefront within the last decade. While no consensus has emerged as of yet, it appears that many scholars working within the Pentecostal tradition are less content to adopt a system of interpretation that is heavily slanted toward rationalism and has little room for the role of the Holy Spirit.

Several reasons account for the desire on the part of some Pentecostal scholars to identify and articulate a hermeneutic that is more representative of the tradition and its ethos. Disappointment with the results of rationalism is one major factor in the emergence of this trend. Owing to the promises made for rationalism, growing out of the Enlightenment, many Western thinkers became convinced that pure reason was the key to the interpretation of any literature, both biblical and non-biblical. But the results of an unbridled rationalism have been anything but uniform, as witnessed in the diversity of current theological thought, which in and

* John Christopher Thomas (PhD, University of Sheffield) is Professor of New Testament at the Church of God School of Theology in Cleveland, Tennessee, USA.

of itself suggests that there is more to interpretation than reason.¹

The dearth of serious critical reflection on the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretive process has also whet the appetite of several Pentecostal scholars for an approach which seeks to articulate what the Spirit's role is and how the Spirit works specifically. It is, indeed, one of the oddities of modern theological scholarship that both liberal and conservative approaches to Scripture have little or no appreciation for the work of the Holy Spirit in interpretation.² Obviously, such a hermeneutical component is of no little interest to Pentecostal scholars.³

Another contributing factor to this recent surge of hermeneutical activity among Pentecostals is the belief of several scholars that the role of the community in the interpretive process is extremely important. Given the community orientation of Pentecostalism on the one hand and the excesses of a somewhat rampant individualism among interpreters generally (both liberal and conservative) on the other hand, reflection on the place of the community in the hermeneutical process would appear to be a natural next step in the development of a Pentecostal hermeneutic.

Finally, the recent paradigm shifts in the field of hermeneutics generally have suggested to some scholars that the time is right to enter into a serious discussion about Pentecostal hermeneutics. Not only have insights from recent hermeneutical discussions confirmed the appropriateness of certain Pentecostal interpretive emphases (such as the importance of experiential presuppositions in interpretation and the role of narrative in the doing of theology), but also the insights gained from a diversity of approaches to the biblical text have given some Pentecostals courage to believe that they too have some contribution to make to the current hermeneutical debate.

While it might sometimes be thought, or even charged, that Pentecostals desire to articulate their own hermeneutical approach merely to be distinctive, in point of fact it would appear that, just as Pentecostals have been able to help the church rediscover a number of biblical truths with

1. This assessment is true even of evangelical theology, where an extremely high view of Scripture has brought little consensus on a variety of interpretive matters.

2. C. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 155.

3. One of the few serious treatments of this topic among Pentecostals is the work of J.W. Wyckoff ('The Relationship of the Holy Spirit to Biblical Hermeneutics' [PhD dissertation, Baylor University, 1990]), who, after a historical survey, proposes a model regarding the Spirit's role based largely on an educational paradigm of teacher.

regard to pneumatology, so they may also have gifts to give when it comes to the interpretive process itself.

But what would a Pentecostal hermeneutic look like and, more importantly, how would it function? What would be the essential components of such an interpretive approach and how would one settle on them? These are just the beginning of a multitude of questions which this topic raises.

This short study seeks neither to offer an exhaustive overview of the topic of Pentecostal hermeneutics, nor to articulate in a detailed fashion a sophisticated theory of interpretation.⁴ Rather, it seeks to explore one possible paradigm, which is derived from the New Testament itself. After a brief discussion of this interpretive paradigm, the approach will be tested by attempting to gain leverage on a particularly difficult issue by the use of insights derived from this biblical model.

4. For some recent attempts at Pentecostal hermeneutics see the following: G.T. Sheppard, 'Pentecostalism and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism: Anatomy of an Uneasy Relationship', *Pneuma* 6.2 (1984), pp. 5-33; M.D. McLean, 'Toward a Pentecostal Hermeneutic', *Pneuma* 6.2 (1984), pp. 35-56; H.M. Ervin, 'Hermeneutics: A Pentecostal Option', in P. Elbert (ed.), *Essays on Apostolic Themes* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), pp. 23-35; F.L. Arrington, 'Hermeneutics', in S.M. Burgess and G.B. McGee (eds.), *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp. 376-89; R. Stronstad, 'Trends in Pentecostal Hermeneutics', *Paraclete* 22.3 (1988), pp. 1-12; *idem*, 'The Hermeneutic of Lucan Historiography', *Paraclete* 22.4 (1988), pp. 5-17; R.D. Moore, 'Approaching God's Word Biblically: A Pentecostal Perspective' (paper presented to the 1989 meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Fresno, CA); L.V. Newman, 'Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Suggesting a Model, Exploring the Problems' (paper presented to the 1991 meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Lakeland, FL); R. Stronstad, 'Pentecostal Experience and Hermeneutics', *Paraclete* 26.1 (1992), pp. 14-30; J.D. Johns and C.B. Johns, 'Yielding to the Spirit: A Pentecostal Approach to Group Bible Study', *JPT* 1 (1992), pp. 109-34; G. Anderson, 'Pentecostal Hermeneutics' (paper presented to the 1992 meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Springfield, MO); A.C. Autry, 'Dimensions of Hermeneutics in Pentecostal Focus', *JPT* 3 (1993), pp. 29-50; D. Albrecht, R. Israel and R. McNally, 'Pentecostals and Hermeneutics: Texts, Rituals and Community', *Pneuma* 15 (1993), pp. 137-61; and T.B. Cargal, 'Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy: Pentecostals and Hermeneutics in a Postmodern Age', *Pneuma* 15 (1993), pp. 163-87; F.L. Arrington, 'The Use of the Bible by Pentecostals', *Pneuma* 16 (1994), pp. 101-107; H.K. Harrington and R. Patten, 'Pentecostal Hermeneutics and Postmodern Literary Theory', *Pneuma* 16 (1994), pp. 109-14; R.P. Menzies, 'Jumping Off the Postmodern Bandwagon', *Pneuma* 16 (1994), pp. 115-20; and G.T. Sheppard, 'Biblical Interpretation after Gadamer', *Pneuma* 16 (1994), pp. 121-41.

II

It is possible, of course, to find a number of different hermeneutical approaches in the New Testament and several full-length studies have been devoted to the use of the Old Testament by various New Testament writers.⁵ Of these many interpretive approaches, one in particular has had a special appeal for many Pentecostals, especially at the popular level, and has recently also shown up in certain academic discussions on Pentecostal hermeneutics.⁶ This approach is that revealed in the deliberations of the Jerusalem Council as described in Acts 15.1-29.

As is well known, the Jerusalem Council came together to determine whether Gentile believers in Jesus had to convert to Judaism in order to become full-fledged Christians. Luke relates that when Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem with the report regarding the conversion of the Gentiles, certain believers who were members of the religious party of the Pharisees (τινες τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς αἰρέσεως τῶν Φαρισαίων) demanded that the Gentile believers (1) be circumcised and (2) keep the law of Moses. As a result of this report and its somewhat mixed reception, the apostles and elders gathered together to look into this matter (ἰδεῖν περὶ τοῦ λόγου τούτου).

The first person to speak, Peter, begins by noting the actions of God among them. It was *God* who chose to allow the Gentiles to hear the Gospel (through the mouth of Peter) and believe. It was *God* who knows all hearts who testified as to the validity of their faith by giving them the Holy Spirit. *God* had made no distinction between Jew and Gentile either in the giving of the Spirit or in the cleansing of hearts. In the light of such experience, Peter reasons that to place the yoke (of the Law?) upon these Gentiles would be tantamount to testing (πειράζετε) God. In contrast to the bearing of this yoke, Peter says that it is by faith that all are saved!

This speech is followed by a report from Barnabas and Paul, which also places emphasis upon God and the things that he did through them among the Gentiles, such as signs and wonders.

James now takes center stage and addresses the group. He not only

5. On this topic see especially E.E. Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

6. See especially the discussions of Arrington, 'Hermeneutics', pp. 387-88, and Moore, 'Approaching God's Word Biblically'.

interprets Peter's testimony to mean that God has received the Gentiles as a people unto his name, but he also goes on to argue that this experience of the church is in agreement with the words of the prophets, citing Amos 9.11-12 as evidence. Therefore (διό), in the light of what God had done and the agreement of these actions with the words of the prophets, James concludes that the Gentiles who are turning to God should not have their task made more difficult by requiring of them the observance of circumcision and the keeping of the Law of Moses. Rather, these Gentile converts are to be instructed to 'abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood'. In the letter written to communicate the findings of this meeting to the church at large, the decision is described as resulting from the Holy Spirit, for v. 28 says, 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements'.

Several things are significant from Acts 15 for the purposes of this inquiry. First, it is remarkable how often the experience of the church through the hand of God is appealed to in the discussion. Clearly, this (somewhat unexpected?) move of God in the life of the church (the inclusion of the Gentiles) was understood to be the result of the Holy Spirit's activity. It is particularly significant that the church seems to have begun with its experience and only later moves to a consideration of the Scripture.

Secondly, Peter's experience in the matter of Gentile conversions has led him to the conclusion that even to question the Gentile converts' place in or means of admission to the church draws dangerously close to testing God. Apparently Peter means that to question the validity of the Gentile believers' standing before God, in the face of what the Spirit has done, is to come dangerously close to experiencing the wrath of God for such undiscerning disobedience. In this regard it is probably not without significance that earlier in Acts (5.9) Peter asked Sapphira how she could agree to test the Spirit of the Lord (πειράσαι τὸ πνεῦμα κυρίου) through her lie. The results of her testing are well known. Is Peter implying a similar fate for those who stand in the way of the Gentile converts?

Thirdly, Barnabas and Paul are portrayed as discussing primarily, if not exclusively, their experience of the signs and wonders which God had performed among them as a basis for the acceptance of the Gentiles. That such a statement would stand on its own says a great deal about

the role of the community's experience of God in their decision-making process.

Fourthly, James also emphasizes the experience of the church through the activity of God as a reason for accepting the Gentile converts. It is clear that Luke intends the readers to understand that James adds his own support to the experience of the Spirit in the church, for James does not simply restate Peter's earlier words: he puts his own interpretive spin upon them.

Fifthly, it is at this point that Scripture is appealed to for the first time in the discussion. One of the interesting things about the passage cited (Amos 9.11-12) is that its appeal seems primarily to have been its agreement with their experience of God in the church. But how did James (and the church with him) settle on this particular text? Did Amos intend what James claims that the text means? Could not the believers from the religious party of the Pharisees have appealed with equal or greater validity to other texts which speak about Israel's exclusivity and the Gentiles' relationship to Israel (cf. especially Exod. 19.5; Deut. 7.6; 14.2; 26.18-19)?

When one reads the Hebrew text of Amos 9.11-12, or a translation based upon the Hebrew text, it becomes immediately obvious that there is no explicit reference to the inclusion of Gentiles as part of the people of God. In point of fact, in the Hebrew text, Amos says that God will work on behalf of the descendants of David 'so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations, which are called by the name, says the Lord that does this'. Although it is possible to read the reference to Edom and the other nations in a negative or retaliatory sense, it is also possible to see here an implicit promise concerning how Edom (one of the most hostile enemies of Israel) and other nations will themselves be brought into the (messianic) reign of a future Davidic king.⁷ Whether or not such a meaning was intended by Amos is unclear.

By way of contrast, the LXX rendering of Amos 9.11-12 seems to intend a message about the inclusion of other individuals and nations who seek to follow God. At this crucial point, the text of Acts is much closer to the LXX, which reads, 'That the remnant of men and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, may seek after [me], says the Lord who does these things'. The difference between the Hebrew text

7. So argues W.C. Kaiser, 'The Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of the Gentiles (Amos 9.9-15 and Acts 15.13-18): A Test Passage for Theological Systems', *JETS* 20 (1977), p. 102.

and the LXX seems to have resulted, in part, from reading 'Edom' (אֱדוֹם) as 'Adam' (אָדָם) and taking the verb 'they shall possess' (יִירְשׁוּ) as 'they shall seek' (יִדְרְשׁוּ).⁸ Whatever may account for this rendering,⁹ it is clear that James, as described in Acts 15.17, shows a decided preference for the LXX's more inclusive reading.

But why did James choose this particular text for support when other Old Testament passages (Isa. 2.3; 42.6; Mic. 4.2; and especially Zech. 2.11) appear to offer better and clearer support for the inclusion of Gentiles within the people of God? Such a choice is difficult to understand until one views it within the broader context of the Lukan narratives. Specifically, Luke seems concerned to demonstrate that the promises made to David are fulfilled in Jesus and thus have implications for the church.

In the Gospel, Joseph is identified as a descendant of David (1.27). The angel speaks to Mary regarding Jesus, saying, 'The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end' (1.32-33). Zechariah (apparently) speaks of Jesus when he says, 'He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David' (1.69). Joseph and Mary go to the city of David for the census because Joseph is of the house and line of David (2.4). Later, the angels direct the shepherds to the city of David to find Christ the Lord (2.11). In Luke's genealogy of Jesus, David is mentioned (3.31). In a dispute over the Sabbath Jesus appeals to the actions of David (6.3). The blind beggar near Jericho addresses Jesus as the Son of David when he calls for help (18.38-39). In a discussion with the Sadducees and teachers of the Law Jesus says that although the messiah is called Son of David, David calls him Lord (20.41-44).

This same emphasis continues in the book of Acts. Peter states that the Holy Spirit spoke Scripture through the mouth of David (1.16). In the Pentecost sermon Peter attributes Scripture to David again (2.25) and says that he foretold the resurrection of Jesus (2.29-36). A little later in the narrative David is again identified as one through whom the Holy

8. C.F. Keil, *Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 334 n. 1, and D.A. Hubbard, *Joel and Amos* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989), p. 242.

9. Some wish to argue that a Hebrew text that challenges the MT at this point lies behind the LXX. Cf. M.A. Braun, 'James' Use of Amos at the Jerusalem Council: Steps Toward a Possible Solution of the Textual and Theological Problems', *JETS* 20 (1977), p. 116.

Spirit spoke (4.25). In Stephen's speech David is described as one who enjoyed God's favor (7.45). Several references to David are found in ch. 13 in Paul's sermon at Pisidian Antioch. David is said to have been a man after God's own heart whose descendant is the Savior Jesus (13.22-23). Jesus is said to have been given 'the holy and sure blessings promised to David' (13.34) and his death is contrasted with that of David (13.36).

The reader of Luke's narratives would not be surprised at this **continued emphasis on David**, nor that James would bring it to its culmination. It would appear then, that part of the reason for the choice of this particular text from **Amos** is to **continue the emphasis on the continuity between David and Jesus**. It may also be significant that the first citation of Amos (5.25-27) in Acts (7.42-44) speaks of exile, while Acts 15 speaks of restoration.¹⁰ Consequently, to cite the rebuilding of David's fallen tent as the context for the admission of Gentiles into Israel was perhaps the most effective way of making this point.

Sixthly, **James rather clearly speaks with authority as he discloses his decision**. That the decision is closely tied to the previous discussions is indicated by the use of therefore (διό). That James has the authority to render a verdict is suggested by the emphatic use of the personal pronoun 'I' (ἐγὼ κρίνω). But as the epistle itself reveals (v. 24), **the decision was one which involved the whole group and the guidance of the Holy Spirit**.

Finally, several **stipulations** were imposed upon the Gentile converts. Most significant is the **omission** of a reference to **circumcision**. Aside from the directive to **abstain from sexual immorality**, the **other commands refer to food laws**. Although there is some evidence that their origin is in the regulations regarding aliens who lived among the Hebrews, as found in Leviticus 17-18, their **intent is rather puzzling**. Are they to be seen as the lowest common denominator of the Torah's dietary laws or as the true meaning of the food laws? Are they intended to be seen as universally valid? The practice of the **later church** (and perhaps Paul's own advice in 1 Cor. 8.1-13) **has not viewed the food laws as binding**, however.¹¹ Perhaps it is **best to view them as (temporary) steps to**

10. For a comprehensive discussion of this approach cf. P.-A. Paulo, *Le problème ecclésial des Acts à la lumière de deux prophéties d'Amos* (Paris: Cerf, 1985).

11. There is some evidence that the decree regarding food was still followed as late as 177 CE in Gaul. Eusebius' report (*Eccl. Hist.* 5.1.26) of one Christian's response to her tormenter, shortly before her martyrdom, illustrates this point. She

ensure table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers. When the composition of the church changed to a predominately Gentile constituency, it appears that these directives regarding food were disregarded.

III

What sort of hermeneutical paradigm may be deduced from the method of the Jerusalem Council and what are the components of this model? Of the many things that might be said, perhaps the most obvious is the role of the community in the interpretive process. Several indicators in the text justify this conclusion. 1. It is the community that has gathered together in Acts 15. Such a gathering suggests that for the author of Acts it was absolutely essential for the (entire?) community to be involved in the interpretive decision reached. 2. It is the community that is able to give and receive testimony as well as assess the reports of God's activity in the lives of those who are part of the community. 3. Despite James's leading role in the process, it is evident that the author of Acts regarded the decision as coming from the community under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. All of this evidence suggests that any model of hermeneutics which seeks to build upon Acts 15 cannot afford to ignore the significant role of the community in that process.

A second element which must be mentioned at this juncture is the role the Holy Spirit plays in this interpretive event. In point of fact, appeal is made to the action of God and/or the Holy Spirit so often in this pericope that it is somewhat startling to many modern readers. For not only is the final decision of the Council described as seeming good to the Holy Spirit, but the previous activity of the Spirit in the community also spoke very loudly to the group, being in part responsible for the text chosen as most appropriate for this particular context. Such explicit dependence upon the Spirit in the interpretive process clearly goes far beyond the rather tame claims regarding 'illumination' which many conservatives (and Pentecostals) have often made regarding the Spirit's role in interpretation. While a model based on Acts 15 would no doubt make room for illumination in the Spirit's work, it would include a far greater role for the work of the Spirit in the community as the context

said, 'How would such men eat children, when they are not allowed to eat the blood even of irrational animals?' Cited according to the translation of K. Lake, *Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History* (London: Heinemann, 1926), I, p. 419.

for interpretation. While concerns about the dangers of subjectivism must be duly noted, the evidence of Acts 15 simply will not allow for a more restrained approach.

The final prominent component in this interpretive paradigm is the place of the biblical text itself. Several observations are called for here. First, the methodology revealed in Acts 15 is far removed from the historical-critical or historical-grammatical approach where one moves from text to context. On this occasion, the interpreters moved from their context to the biblical text. Secondly, the passage cited in Acts 15 was chosen out of a much larger group of Old Testament texts which were, at the very least, diverse in terms of whether Gentiles were to be included or excluded from the people of God. It appears that the experience of the Spirit in the community helped the church make its way through this hermeneutical maze. In other words, despite the fact that there were plenty of texts which appeared to teach that there was no place for the Gentiles as Gentiles in the people of God, the Spirit's witness heavily influenced the choice and use of Scripture. Thirdly, Scripture was also apparently drawn upon in the construction of certain stipulations imposed upon the Gentile converts to ensure table fellowship between Jewish Christian and Gentile Christian believers. This step seems to have been a temporary one and these stipulations in no way treat the Gentile converts as less than Christian nor as inferior to their Jewish-Christian brothers and sisters. These points unmistakably reveal that the biblical text was assigned and functioned with a great deal of authority in this hermeneutical approach. However, in contrast to the way in which propositional approaches to the issue of authority function, Acts 15 reveals that the text's authority is not unrelated to its relevance to the community, its own diversity of teaching on a given topic, and the role which the Scripture plays in the constructing of temporary or transitional stipulations for the sake of fellowship in the community.

In sum, the proposed Pentecostal hermeneutic built on Acts 15 has three primary components: the community, the activity of the Spirit and the Scripture. In order to gauge the usefulness of this paradigm, it will now be tested by addressing a specific, particularly difficult, issue currently facing the church.

IV

One of the most significant current debates within the ecclesiastical world is that regarding the role of women in the ministry of the church.

A number of problems complicate the issue, not least of which is the fact that the New Testament evidence ranges from texts that describe women as active participants in ministry to those that advocate the (complete) silence of women in the church. Although various approaches to these texts have been followed, for many interpreters the question comes down to one: did Paul (or someone writing in his name) mean what he said regarding silence? Normally, one of three interpretive decisions is made. One possibility is that Paul intended women to remain silent and, therefore, outside the ministry of the church. The passages which appear to advocate a leading role for women must mean something else or, at the least, be interpreted in a fashion that would not contradict the silence passages. Another option is to say that Paul meant what he said regarding silence but did not intend these statements to be taken as universally applicable. Rather, they were directed to specific situations and have nothing, or very little, to contribute to the broader question. Still another approach is to say that Paul simply did not mean what he seems to have said. Therefore, these texts do not contradict those which assign a leading role to women in the ministry of the church.

Each of these interpretive options, regardless of the theological orientation of the interpreters, is grounded in a somewhat rationalistic approach to the biblical text, which seeks to determine, primarily through historical-critical investigation, the meaning of these passages and how it is that they might fit together. For the most part, Pentecostals have followed the lead of others in attempting to come to a decision regarding this crucial issue. Unfortunately, there exists at present an impasse in most Pentecostal groups that shows few signs of being broken. It is to this issue that the paradigm contained in Acts 15 is now applied.

The Pentecostal Community

As with the approach found in Acts 15, the appropriate place to begin this discussion is with the community in which this attempt at interpretation is to take place. Pentecostals should have little trouble with this component for the movement itself has been one in which community has played a leading role. For our purposes, the community is here defined as those individuals called out of the world by God who have experienced salvation through Jesus Christ and are empowered by the Holy Spirit to do the work of ministry in this present world. This community could be a single, local Spirit-filled body or a group (or denomination[s]) of such congregations. One of the crucial elements would be

the presence of a sufficient level of knowledge of one another, accountability and discernment within this community to safeguard against the dangers of an uncontrolled subjectivism or a rampant individualism. It would be a community whose shared experience of the Spirit would allow for testimony to be given, received and evaluated in the light of Scripture. Therefore, as far as this issue is concerned, interpretation is no private affair, in the sole possession of scholars, but is the responsibility of the community. This observation remains valid even if, as in Acts 15, a group of leaders representing the larger group are called upon to perform such a function.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

It is within such a community that the experiences of the Spirit, or the acts of God, are manifested. As in Acts 15, the activity of God is made known to the larger community through testimonies about the work of the Holy Spirit. What sorts of testimonies would such a Pentecostal community hear regarding the role of women within the movement, and whence would they come? The testimonies from the past found in the pages of publications like *The Apostolic Faith*, *Church of God Evangel*, *Pentecostal Holiness Advocate*, *Pentecostal Evangel*, *Latter Rain Evangel*, *Bridal Call*, the *Crusader* and many others from around the world would bear witness to the fact that God had gifted women to do the work of ministry in the Pentecostal revival. The ministerial records from various denominational archives would reveal the ways in which the Spirit has endowed sons and daughters with gifts for ministries that circle the globe and manifest themselves in the planting of churches, founding of schools and orphanages, publishing of newsletters and magazines, working with the poor and oppressed, as well as singing, preaching, teaching and supporting the church financially. In addition to these forms of testimony, would not those converted, sanctified, Spirit-baptized, healed and called into the harvest through the ministries of our sisters join in the raising of their voices as to God's actions among us?

In the face of such powerful testimonies to the activity of God in the church, is a response like Peter's not appropriate: why do you wish to test God by placing restrictions upon the ministry of our Pentecostal sisters? If indeed God is giving gifts to women for ministry, are we not in danger of divine wrath if we test God by ignoring his actions? What if there are some in the broader community who object that they have not seen such ministry among women? One could only respond that most of

those in Jerusalem had not seen Gentile converts with their own eyes, but in the end were willing to accept the testimony of others who had witnessed such conversions. At least within the Pentecostal community, the work of the Spirit would lead most to the conclusion that God does intend women to take a leading role in ministry. But what about the biblical texts? Do they not, at least in some respects, contradict what the Spirit appears to be doing in the community? How should these texts be approached and what exactly do they tell us about women in ministry?

The Role of the Scripture

The dilemma at this point is the nature of the biblical evidence itself. For, in truth, the New Testament seems both to deny and affirm a leading role for women in the ministry of the church.

On the one hand, it must be fully acknowledged that there are passages which state that women are to remain silent in the congregation (1 Cor. 14.33b-35), and are under no circumstances permitted to teach or have authority over a man but must be silent (1 Tim. 2.11-12). Both texts have proven to be notoriously difficult to interpret, in part because they seem to be contradicted or at the least modified by other passages in the same epistle (1 Cor. 11.5) or group of epistles (Tit. 2.4).¹²

On the other hand, there are a number of texts which appear to assume a prominent role for women in the church's ministry. These texts indicate: (1) that it was expected that women would have the gift of prophecy (Acts 21.9) and would pray and prophesy in the community's public worship (1 Cor. 11.3-16); (2) that women were regarded as co-laborers with Paul in ministry (Rom. 16.3, 12; Phil. 4.3); (3) that somewhat technical terminology for ministry functions could be assigned to women, particularly the term *διάκονον* (Rom. 16.1) and perhaps even *ἀπόστολος* (Rom. 16.7);¹³ (4) that a woman could take the lead in instructing a man more fully in the way of the Lord (Acts 18.26); and (5) that women hosted house churches (Acts 12.12; Rom. 16.3; 1 Cor. 16.19; Col. 4.15), which in all likelihood included more than simply providing space for worship.¹⁴

12. One Pentecostal scholar goes so far as to suggest that the passage found in 1 Cor. 14.33b-35 is a later interpolation into the text. This somewhat radical decision is based almost wholly on internal considerations. See G.D. Fee, *First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 699-705.

13. There may even have been an order of widows in the early church (1 Tim. 5.9, 10).

14. Cf. the relevant discussions in D. Birkey, *The House Church: A Model for*

In the light of the experience of God in the community, there can be little doubt which texts are most relevant to Pentecostals in the question regarding the role of women in the ministry of the church. Simply put, it would appear that given the Spirit's activity, those texts which testify to a prominent role for women in the church's ministry are the ones which should be given priority in offering direction for the Pentecostal church on this crucial issue. To the objection that might be raised on the basis of the silence passages, one can only respond that this objection is quite similar to the one that some of those present in Acts 15 could have produced regarding the exclusion of the Gentiles from the people of God. Despite the fact that a couple of silence passages do indeed exist, the powerful testimony of the Spirit coupled with numerous New Testament passages that clearly support a prominent role for women in ministry necessitate a course of action which not only makes room for women in the ministry of the church but also seeks to enlist all the talents of these largely under-utilized servants of the Lord in the most effective way possible for work in the harvest.

A final way in which the Scripture might function in grappling with this issue concerns the possible need for the adoption of temporary stipulations in order to preserve the 'table fellowship' of the broader community. Whatever the precise nature of such stipulations, in keeping with the spirit of those adopted in Acts 15, these stipulations should be grounded in the biblical tradition, should in no way serve to undermine the legitimacy of women as ministers, and should most likely be regarded as temporary stipulations for the sake of genuine sensitivity on the part of some, both male and female, in the broader community of faith. However, it must be stated in no uncertain terms that the spirit of Acts 15 would clearly be violated if discussion about what might be legitimate stipulations regarding women in the ministry of the church in a given situation were taken as opportunities to impose (in some cases existing) oppressive restrictions upon women under the guise of sensitivity.

V

Several concluding observations are offered here in order to summarize the major results and implications of this inquiry.

First, this study suggests that there may indeed be a distinctive

Renewing the Church (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), and V. Branick, *The House Church in the Writings of Paul* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989).

hermeneutical approach to Scripture, contained in the New Testament itself, that is more in keeping with the ethos and worldview of the Pentecostal community than are many of the interpretive approaches currently being employed by a number of Pentecostal interpreters. Three elements are crucial for this approach to Scripture: the role of the community, the role of the Holy Spirit and the role of Scripture.

Secondly, the community functions as the place where the Spirit of God acts and where testimony regarding God's activity is offered, assessed and accepted or rejected. It also provides the forum for serious and sensitive discussions about the acts of God and the Scripture. The community can offer balance, accountability and support. It can guard against rampant individualism and uncontrolled subjectivism. A serious appreciation for the role of the community among Pentecostals generally, and Pentecostal scholars specifically, might perhaps result in less isolationism on the one hand, and a serious corporate engagement with the biblical text rather than equating a majority vote with the will of God, on the other hand.

Thirdly, in this paradigm the Holy Spirit's role in interpretation is not reduced to some vague talk of illumination, but creates the context for interpretation through his actions and, as a result, guides the church in the determination of which texts are most relevant in a particular situation and clarifies how they might best be approached. Acts 15 suggests that the Spirit may also offer guidance in the community's dialogue about the Scripture.

Fourthly, in this hermeneutical model the text does not function in a static fashion but in a dynamic manner, making necessary a more intensive engagement with the text in order to discover its truths in ways that transcend the merely cognitive.

Fifthly, this approach clearly regards Scripture as authoritative, for ultimately the experience of the church must be measured against the biblical text and, in that light, practices or views for which there is no biblical support would be deemed illegitimate. Thus, there is protection from rampant subjectivism. But instead of understanding the authority of Scripture as lying in the uniform propositions to which Scripture is sometimes reduced, in this paradigm an understanding of authority includes a respect for the text's literary genre and the diversity as well as the unity of Scripture. Therefore, this method regards Scripture as authoritative but allows the form and the content of the canon to define the nature of biblical authority. Consequently, one might say that it

approaches the issue of biblical authority more biblically.

Sixthly, this interpretive model suggests a way forward for the church when faced with issues about which the biblical evidence is (or appears to be) divided. Just as the Spirit's activity in the community was able to lead the church to a decision regarding the inclusion of Gentiles, despite the diversity of the biblical statements on this topic, so it would seem that this paradigm could assist the (Pentecostal) church in grappling with significant issues that simply will not disappear (for example the issues of divorce and the relationship between the church and civil governments).

Finally, this hermeneutical method has been tested by examining the role of women in the ministry of the church. The results of this brief analysis suggest that many Pentecostal churches have not paid nearly enough attention to the activity of the Holy Spirit in empowering women for a variety of ministries in the church, and as a result, have allowed one or two texts to undermine the balance of the biblical teaching on this topic, as well as the Spirit's own witness. If this paradigm proves to be one of which Pentecostals make use, then perhaps the Pentecostal church will be less inclined simply to follow others (whether liberal or conservative) on this topic and will have the courage, like the church in Acts 15, to make decisions which 'seem good to us and the Holy Spirit'.

This experiment, then, is offered with the hope that it might be of some assistance to Pentecostals in our attempt to articulate a Pentecostal hermeneutic.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.