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The Enemy at the Gate

Women and Evangelical Rhetoric

Without blushing, Paul is simply stating that when it comes to leading in the church, women are unfit because they are more gullible and easier to deceive than men. While many irate women have disagreed with his assessment through the years, it does appear from this that such women who fail to trust his instruction and follow his teaching are much like their mother Eve and are well-intended but ill-informed.  

—Mark Driscoll, Pastor, Mars Hill Church, on the role of women in leadership at Mars Hill Church according to 1 Tim 2:12–14

The commands of God in Scripture clearly delineate the structures of the Church. . . . We cannot have it both ways. The Church must choose between the ordination and the subordination of women.  

—Elisabeth Elliot, author and spouse of martyred missionary Jim Elliot

BLUMHOFER WARNED THAT SCHOLARS who choose to examine the subject of women in the Pentecostal movement would be met with multiple narratives, competing voices and an array of discrepancies as to the actual role women played in the founding and shaping of the movement. Like the story of women’s involvement throughout church history, no single narrative explicitly defines where a woman’s voice fits into the grand narrative of Christianity. Could this absence of clarity be a result of the cultural oppression of women that denied them a formal education, proper teaching on the Scriptures, and a lack of opportunity to discover their place on their own? As a result of these conditions, men penned the histories, examined the texts, and wrote the doctrines upon which thousands of years of church history and hierarchy has been formed. Do we simply lack the female perspective and, therefore, cannot truly know what roles women played or the influence they brought to bear on the development on the church? Or is it something far worse? Could God himself have chosen to exclude women and raise up only a select remnant of chosen men to spread his message of redemption and the Gospel of eternal life through Christ?

These questions are not new. Throughout the history of Christ’s church, these questions have been pondered, questioned, challenged. John Wesley wrestled with them after being discipled and deeply influenced by the teachings of his mother, Susanna. Phoebe Palmer argued for the public speaking and ministry of women based on careful biblical study and presented one of the more sustained critiques on the role of women ever presented in her day. Yet, Palmer remained steadfastly committed to the cultural and social norms prescribed for women in the home and within the marriage relationship. The issue continues to be taken up by the Southern Baptist Convention. In their denominational meetings they chose to remain steadfastly committed to the position that ministry work is reserved for men. The Roman Catholic Church, faced with a shortage of priests entering the ministry, revisits this issue often, and it is well debated in the public square, yet the Vatican continues to excommunicate women who seek ordination in rogue parishes. Growing non-denominational movements whose charismatic leaders seek to appeal to the popular culture in their dress, their proclamation of the gospel, and their mega-church growth plans dismiss the notion of women as ministers and argue fervently for a male-dominated priesthood within the evangelical church.

For every tale of frustration and repression, stories arise of women and men who reject the historical precedent and look to God himself both in His written Word and in the pouring out of His Spirit to reconceptualize who God is and through whom He is willing to work. While women have been celebrated in the mythology of Pentecostalism: the movement birthed in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to the oppressed, the societal rejected, and the underclasses; they were privately doubted and their qualifications questioned. Men expressed reservations over the impact on the church, society, and the family of women’s involvement in ministry. For every rhetorical opportunity, often more powerful rhetorical constraints arose.

The tension seems not to be firmly grounded in theology or the Scriptures, but rather in the historical context and in relationship to the prevailing culture. The friction manifests itself in the way the church uses words. Language and symbols are used to construct, shape, and naturalize very particular ways of seeing that may or may not exist in the broad counsel of the Scripture. The relationship between the church and women is distinct, and as a result of their unique ideology and practice, how Pentecostals have talked about women in ministry is even more distinct. Yet, the challenges faced by Pentecostals, specifically, mirror the challenges faced by the
larger evangelical community. The idea of women in church leadership opposes religious convention, but it also defies American conservative evangelical culture, which places strict limitations on the role of women outside of the domestic sphere. Evangelical rhetoric creates and shapes both policy and perception of the place of women in the public, private, and religious spheres. Several voices compete on the roles women may play in their homes, in society, and most importantly in the church.

This chapter argues that the role of women in the church speaks directly to the nature of who God is and how he relates to his people. When women are excluded from formally sharing the Gospel of Jesus and in serving his people, then they are excluded from the very center of Christianity.

I contend that the role of women in the Assemblies of God is symptomatic of greater issues at play in evangelical rhetoric. These concerns include a lack of reconciliation of past affiliations and historical patriarchy, a desire for greater cultural acceptance in the evangelical community, and a reaction to the secular women’s movement, which was perceived as an assault on the family and traditional values.

These issues are significant because they speak directly to how the Assemblies of God moved from the fringe of American evangelical culture to the largest denominational member of the National Association of Evangelicals. Given this shift in influence, these remaining challenges to women in both the Assemblies of God, specifically, and in the evangelical community more broadly are significant. Presumably, the Assemblies of God would have had a greater influence in freeing women to serve in the ministry of the church, given the historical precedent set by women in the Pentecostal movement. Instead, the Assemblies of God appears to have been molded and shaped by the standards of evangelical propriety regarding women’s leadership.

As the Assemblies of God grew into the middle-class and waded into the mainstream of American religion by aligning themselves with organizations such as the National Association of Evangelicals, they began to sacrifice distinct, identifying traits that had set the movement apart at its birth, including racial diversity, pacifism, and some might argue a strong emphasis on the physical manifestations of the Holy Spirit. These losses dramatically affected how the Assemblies of God addressed the issue of women and their approach to a woman’s ministry. The number of women serving in ministry positions including those of evangelist and missionary (which had historically remained strong despite challenges to their call and questions surrounding their proper roles) declined significantly. What might appear to be the most devastating era for the number of women serving in ministry positions in the Assemblies of God also saw the official position on women becoming more refined and accommodating and the discourse more prevalent as the secular culture also wrestled with the issue of women’s roles in other major professions. The discursive tension surrounding the opportunities for women in the Assemblies of God would again emerge means of restraining them dominated the discourse.

While Blumhofer’s warning of the lack of a single narrative is true, within the conflicting narratives, we are able to trace the threads that created the tapestry of the Assemblies of God and place them in the context of the rhetorical situation. Out of this unraveling, I believe a more complete picture of attitudes toward the role of women emerges. Within the conflicting narratives, one unified message remains constant: women who experienced a distinct call to ministry and an empowerment for service via the theology of the Pentecostal movement and the doctrine of the Assemblies of God could have served as a prototype for women in the greater evangelical community to also take responsibility for their calling and be poured out in their service to God. I contend that while the challenges facing the Assemblies of God continue to mirror those in the greater evangelical community, the Assemblies of God can address these challenges, regain their charismatic moment, and lead on this issue rather than follow.

WOMEN AND THE SOCIOECONOMICS OF SERVICE

The story of Pentecostalism and the Assemblies of God, as we have seen throughout previous chapters, is the story of the discontented. It is the story of people who were not satisfied with the way religion and the world in general was functioning. According to James Davison Hunter, much of the evangelical culture was initially created in reaction to a perceived secularization of mainline protestant institutions. The Assemblies of God shares a similar reactionary history. At least initially, Pentecostals were rejected both by the mainline of American religion and by their evangelical counterparts. This rejection positioned the Pentecostal movement to establish itself as counter to the greater religious culture within the United States. Their message was one that challenged all religious convention and created an opportunity for their rhetoric to take on a prophetic tone to both the secular “lost” world as well as to “dead” churches. Like the movement itself, women in the Assemblies of God operated in a capacity that blew apart the culture of their day and challenged the notions of conventional wisdom and church hierarchy.

Yet, the arguments used against them sound surprisingly similar to the discourse on the role of women today. Some opponents argued that the very fabric of the family, the foundation of society itself would crumble if women dared to proclaim their message and live their calling. Others championed the empowerment of women through Holy Spirit infilling as a means of building the church on earth in anticipation of Christ’s return; the harvest is ready, but the workers are few, and women are needed if the world is to be persuaded to the cause of Christ. Over a century since the founding of Assemblies of God and nearly a century after women’s suffrage, the church is still debating the place of women while the secular world is hiring them as CEOs of major corporations,
appointing them as university presidents, and nominating them to national political tickets. Women have become a pawn in the “culture war” where their motivations are continually questioned and their pursuits are suspect.

A movement that ran counter to the culture, including the religious establishment, has been absorbed by the culture and the politics of the day. The Assemblies of God emerged from the cultural, ecclesiastical, and theological margins of American society and over time moved to the center, middle class of society. In their progression to middle-class acceptance, the Assemblies of God either toned down or all together changed their perspectives on the nature of Scripture, millennialism, and the roles of women. To some degree, these changes were the result of the rapid growth of the movement. As more people were brought into the Assemblies of God, many of whom were reaping the benefits of the rise of the American middle class, the “outsider” values that had played a dominant role in the success of the movement succumbed to the American consumer culture. Not only were these new adherents more representative of mainstream American culture (e.g., Caucasian, white-collar, suburban, etc.), they were also more likely to have come into the Assemblies of God by way of prior evangelical affiliation. And with these past affiliations came theological differences that, over time, blended with the Pentecostal ethos.

In the early years, Pentecostalism was committed to all people as equal participants, especially the marginalized. Women, the poor, those with little formal education, and people of color worked and worshiped with people of financial means and cultural status. Each had a place, an obligation, in spreading the Pentecostal ethos.

According to theologian Cheryl Bridges Johns, “This subversive and revolutionary movement . . . had a dual prophetic role: denouncing the dominant patterns of the status quo and announcing the patterns of God’s order.” As a result, Pentecostalism and Pentecostals were rejected and opposed by society at large and by established religious organizations. For Pentecostals to be accepted in the larger culture, they would have to be willing to make some compromises and accommodations to that culture. These choices continue to have a dramatic impact especially on the role of women and amplified the tensions that already existed within the movement.

Theologian and historian Mark A. Noll argues that the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century disrupted traditional gender roles, but as the heat of revivals cooled, the blurring of gender lines receded. While female missionary activity was and continues to be vibrant among evangelicals such as the Southern Baptists (similar to what we saw amongst Pentecostals in the Assemblies of God), these same groups present one of the more conservative positions on broader issues of gender roles both in the church and in the outside world. Women were often empowered, used, and then silenced.

Engaging the Culture War and Drawing the Battle Lines

As the “culture wars” ramped up and the secular feminist movement grew, more mobilization occurred within the evangelical ranks with a dramatic move to a more right-wing stance. Evangelical leaders became prominent in these wars and enlisted many followers into organizations such as Concerned Women for America, the Christian Coalition, and Focus on the Family. Noll states that such mobilization “obscures historical evangelical attitudes toward gender, which were sometimes quite radical.”

This mobilization has also resulted in the emergence and solidification of boundary drawing within the evangelical subculture and can be seen as an attempt to establish or reestablish the community’s self-definition. Several recent scholarly examinations of evangelical culture and rhetoric have highlighted what is called boundary work or what Charles Alan Taylor has termed “demarcation rhetoric.” According to Pauley, a culture that engages in boundary work or the rhetoric of demarcation is one that is feeling disrupted and is forced to look internally at its communal assumptions. When those within the culture challenge the beliefs and norms, then these rogue members of the group must be addressed and limits and boundaries articulated.

We can see this demarcation occur, however subtly, over time with regard to the role of women. As the Assemblies of God was initially attempting to establish their community’s self-definition of shared common beliefs, values, and social patterns, they first had to contend with those who had come from “the outside” and brought with them differing definitions of cultural acceptability. This challenge continued with the joining of the Assemblies of God with the greater evangelical community. The Assemblies of God absorbed evangelicalism more fully than the culture of Pentecostalism influenced evangelicalism.

As a result, the challenges to evangelical culture represented in the role of women became an internal threat to the community and like Pauley describes, once this aberrant practice is discovered, the community undertakes a process of clarifying and marking out its boundaries. The result for women in the Assemblies of God was the sustained effort to diminish their presence in the ministry and to avoid engaging the evangelical community in any form of reevaluation of the defining characteristics of who is called and what it means to serve in ministry. Essentially, the Assemblies of God abandoned the promotion and empowerment of women ministers rather than be excluded from the evangelical community.

Sociologist Christian Smith takes the analysis of boundary work further to include not only internal threats from within the community, but also the establishment of these rhetorical boundaries by those outside the community who pose a threat to the stability of the culture. According to Smith, evangelicals have and continue to operate with a very strong sense of boundaries that
distinguish themselves not only from the non-Christian, but from the non-evangelical. A distinct “us versus them” mentality is “omnipresent in evangelical thought and speech,” which shapes evangelical consciousness and discourse.\textsuperscript{361}

The secular feminist movement, in particular, represents a hostile outside threat to the community if for no other reason than they represent the “them” of the “world” that operates outside of the boundaries of evangelical Christianity. The perceived threat by the feminist movement to the stability and structure of the family and an undermining of traditional gender roles places them at odds with evangelicalism and therefore makes not only the movement itself but also anything that resembles a feminist approach an enemy. Smith argues that while evangelicals do not spend a great deal of time talking about what is so “worldly” about social movements like the feminist movement, they are keenly aware of the threats that are represented by feminists, and they must stand in opposition to these threats and interact only in a redemptive manner. The appropriate response to opposition is not often contemplated, but it is, in Smith’s view, a lived experience. As a result of the lack of contemplation over these perceived outside threats, very little thought or discourse is then given to what attitudes toward issues like gender may have existed historically within the evangelical community.\textsuperscript{362}

Noll continues that the mobilization and boundary drawing also obscures the surprising similarities and the interest shared by some leading feminist voices and many rhetoric anti-feminist evangelicals. Evangelical women’s organizations took up issues that were not that far removed from their feminist counterparts such as experiences of severe wounding by men, growth in a shared female consciousness, and the ability to control their own lives. While evangelical women tend to criticize the humanism of the secular movement and uphold tenets such as inerrancy of Scripture, they share a belief in the ability of women to accomplish great things and make an impact on the world including a desire to work outside of the home and a desire for equality amongst the sexes in society at large. It would seem then that feminism is more compatible with conservative religious belief and practice than is often argued.

As we have seen, following World War II American society underwent significant changes, including middle class women entering the work place and feminist voices pushing attitudes about gender to the forefront of public discussion. What occurred in the Assemblies of God was reminiscent of what occurred amongst Baptists and Methodists following the early revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Distinctions between male and female roles grew as the intensity of the movement was replaced by institutional building. According to Noll and as evidenced by what has been presented in earlier chapters of this study, the result was not an out and out repudiation of women in ministry, but a steady elimination of women from public places of visibility. Over time, the Assemblies of God grew closer to the fundamentalist and neo-evangelical strands as the twentieth century progressed.

**THE APOSTLE PAUL, FEMINIST OR FOE**

While nineteenth and twentieth century evangelicals and early twentieth century Pentecostals advocated women’s full participation in ministry and viewed Acts 2 and Joel 2:28 as the “magna carta” for proof of the biblical evidence for women’s ministry, other Scripture that seemed to limit the liberty of women was destined to be interpreted through the lens of Pentecostal proclamation and experience.

However, a tract written by Frank M. Boyd, who at the time was one of the fellowship’s most respected Bible institute instructors, and published by the Assemblies of God’s Gospel Publishing House, broke from the earlier traditions of the fellowship and focused the argument concerning women’s ministry on the Pauline “limitations” of 1 Cor 14:34 and 1 Tim 2:11–12. Boyd emphasized his position that these limitations were not cultural or temporary conditions, but were for all believers in all time periods. These limitations, in Boyd’s view, were not to exclude women from ministry, but to provide safe parameters for the Lord’s handmaids. Boyd’s argument focused on the differences in roles for men and women in the divine economy and the headship of women by men, especially their husbands. Therefore, women were to serve under the headship or leadership of male pastors and denominational leaders and ministry work was to vary according to her marital status. Unmarried women were “unencumbered by the duties of wifehood and the responsibilities of motherhood”\textsuperscript{363} and were then able to devote their time and energy to ministry. Married women, however, are to submit to their husbands and place their focus on their homes.

### Authority versus Submission

As has been noted in Chapter Three, the official policy of the Assemblies of God on the role of women was revised in 1935 and has changed very little in the years that have followed. If anything, the refining of the language actually strengthened the position of women, unlike previous revisions such as the 1931 limitations. Yet, from the late 1930s through the 1960s, official publications, including the *Pentecostal Evangel* and Christian education curriculum, took on a perspective that was closer to Frank Boyd’s position. From illustrated messages to articles and lessons, the message coming from the Assemblies of God was clear: women are to be allowed to participate in ministry, but men are to be the authority of the church.

This posture is significant because the argument about authority shifted away from the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to the
empowerment of institutions. For Pentecostals in the Assemblies of God, authority had always been derived from the Holy Spirit. It initially prevented organization among the membership because the formation of organized denominations symbolized a removal of the Holy Spirit as Empowerer and moved adherents closer to the “dead” religious organizations they had left. Again, Poloma argues that the adoption of biblical interpretive principles from fundamentalism and evangelicalism, rather than the development of a hermeneutic consistent with the experience of Pentecostals has silenced the Assemblies of God’s prophesying daughters.

I would take Poloma’s assertions further by arguing that the rhetorical shift away from the empowerment found in the Books of Acts and Joel to the perceived limitations presented by the Apostle Paul created a situation in which women were not only excluded from church leadership but also relegated to other spheres. I would argue that what Poloma sees and what I assert are both reactions to the perceived threat to the evangelical culture. Further boundaries were created with increasing emphasis placed on limiting a woman’s authority in every sphere. The primary role of a woman was to be married and her sphere was in the home. Within her marriage and as a means of maintaining her proper sphere, a woman’s obligation was to submit to her husband. According to one author in the Pentecostal Evangel, “Too much ‘spunk’ here is a sure cause of trouble; it is well nigh impossible for a man to respond amiably to a bossy wife.” Rather, she should “maintain the equilibrium with a meek and quiet spirit.”

Adult Sunday school curriculum presented lessons that noted the “most far-reaching advancements achieved in this century of progress is the prominence to which womanhood has steadily climbed.” Yet, the curriculum claims, this progress resulted in “an overbalanced emphasis upon women’s rights which, while claiming equality with men, demands an absolute independence contrary to the scriptural standing regarding the relationship of the sexes.” The Christian model, the lesson argues, is of a husband and wife working together as long as the man is in charge.

Here again, we see the rhetorical boundary lines being tightened with regard to women’s roles in the Assemblies of God. Not only had emphasis shifted in the scriptural hermeneutic to stress greater limitations for women in leadership, the rhetorical boundaries were further tightened to emphasize a woman’s place outside of the church. Women were not explicitly prevented from serving in the church, but the words, language, and symbols expressed by the Assemblies of God established a clear message that women were to be subject to men and as a result, anything that challenged this subordination amounted to rebellion. For a woman called into pastoral ministry, especially those whose husbands were not also serving in the church (so she could remain subject to his leadership), this position presents a real problem and rather than finding empowerment in her call, the message was reinforced that her call was suspect.

While a subtle shift occurred from the 1960s through the 1990s toward encouraging women in a variety of social roles, the primary emphasis remained on women as wives and mothers. In the early 1980s, the Pentecostal Evangel published an issue that “honored” mothers who were employed outside the home. In this issue, a writer admonished members of the church to reconsider its attitudes toward women: “Nowhere does the Bible exalt a mother because she refuses employment. On the contrary, the capable wife described in Proverbs 31 seems to be engaged in business as well as efficient homemaking.” While response to the issue was mixed, even those who expressed some support were troubled that the article “seems to encourage mothers to work” or emphasizes those who were “forced” to work. The church would not then “force” a woman into full time ministry when it might create a situation in which her primary function as wife and mother might be called into question. “The world” outside of Christianity might seek to undermine this core value of family and motherhood, but the church would not not participate in this societal breakdown by promoting women within their ministry ranks.

These messages are consistent with those marketed by leaders in the greater evangelical community, including Dr. James Dobson founder of the Focus on the Family organization and author Elisabeth Elliot who championed the notion of women’s submission. Unlike Frank Boyd, who argued that women’s submission was rooted in the fall of mankind, Elliot argues for submission at the moment of creation and as an established hierarchy created by God from moment one as a means of protection for women. Rather, she argues that the secular women’s movement was responsible for placing guilt and shame upon women in the church.

In an article published in Christianity Today, Elliot argues against the ordination of women and states the question was raised because of the women’s liberation movement and the concepts of authority, submission, and obedience have fallen “into disrepute in the secular world.” She continues to argue that women’s ordination is a means for the secular world to imbue guilt to the church for denying women equal status to men. The church is, according to Elliot, in “painful self-doubt” and deciding to jettison certain principles and practices that have become distasteful to the society at large. “The exclusion of women from ordination is based on the order established in creation. . . . Quite simply, woman was made for man. Man was not made for woman.” The natural order of creation did not change at the fall or through Christ’s redemption and the church negates the truth of what it teaches when it ordains women to the office of “minister of Word proclaimer.”

Elliot states that if a woman “‘feels called’ to do a work that on scriptural grounds is outside the ‘idea of God in the making’ of her, it is the duty of the church theologically . . . to judge her vocation. No one merely because he or she has the Spirit, may
disregard the judgment of the congregation.” 371 She concludes her argument by stating, “The commands of God in Scripture clearly delineate the structures of the Church. . . . We cannot have it both ways. The Church must choose between the ordination and the subordination of women.” 372

Again, we see the dominant language used by Elliot is one that focuses on a battle, an “us versus them” encounter with the world. She includes no discussion of historical attitudes towards women or the roles women have played in Scripture and within the modern-day church to spread the gospel message. The idea of women as ordained ministers of the church, she suggests, could not have come from within the church or by the virtue of scriptural authority, but rather, it is the result of the deception of women and those who would seek to promote them by the evil secular forces that seek the church’s destruction. As a result, she implies, the church and its members should discourage this deception and prevent women from engaging in heretical behavior.

Whereas Elisabeth Elliot places the blame for the desire of women to participate in ministry work at the feet of the feminist movement, Poloma argues that the Pentecostal movement could have built on the work of nineteenth century evangelical women who advocated women’s suffrage and sparked an alternative to the secular feminist movement. Poloma argues that the Pentecostal movement had an opportunity to be revolutionary and create a place for women in ministry, but Pentecostals chose instead to remain with their brothers and sisters in more conservative Christianity, and as a result, they also chose a reactionary course.

It would seem that the rhetoric of early Pentecostals was revolutionary in its openness to women’s participation while attempting to maintain a balanced perspective of traditional family roles, but over time, the argument for a woman’s role in the family structure began to dominate the discussion. The leadership of the Assemblies of God may have been looking for a way to deal with those women who were already amongst their ranks as ministers and simultaneously subvert any growth in the ranks, thus promoting a more conservative view of womanhood in their popular publications. They managed to do so while maintaining a quasi-supportive stance of women already engaged in ministry work, thus exacerbating the tension women felt and continue to feel with regard to their place in ministry. This type of double-talk creates dissonance for those who support women’s ordination and ministry and sends the message that Pentecostalism was not, in fact, the revolutionary movement it claimed to be, but that it is more like the culture Pentecostalism emerged from and sought to revolutionize.

The Assemblies of God appears to have engaged in nothing more than a school-yard game of wanting to be part of the “popular” crowd. Originally rejected, they were now part of the evangelical “in” group, and with that acceptance came pressure to conform to the ideas and action of the rest of the group. Assemblies of God General Superintendent George O. Wood acknowledged this peer pressure when he was asked what factor contributed most to the challenges that women have faced in the Assemblies of God. Wood replied, “Culture. We tended to succumb to the prevailing culture.” 373

MODERNISTIC INFLUENCE AND RHETORICAL PRACTICE

While the Assemblies of God undoubtedly engaged in cultural accommodation that was detrimental to its distinctive doctrines and practices, its stance was more than a simple position in a popularity contest. The root of this accommodation comes from the shared epistemological roots of the Assemblies of God and their evangelical brothers and sisters. As historians George Marsden and Mark Noll have argued, these groups were profoundly influenced by a particular set of Enlightenment-based assumptions on American religious thought that began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and that continue in large part today. This “Scottish Common Sense Realism” or as Noll calls it “didactic Enlightenment” assumes the plain and transparent nature of truth and wisdom, the workings of the universe, and the meaning of the Bible. To continue to the school-yard metaphor, the Bible is reduced to a divinely inspired “third grade answer book.” Evangelicals, then, know how they know by looking at truth and wisdom as uncomplicated and by placing emphasis on literal, “common-sense” understandings of biblical truth. These epistemological assumptions about how to interpret Scripture first led to a dangerous impasse on how to arrive at a biblical position on the question of slavery during the Civil War and caused great damage to the church. These same assumptions are at play in how the evangelical community, including the Assemblies of God, have created and reinforced a scriptural impasse to arrive at a position on the role of women in church leadership.

As Mark Steiner notes, one of the challenges that stands out in evangelical rhetoric (and the theology from which it is formed) is that it has blindly accepted the epistemological assumptions of modern thought. He stresses Marsden’s point that American Protestantism featured notions that “the common sense of mankind, whether of the man behind the plow or the man behind the desk, was the surest guide to truth.” 374 Noll builds on Marsden’s point by acknowledging the initial effectiveness of this intellectual framework as it made evangelical Protestantism “so dynamically powerful in the early history of the United States,” but in the end fostered a “weak intellectual legacy” that resulted in a dysfunctional and anti-intellectual response to social, intellectual, and theological challenges. 375

These assumptions, according to Steiner, are still very much entrenched in the evangelical tradition and rhetorical practice. The result of these assumptions in evangelical discourse is a strident, boundary-drawing, cultural warfare that reduces the complexities
and ambiguity of faith to a simplistic formula. Those who question, challenge, or seek to engage these complexities are labeled enemies of biblical truth. Warfare engages an “either for us or against us” type of rhetoric.

This “us versus them” rhetoric accelerated as women found more acceptance in the larger culture. Whereas the discussion in the early days of the Assemblies of God publications gave at least lip-service to questions of the theology of women’s leadership, as the evangelical community chose to engage evolving roles for women as a battle against the church of Christ, the rhetoric changed dramatically. The rhetoric focused instead on the assault against “tradition” and against the family. Feminism, not the call of God on their lives, was driving women to seek out opportunities where they might lead and direct. The rhetorical shift within the Assemblies of God was no different. The emphasis moves from the empowerment of women for service to the protection of their role in the domestic sphere and the battle against being “forced” into something that might take them outside of the home.

By naming the enemy “feminism,” a battle could then be waged with a defeat-at-all-cost rhetorical stance so as to save the family and restore order and “right” to the world. Rhetorical positions such as Elisabeth Elliot’s draw a clear line in the sand over which the church is forced to make a choice. The correct choice is clear, and the congregation must take a stand against any woman who might proclaim a calling from God. No middle ground exists. For women, subordination was ordered at the moment of creation. Clearly, a fallen world (an enemy) works to subvert the natural order of God’s design and put an idea into the mind of a woman that she might have a role to play in spreading the Christian message rather than gazing lovingly upon her husband while he ministers. At best she may teach her children’s Sunday school class or participate in a women’s Bible study group. Anything outside of this “acceptable” realm is an attack on the church, rather than a contribution.

At one time, Pentecostals rejected culture (both religious and secular). Evangelicalism determined to wage war with culture. When the Assemblies of God chose to embrace the activist stance and demarcation lines established by their evangelical counterparts, they also took on the consequences of their war, and women became collateral damage. Rather than examining historical attitudes on gender and finding common ground, the evangelical community chose to be combative. What is more, the evangelical community including the Assemblies of God sacrificed something even greater than women’s rights when they engaged the culture war over the role of women. They sacrificed their ability to stand in prophetic resistance and lost an opportunity to become revolutionary.

The Loss of Prophetic Resistance

While the political choices of evangelicals, specifically their alignment with one political ideology is outside the purview of this study, it is important to note that when evangelicals sought to battle issues like feminism, they often did so by engaging the enemy on political grounds. Yale scholar Stephen L. Carter argues that the prophetic religious voice, calling us to account, pointing the culture in the right direction of God’s will is very different from the one telling us who should be in charge. The Old Testament prophets simply presented the message of righteousness; they never had a hand in the building of kingdoms or the downfall of those who did not heed their message. The American political system is not averse to those who are radical in their message. Rather, the American political system invites radicalism, in order to tame it and refocus its energy on minor triumphs within the political system. This co-opting is only possible, however, when the radicals are willing to be co-opted. Once the decision is made to become a part of the system, the power of the prophetic is lost.

I contend that the Assemblies of God is facing the choice Carter presents. By aligning the fellowship with the greater evangelical community and embracing a more conservative political position, the Assemblies of God has sacrificed the prophetic nature of their message and diminished the impact of their role in the culture. An opportunity to challenge the mainstream church culture on how God views women in the family, society, and the church became a reaction to the culture’s empowering of women as a means of subverting God’s plan.

The Assemblies of God was once an antagonist of the status quo (both within the church and those outside of the church), but among her people today are impassioned patriots who have chosen to battle the culture via politics and who have adopted nationalism as a religious creed. What was once a radically inclusive spiritual fellowship in which race and gender virtually disappeared, today’s predominantly white, middle- to upper-class adherents are skeptical of what they view as radical feminism and multiculturalism fraught with the challenges of immigration and cultural change.

These issues faced by the Assemblies of God mirror broader rhetorical problems in the evangelical community. As in the early days of the Assemblies of God, the world is an uncertain place. This uncertainty drives questions about the role of religion in the public square. The presence of women in church leadership challenges religious convention and American culture. Voices compete to describe the role women have to play within the home, the society, and the church.

While some within the evangelical community supported female candidates for political office, leaders of their denominations were removing magazines from their bookstores that featured female pastors on the cover. According to Richard Land, then
President of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, no disconnect or inconsistency exists in their position on the role of women. Land states that leadership in public office is different than leadership in the home or the church. Land’s failure to see a disconnect between the position of women in the church and in the public square does not mean a discrepancy does not exist. The discourse on women’s roles in the church remains contentious, the boundary lines are strictly drawn, and the evangelical community maintains a position of insular cultural production that feeds this discourse. Women who believe they are called to serve in the world of the church continue to be left behind.

Pentecostals stand again at a cultural crossroads. If, as George Wood stated, the problems faced by women have been the result of the movement’s succumbing to the attitudes, actions, and beliefs of evangelical culture, then the direction of future discourse on the role of women depends upon how willingly Pentecostals stand in prophetic resistance to that prevailing culture on this issue.

352. Driscoll, Church Leadership.
354. Hunter, To Change the World, 86.
357. Noll, American Evangelical Christianity.
358. Ibid., 83.
359. Taylor, Defining Science; see also Pauley, “Jesus in a Chevy?” 73.
362. Ibid., 125.
367. Ibid.
370. Ibid., 14.
371. Ibid.
372. Ibid., 16.
377. Ibid.
Benevolent Neglect
Overcoming Rhetorical Circumstance

The decline [of women serving in ministry] may be the cumulative result of the ambiguity of leaders’ attitudes toward women in ministry as seen in the previous historical events. The attitude could be labeled “benevolent neglect” of the problem, or perhaps a failing to perceive even that there was a problem. Some might have even seen the decline as a good thing. —Dr. Barbara Cavaness

My identity isn’t wrapped up in any one of those [ministry] roles; it doesn’t depend on a specific title or position or what people call me. My identity is in Christ, as a follower of Jesus and a woman called to minister to people. —Dr. A. Elizabeth Grant

AS THE TWENTIETH CENTURY ended, Pentecostalism appeared to be a very different movement than when the century dawned. In a relatively short amount of time, the movement had grown beyond the fringe of the American religious class and spawned several organized fellowships and denominations. One of these was the Assemblies of God, arguably the largest and most widely recognized Pentecostal organization in the United States and around the world. Once excluded from the evangelical community, the Assemblies of God is now the largest member of the National Association of Evangelicals and has, since its inclusion in the organization, been recognized by its members holding positions of national prominence within the organization.

Growth and influence have not come without a price. During the 1980s the Assemblies of God was forced to endure scandals created by two of its most well-known ministers when both the Rev. Jim Bakker and the Rev. Jimmy Swaggart, television evangelists affiliated with the Assemblies of God, were found to be engaging in sexual and financial misconduct. In addition to Bakker and Swaggart, several others credentialed with the Assemblies of God were caught up in the scandals, which resulted in both disciplinary action by the Assemblies as well as legal action.

Facing deeper challenges than just those associated with the Bakker and Swaggart scandals, the Assemblies of God was described as “beset by bureaucratization and bewildered by cultural change.” The Assemblies of God responded in a very dysfunctional manner to these challenges, especially where women and more specifically women leaders were concerned. The fellowship’s evolving rhetorical stance toward women throughout the twentieth century, in significant part, explains the nature and consequences of this dysfunction. Historically unwilling to subject themselves to critical scrutiny, particularly self-critical analysis, the Assemblies of God suffered from stagnation more typically associated with the “dead” religious culture they had once decried. While most Americans had at one time been suspicious of Pentecostals and had ignored the movement, white, middle-class growth and favorable media coverage revealed that those in the Assemblies of God behaved more like evangelicals and less like radicals. This discovery dispelled the myths that being Pentecostal meant participating in bizarre conduct, living like a pauper, or believing in strange theology. It also dismissed any notion that the Assemblies of God was in the vanguard on social issues that had plagued the United States during the same period. When women and minorities began to gain a place within society, the Assemblies of God was at best rhetorically absent or at worst, battling the movements that sought to promote more inclusive participation. Most Assemblies of God constituents were, in fact, white, middle-class evangelicals whose churches, districts, and national offices were led nearly exclusively by white men. While this situation might have brought about a greater comfort level in the evangelical community, it did not reveal an adequate picture of what was truly happening within the fellowship. The Assemblies of God was at a place where self-evaluation was necessary, and the timing seemed right to deflect attention away from the scandals and re-evaluate the perception of who and what the Assemblies represented.

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mobilized growth to take the fellowship into the next century as a stronger and more influential force. The program called for the addition of 20,000 new ministers, 5,000 new churches, 5 million new converts, and 1 million prayer partners to the ranks of the Assemblies of God membership rolls within 10 years.382

The program was meant to demonstrate just how far the Assemblies of God had come from its humble roots. The message that had once seemed so pure because it had been at odds with the culture now seemed credible because so many people believed it. At one time, adherents were called to live in prophetic tension with society, but by the Decade of Harvest they were typically representative of other Americans of similar socioeconomic standing. Success, which at one time had been defined as being uneasy in this world, was assigned a numerical designation as defined by the goals of the program.

Unfortunately, the energy poured into the Decade of Harvest merely maintained or slightly improved the status quo. In an article published in The Christian Century, Assemblies of God Pastor Paul Tinlin and historian Edith Blumhofer associated the dismal results of the Decade of Harvest campaign to a lack of serious self-critique, an abandonment of spiritual disciplines that allowed for spiritual formation (but required time and effort) for an overemphasis on mega-church development, media stars, and faltering programs. The problems lay with an uncertain denominational identity, the struggle to expand while conserving their Pentecostal essence, a detachment of the grassroots from the national leadership and difficult theological and social issues that the Assemblies of God refused to adequately address. One of those theological issues cited by Tinlin and Blumhofer included where the Assemblies of God really stood on the role of women in ministry.383

While it appeared on the surface that the Assemblies of God had made the most progress among evangelical denominations in affirming the ministry of women, the experiences of women within the fellowship did not confirm this progress. Toward the end of the twentieth century, the supposed increase of women within the fellowship was based largely on the methods of reporting data and not on any socio-cultural change.384 In trying to navigate the difficult waters between a distinctive Pentecostal identity and greater acceptance among its evangelical peers, the Assemblies of God failed to create an environment in which women could find a true place to fulfill their call to minister and serve side-by-side with their male counterparts in leadership. Rather than address the challenges facing women in the fellowship, the Assemblies of God adjusted how they reported the number of women serving and once again created a rhetorical situation that veiled the true state of affairs. Tinlin and Blumhofer confirm what has been evident throughout this book: progress on questions relating to women in ministry has been slow, painful, and less than transparent.

Rhetorical History as a Process of Social Construction, Maintenance, and Change

A look at the rhetorical history of women in the Pentecostal movement does more than simply expose a mixed historical record. Historian Grant Wacker, addressing the disproportionate role of women and the conflicting constraints they faced from the movement’s inception, contends that the real question was not that this conflict of opportunity and constraint existed, but rather “why?” Answers to why are found in the rhetorical invention of the movement itself, the women who participated in it, and in those who challenged their involvement. The conflict is inherent in the language of the movement and the role this language played, and to an extent, continues to play in the formation and shaping of a distinctive position on women’s leadership and the context in which people think about the role of women in the church.

In the conflict of the narrative, women who have experienced both a distinct call to ministry and an empowerment for service via the theology of the Assemblies of God speak uniformly. The feminine voice does not call for a chance to rule for the sake of personal power; rather, in the words of Beth Grant, an Executive Presbytery who represents credentialed women, women seek an opportunity to take responsibility for their calling and to be poured out in their service to God.385

What began as a movement counter to the culture, however, has been absorbed by the rhetoric of the evangelical culture and its politics. The Pentecostal people of the Assemblies of God were once rhetorically radical. Today, they fight for relevance among competing voices in the evangelical community. They seek a place in the larger culture and among their own people who often question the necessity for a distinctive identity or movement at all. Therefore, women have faced dissonance in the messages concerning their place within the Assemblies of God.

The Pentecostal movement created an exigency or a sense of urgency: to spread the messages of Jesus as Savior, Baptizer, Healer and soon-coming King. This sense of urgency created a space for women and provided them empowerment for service. However, among their fellow laborers, in their gatherings, and within the evangelical community were an audience bound up with varying constraints of what ministry looked like and who could legitimately present the discourse. These constraints play a significant role in the social construction of Pentecostal culture and discourse.

A more fundamental theological tension inheres in the Pentecostal movement. The tension between radicalism and conservatism is a continuing exigency that needs to be negotiated and renegotiated. A constant and very fundamental “imperfection” exists among core denominational distinctives, such as the role of women, and in the larger movement that requires a continual rhetorical effort to engage—whether to ameliorate the imperfections or to strategically amplify the imperfections so as to increase pressure for some
sort of social or theological change. This tension touches the core of Pentecostalism’s relationship to the larger evangelical community and American religious culture. At every major juncture of Assemblies of God history, the role of women continues to surface as a significant issue that has both made the Assemblies of God what it is while at the same time creating the greatest amount of dissonance both within the movement and in its relationship with evangelicalism.

When the Pentecostal movement broke forth and birthed the Assemblies of God, Americans were asking themselves who they were and who they wanted to be. The turn of the century was fraught with changes, and the United States was on the verge of emerging as a major worldwide power. A shift in power, wealth, and military might was about to take place, and Americans were making the choices that would lead to this change. The rise of the Assemblies of God was not the accomplishment of the elite or the powerful, but rather emerged from a gathering up of the poor and outcast, taking the despised things and seeing God glorified in them. Pentecostals have not prospered in the twentieth century by blending into its cosmopolitan ethos. They succeeded by criticizing that ethos and suggesting alternatives. At each juncture, the greatest challenges faced by the Assemblies of God came when they tried to be both subversive and “just one of the boys” in an old boys club.

The context for women of the Assemblies of God in the twenty-first century does not seem much different than it did during most of the twentieth century despite cultural accommodation. While several opportunities were taken to temper issues like race, address faulty perceptions of Pentecostal identity, and assert a position of influence within the evangelical community, the challenges to women desiring a place in ministry and leadership of the Assemblies of God still exist, and the rhetoric surrounding these issues is circular and eerily similar to that of their foremothers. Ironically, women in Pentecostal ministry are central to the Assemblies of God theological practice.

Several changes within the leadership of the Assemblies of God, specifically the election of Dr. George O. Wood to the office of General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God in 2007, signaled a significant change in rhetorical practice with regard to the role of women in ministry. His election resulted in the adoption of a resolution at the 2007 General Council in Indianapolis, Indiana, to appoint one woman and one minister under the age of forty to the Executive Presbytery, the highest governing body within the fellowship. His inclusion of auditors (a rotating group of women and ministers under the age of forty) in meetings prior to the resolution taking effect in 2009 created a cultural shift within the leadership of the Assemblies of God. Prior to the inclusion of these auditors, no one other than the members of the Executive Presbytery had participated in these meetings. Just having the auditors present changed the dynamic of the group and brought an awareness of to the insight these participants provided. In addition, Dr. Wood’s administration oversaw the creation and implementation of the Network of Women Ministers (originally named the Network of Women in Ministry), the first officially endorsed and funded department within the Assemblies of God organization to focus specifically on the support and promotion of women in all ministry areas of the Assemblies of God. The discourse surrounding this “network” could develop an entirely new generation of Assemblies of God churches and women serving in vocational ministry.

The rhetoric of women’s involvement has been reframed by male and female ministers who have chosen to bring the issue of women’s leadership once again to the forefront of denominational discourse. The shift in this discussion occurs through the language of authority versus service. When a rhetoric of service is employed, greater opportunity for women abounds and the opposite is true when a rhetoric of authority is employed.

Finally, denominational leadership have created new opportunities for women’s leadership, and the implications of these opportunities are unfolding. Specifically, the discourse of denominational officers such as General Superintendents Thomas Trask and George O. Wood as well as some key women “activists” expose key changes in the rhetorical landscape of the Assemblies’ discursive culture. The reality for women, however, remains significantly constrained by important continuities in that landscape.

REFRAMING THE MESSAGE

Although the programmatic Decade of Harvest proved to be a less-than-stellar system for evaluation and change for the Assemblies of God, the 1990s did bring about several changes in national leadership and a renewed focus on advocacy for women as leaders and ministers. One example of this renewed focus was a series of white papers published by the General Council referred to as “position papers.”

The Role of Women as Described in Holy Scripture

In 1990, the General Presbytery issued one such position paper that affirmed the ministry roles of women, including language that confirmed women’s authority to serve in any and all leadership roles at the local, district, and national levels. The title of the paper is rhetorically significant as it does not simply say, “What we believe on the role of women in ministry.” Rather, the title, “The Role of Women as Described in Holy Scripture,” explicitly states that the position taken by the Assemblies of God is not their own construction, but rather the position demanded of them by Scriptural mandate.

Building on this title, the position taken by the leaders of the Assemblies of God reaffirmed the official policy and appealed to
the eschatological commitment of Pentecostal’s proclamation of Holy Spirit empowerment. The paper begins with the creation narrative and argues that men and women were created equal. The paper extends the argument that Paul’s theology, particularly Gal 3:28, has universal application, and calls for the equality of all people. The paper concludes with an eschatological argument for women’s roles in ministry. It says, “As we look on the fields ripe for the harvest, may we not be guilty of sending away any of the reapers God calls. Let us entrust to these women of God the sacred sickle, and with our sincerest blessings thrust them out into the whitened fields.”

One distinction in this paper is the incorporation of the creation narrative as evidence of the equality of men and women. This inclusion significantly contradicts the interpretation of the creation narrative found among most mainstream evangelicals as argued by men and women like Elisabeth Elliot. Evangelicals such as Elliot argue that equality does not exist because women were created second to men and were “given” to men who were intended to lead female followers. The Assemblies of God’s narrative places the fissure of inequality at the fall of mankind into sinfulness away from the original intention of God at the moment of creation as espoused by many mainstream evangelicals.

Second, this position paper places a priority on the Apostle Paul’s commitment to the equality of people beyond the availability of salvation. Rather than prohibiting women’s equality, the position paper takes the viewpoint that the Pauline limitations are to be viewed in light of Paul’s statement that there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus. In naming examples of ministers, both Old and New Testament women are mentioned, including women to whom Paul refers as fellow laborers. The emphasis on Paul’s affirming of women counters the argument that the limitations he advocates are universal. This position is also a shift from evangelical arguments that limit the roles of woman by focusing solely on restrictive verses and then interpret through that lens the work of women Paul mentions by name.

Unfortunately, the position paper does not give attention to the gospel narratives and does not fully incorporate the role that women played in Jesus’ life and ministry. This omission is ironic because other position papers, specifically those on the “theology of ministry,” present Jesus as the model for ministry by beginning with Jesus and the gospel narrative. While this absence is a weakness in the position paper on women, it does not negate the strength of the arguments presented and the shift in the rhetoric from what has been argued historically by the leadership in the Assemblies of God as well as their evangelical counterparts.

Not only does this position paper, which was updated and reaffirmed in 2010, lay out a rhetoric that argues from an inherently Scriptural position for the role of women, its tone reaches back to the earliest arguments for Pentecostalism’s own existence. The Assemblies of God uses the language of Holy Spirit baptism and speaking in tongues as an empowerment for service (its doctrine that distinguishes it from its counterparts in evangelicalism) and employs the eschatological language of saving souls and the desperate need for workers willing to take up the task of reaching the lost. The language used is not unique to women empowered for the “harvest work” God has given them, but its terms have historically been used both to justify Pentecostal distinction and to create space for women within the ranks of those harvesters. By aligning the language in the policy with the Constitution and Bylaws of the Assemblies of God, the position paper creates an argument accessible to the constituents within the fellowship and renews a commitment to its Pentecostal distinctive and to the women who were present from the very beginning.

A Reclamation of Pentecostal Rhetorical Invention

David Zarefsky argues that perspective distinguishes the rhetorical historian from others who examine historical events. This position paper reframes the message regarding women’s roles in the Assemblies of God, yet it is directly in line with Pentecostal rhetorical invention as laid out by rhetorician Martin Medhurst. Therefore, it is important to identify principles of rhetorical invention that are inherent to Pentecostal thinking and, in turn, Pentecostal talk.

Medhurst, himself the product of a Pentecostal upbringing, has identified a set of rhetorical principles grounded in doctrinal positions of the Assemblies of God. As with Pentecostal theology, Medhurst argues that Pentecostal rhetoric is informed by experience, and these experiences affect the way Pentecostals communicate. While Pentecostals share a common adherence to doctrines such as creation, fall, and redemption, they have also created a self-identity and public persona through a system of interrelated enthymemes and examples. In enthymematic form, Medhurst presents five premises: First, God is in control because in Rom 8:28, “all things work together for good to them that love God, to whom they are called according to the will of God.” Second, pray without ceasing as 1 Thess 5:17 says, for “this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” Third, expect a miracle for in Isa 53:5 we are told that “by his stripes we are healed.” Fourth, trust and obey as is stated in Heb 11:6, “without faith it is impossible to please Him.” Finally, work, for in John 9:4 the Scripture tells us that “the night cometh, when no man can work.”

As is evidenced in the position paper and in this enthymematic structure, the Bible is the authorizing agent of the Pentecostal worldview and is guaranteed by God. Medhurst argues that these premises are inexorably linked because Pentecostals live in the
constant expectation that God will act in history, even if it is outside the norm of everyday experiences. A constant awareness of God’s presence and power shapes the way a Pentecostal thinks and approaches everything. No matter what the situation, God can change it.

According to Medhurst, the “primary task for the Pentecostal is to trust and obey.” This faith includes an unfettered trust in the Bible as the verbally inspired word of God. It is both the grand narrative of salvation, but it also offers specific promises to mankind from God. Pentecostals are also taught to trust and obey those in authority including the local pastor. Because this authority is ordained by God, one risks relationship with the Divine by questioning or disobeying the pastor’s instruction.

I would expand on Medhurst’s explanation of this point to note that to trust and obey also means that those called into the ministry of the gospel must trust that their calling is valid; they are empowered through their Pentecostal experience, and they must be obedient to the call as well as the God who called them. This principle consistently creates dissonance for women in the Assemblies of God. It is inherent in their Pentecostal DNA to trust God and to obey his calling on their lives according to the Scriptures and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, yet they are also to look to the authority of those God has already placed into service. When those in authority, at the local or national level, encourage a call or place roadblocks in the path to ministry service, they create insecurity and dissonance.

The action of obedience is found in the fifth premise: work. More than anything, the Pentecostal is “admonished to work.” Pentecostals from the time of the early church to be about the Father’s business and use all the available means of persuasion to spread God’s word before it is too late. Medhurst argues that a sense of urgency pervades all Pentecostals’ works. Time is running out and the work must be done before it is too late.

This premise also speaks directly to the calling of women. It does not designate only men to do this work. If you were baptized in the Holy Spirit, then you were to be about the work of God regardless of your gender, race, or socioeconomic status. The work is great and the workers are few, so those who are called and empowered must use everything at their disposal to see the work completed. I would argue that as time passed and the Assemblies of God grew both in number and status, the sense of urgency diminished. This premise was used to whip up Pentecostal fervor more so than it was used to embolden those who were called into active service. Time might have been running out, but there was more than enough time to limit those who could serve and in what capacity.

The first act of rhetorical invention is to invent the Self. Medhurst affirms Kenneth Burke’s contention that we invent language and the negative, and they in turn invent us. This interaction takes place over many years, and in this formation, a worldview develops with a set of assumptions, beliefs, and presuppositions. This worldview functions like ideology to guide not only the content of thought, but its processes, and our approach to a topic or a problem. How we think about things and the motives that lead us to embrace them are critical to the invention of Self and the way we will engage in rhetorical practice.

Ultimately, the Assemblies of God returned to an earlier worldview and its original assumptions, beliefs, and presuppositions to create this position paper and argue for an equal place for women. The ideology of Pentecostal belief and rhetorical invention affected not only how the Assemblies of God thinks about women in ministry but also how they approach the problem of moving this ideology into reality. By reframing the message and arguing from a distinctive scriptural position outside the evangelical mainstream, the Assemblies of God once again set itself apart with a paradigm on the role of women. The question that remains today is this: Has the publication of this position paper done anything more than provide lip-service to the issue and to those women who question if they really are welcome in the ranks of clergy within the Assemblies of God?

I would argue that it has not. Rather, this document is more often than not another paper on a shelf that creates a false sense of well-being while not making a lot of difference in the practice of women being hired or allowed to fulfill their calling. While the rhetoric employed in this position paper is one more means of strengthening the policy positions of the Assemblies of God, it has not translated into more women finding a sense of belonging in their call.

Although the position paper on the role of women communicated a position on women to the general population in the Assemblies of God, other publications reframed the message regarding women specifically to the ministerial class. In addition to a renewed emphasis on women in ministry, research included in these publications confirms my argument that despite the publication of an “official” position on women, the reality of women’s leadership was not in line with the rhetoric of this paper.

In 1997, the Enrichment journal, which served as a professional publication for the Assemblies of God until 2015, dedicated an entire issue to the subject of women who were creating ministry opportunities for themselves, many of whom were outside of the traditional roles of pastoring churches or serving on the foreign mission field. The issue highlighted the variety of ministry areas where women were thriving, including a feature story about four Assemblies of God women ministers creating their own opportunities for ministry: Janie Boulware-Wead, whom I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, is a single mother who planted six Hispanic churches in Northwest Arkansas in five years and who, as a result of her success, would be tapped to direct a missionary program targeting the Hispanic peoples both in the United States and around the world. Patricia Cote served as a U.S. Army Chaplain and was the first female ever assigned to an infantry unit. Cynthia Smith pioneered a church with a strong commitment to social action in an African-American community, including a home for AIDS victims, a program to feed the poor, a
transitional home for men, a short-term shelter, and a clothing outreach. Angie Thomson left a lucrative corporate position to establish an orphanage in Romania. Each of these women found ministry niches consistent with the example set by women early on in the Pentecostal movement. They found opportunities to take responsibility for their calling and carry it out. To herald their work in a “professional” media tool designed for pastors demonstrates a distinct change from much of the dissonance-laden rhetoric perpetuated by the Assemblies of God to that point in its history.  

A Rhetoric of Women’s Service Requires Obedience and Men

The 1997 edition of Enrichment also includes a critical analysis of the situation facing women in the Assemblies of God written by Deborah Menken Gill. At the time, Gill was one of the few women in the Assemblies of God serving as a senior pastor of a church. In addition to her pastoral role, she also served as a professor of pastoral ministries at North Central Bible College (now North Central University), an Assemblies of God affiliated college in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Gill notes statistics consistent with those highlighted in other reports that seem to indicate that there is a strong presence of women serving in the Assemblies of God. For example, from 1977 to 1993, it would appear that the number of women pastors showed gradual increase, but this increase is suspect when one looks beyond the raw numbers. Gill notes that in the official reporting by the General Council these gains include a disproportionate number of women who were 65 years or older (approximately 40 percent of the total number of women reported) and who were most likely retired or nearing retirement. The number of women who sought ordination had steadily decreased during this same period. Gill rightly points out that despite a perceived openness to women in a variety of ministry areas, “this generation has the lowest percentage of female ministers of any in the history of our Fellowship.”

Gill makes it a point several times throughout her writing that it is the responsibility of women to pursue their calling fervently and repeats the question, “What’s a woman to do?” Her response to this question is to emphasize the Pentecostal rhetoric of work, trust, and obedience. Still, Gill notes that few opportunities have been presented to women to obey their call, which can create a sense of disillusionment, cause them to question the call itself, and give rise to a strong sense of discouragement, leading women to leave the fellowship in order to pursue their call elsewhere. As a result, Gill challenges male pastors to become “armor-bearers” for women by encouraging women to follow their calling into all areas of ministry and to provide those opportunities to succeed.

Gill also takes her advocacy one step further when giving the charge to her fellow pastors. She asserts that ministers need to do better work in understanding the biblical basis of women in ministry and to study the Assemblies of God’s policy statement that provides for the full participation of women. Finally, Gill admonishes her colleagues to articulate their personal endorsements of preaching women. This plea is significant because Gill reiterates arguments that have been made several times throughout the history of the Assemblies of God. Women are supposed to “just do it,” regardless of how they are treated or what opportunities are available to them. For the most part, as noted above, that is exactly what women have done by carving out their own opportunities or being creative in how they have acted out their calling. However, Gill also calls out the men who need to be more encouraging and empowering in both actions and words. The challenge she levels last is the key to her argument—Gill’s fellow pastors must articulate their endorsement of women. What Gill does not differentiate, but I would argue is also vital to this challenge is that this articulation cannot simply be in private, polite conversation in the presence of a woman who is struggling with her call. This articulation must be made publicly in teachings, sermons, and in their endorsement of women candidates for ministry positions at all levels of the Assemblies of God ministry structure.

This public advocacy is lacking throughout the history of the Assemblies of God and has created a significant amount of dissonance in the messages surrounding women in ministry. From the earliest days of the movement, to the organization of the Assemblies of God in 1914, and continually as the fellowship grew and became more accepted, a “two-faced” approach to the question of women persists. On one hand, women have been affirmed in private conversations or through official policy positions, but when pressed to be advocates for women, the leadership of the Assemblies of God has fallen significantly short.

However, it is difficult to articulate a position and engage in advocacy if the arguments in favor of a position are not clear. Over time, the arguments in favor of a Pentecostal position for women’s leadership became muddled. At every juncture where formal organizations were established, the freedom of women to participate in ministry was limited. William Seymour began to establish boundaries against women’s leadership that eventually led to fissures with several women including Florence Crawford and Clara Lum and leaving his wife, Jennie, as the only woman in any form of leadership position. At the formation of the Assemblies of God, E. N. Bell, the first General Superintendent privately argued that women did not have the ability to serve effectively in ministry because they were too weak to handle the difficulties ministry service required. Even after the establishment of an official position on women within the constitution and bylaws of the Assemblies of God after years of revisions, men like Robert Brown spoke openly about their disdain for women who might officiate over the ordinances of the church. Brown’s position was filled with irony given the fact that his wife, Marie Burgess Brown was the founding pastor of the church they served in together and would continue to serve long past his death.

Cultural accommodation also played a significant role in muddling the message on a woman’s place in Pentecostal ministry.
This accommodation came from within the religious culture and as a result of changes in the secular culture. As more converts to Pentecostalism came into leadership positions, they brought with them previous theological baggage, which would seep into the rhetoric and be used to argue against women’s participation regardless of the number of women already serving under the banner of the fellowship. When the secular women’s movement from suffrage to feminism gained momentum, the roles of women were challenged to combat what some saw as an evil attempt to destroy the family structure and to undermine the moral fabric of the church and the nation. These social movements were seen as an affront to the church, rather than an opportunity to demonstrate that the Pentecostal church had actually been at the forefront of advancing a woman’s rise to full citizenship as well as her role within the church. While women’s positions in the Pentecostal movement were questioned and challenged even in the earliest days, the discourse that had initially focused on empowerment for service had become less about serving and more about power. Arguments focused on theological positions of power and authority as well as a revolt against changing societal roles that seemed to undermine centuries of religious patriarchy and family structures. The official position of the Assemblies of God had become lost amongst the clamor of these constraints and created rhetorical dissonance for the women caught in these cross-currents.

THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

The opportunities that Pentecostal belief had provided for women began with a foundational understanding that the purpose of a Pentecostal experience was not simply personal edification, but sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because God chose women to participate in the New Testament Holy Spirit baptism experience, then it was only logical that they should also carry the gospel message.

During the earliest years of the Pentecostal movement, validation of women’s roles in ministry were based on the eschatological Pentecostal proclamation found in Acts 2 and the prophecy found in Joel 2. A hermeneutical shift developed in which the Pauline limitations in the Corinthian and Timothy letters were emphasized more with less regard for how women were perceived in other New Testament writings.398 This shift parallels the position found in many other evangelical traditions including the Southern Baptist Convention, which continues to deny women a place in official ministry positions. Several founding members of the Assemblies of God who rose to prominence, including Bell discussed above, came into Pentecostalism from these traditions. As the Assemblies became more accepted in the evangelical community, these arguments against women’s involvement grew in prominence. According to Assemblies of God theologian Sherilyn Benvenuti, the reaction against Pentecostalism’s prophesying daughters was based entirely upon the question of authority.

The use of authority rather than Spirit-empowerment to determine calling directly reverses the position taken by the earliest pioneers of the movement. Initially, servant hood, not authority, was the paradigm by which Pentecostals measured calling. The Holy Spirit held the authority, and the Spirit anointed whomever he chose to serve the body. Authority is not derived by position alone, but rather it is found in the individual who serves though the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result, gender becomes irrelevant because there is little debate over gender when it comes to who can and who cannot serve.399

These challenges to women within the Assemblies of God are outweighed only by the reality that they live in a world desperately in need of every anointed person who can preach the gospel to do so. This reality is manifested in Pentecostal rhetorical invention with the premise to work. The sense of urgency that is coupled with the great work of “winning” souls to Jesus demands an immediate and swift response when one is called to engage in the work of the church. A commonly used colloquial phrase amongst Pentecostals has been that “the fields are white for the harvest but the workers are few.” If this statement is more than a figure of speech, then women not only can be chosen to serve, but must be. Women who reject this command and those who encourage them to ignore it do so at their own peril. Unfortunately, the church has chosen to remain preoccupied with never-ending doctrinal debates over who is qualified to present this gospel message and in what position. Benvenuti states, “We are, in a sense, watching the house burn down while arguing which fire truck to use. The time has come for Pentecostal women to leave the arena of debate and simply be who they are and do what God has called them to do.”400

Reclaiming the Prophesying Daughters

During the last decade of the twentieth century, Pentecostals began to again revisit their commitment to women and the Assemblies of God furthered their emphasis on the multiplicity of women’s ministry roles. This renewal appears in multiple publications specifically aimed at ministers and scholars as well as local church members dedicating issues to the subject. Some of these publications include the position paper on women’s roles, entire issues of Enrichment journal, and PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies. As an extension of the arguments made by Gill in Enrichment and Benvenuti in PNEUMA, the Assemblies of God established a task force to examine once again the roles of women in the fellowship and to reconcile what is
written in policy papers with what is practiced at the local church. According to Beth Grant, who was appointed National Chairperson of the taskforce in 1998, “We find ourselves at a point in which the role of women in the church and ministry is being debated within the evangelical community and within our ranks.”

The taskforce was not established to address gender issues, but rather it was an attempt by the General Council to raise the visibility of women in ministry and to keep faith with the roots of the Pentecostal movement. Grant argued that the future of the Assemblies of God depends on the faithfulness of both men and women to do what God has called them to do and to be empowered by the fellowship to do so. She stated, “This initiative brings together the best of what our Assemblies of God executive leadership, our national task force . . . have to offer women ministers of all ages. Each partner is contributing creativity, resources and ministries in the areas of their greatest strengths because of their shared commitment to empowering women of God.”

Wood, then General Secretary of the Assemblies of God, articulated that “We [the General Council] want to do everything we can to encourage the development of women in ministry, and encourage young women who are in training for ministry in our schools.”

Byron Klaus, former President of the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, speaking at a biennial conference sponsored by the taskforce stated, “This is not about feminism; it’s about the call. How dare we not be good stewards of what God has ordained? Redemption knows no limits!” Klaus added, “I am not hearing from the young women in our Movement that ‘I deserve this’ (position of ministry). I am hearing ‘God called me!’ I am not championing equality but asking for righteousness!” This statement is a distinct shift in the rhetoric by leaders in the Assemblies of God from previous generations. Through these efforts, the Assemblies of God, as a body, was making a deliberate choice to articulate support for women and to create an environment that encouraged their participation.

This move is significant for several reasons, but for one in particular, the way the Assemblies of God is organized. As a cooperative fellowship, the leadership of the Assemblies of God, namely the General Superintendent and the Executive Presbytery, do not have the power to issue a decree about a position or policy so that the member clergy and their district leadership must see that it is carried out. Rather, power within the Assemblies of God is based in the autonomy of the local church. Yet, unlike the leadership of the Assemblies of God historically, Wood believed that he could serve as an advocate for a “full employment act” for women’s service including in roles of senior pastor, elder, or any number of ministry positions. Unlike during previous attempts to reconcile the issue of women’s roles, Wood took a stand rhetorically and then backed up that rhetoric with action. He encouraged women to become educated, credentialed, and ordained. This combination empowered them to serve and opened doors that had previously been closed by the double-speak of leaders who said one thing and did another.

The establishment of the taskforce provided an opportunity for the Assemblies of God to engage in self-critical analysis while at the same time establishing a forward momentum. The language used by the leadership within the fellowship and in the taskforce returned to a rhetoric in which the language of calling was rooted in empowerment of the Holy Spirit and not in authority, and a rhetoric of service was once again given prominence. The task force continues to serve as a means for the Assemblies of God to put their rhetoric into action. Unlike the Decade of Harvest initiative, the taskforce was not a top-down program of change and growth; instead, it is a way for the local church to partner with the fellowship to examine how the roles of women play out both in terms of policy and practice.

The Women in Ministry Taskforce would never have come to be had it not been for a shift in leadership within the fellowship. These leaders were committed to seeing the Assemblies of God reclaim its prophesying daughters and give them a renewed voice. This reclamation and renewal did not occur quickly, but it has been a sustained effort over the course of nearly a quarter of a century. I contend that just as the leaders of the past have created dissonance on the issue of women’s roles, these shifts in leadership have created an opportunity to clear away the dissonant voices and replace them with a unified rhetoric.

**CHANGING LEADERSHIP, CHANGING RHETORIC**

Leadership changes in the fellowship also renewed the focus on the roles of women when, in 1993, Thomas Trask was elected General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God. During his tenure, Trask seemed to encourage the Assemblies of God constituency toward a greater acceptance of women in a larger multiplicity of ministry roles than had previously been espoused by national leaders. In an interview for the ministerial journal, *Enrichment*, Trask stated, “I would encourage them [male pastors] to open their hearts and pulpits to women whom God has gifted in preaching, teaching, exhortation, and other abilities.” He contended that such action would have lasting benefits for everyone involved. Women would find fulfillment in their calling, and the church would benefit from their participation. This position anticipated the call made by Gill a handful of years later that male pastors are a key component of the rhetoric of women’s roles if the Assemblies of God is going to be in line with the policy positions outlined by the fellowship. Those pastors are the last line of defense between the policy positions and the acceptance of women by
congregants who had most likely never seen a woman active in a ministry role or knew of the history of women’s roles in the Assemblies of God outside of the position paper—that is assuming these congregations had access to or had ever read the position paper.

**Thomas Trask and the Priority of Women**

At the same General Council meeting where Trask was elected, the first woman in Assemblies of God history was nominated to the Executive Presbytery. Carmen H. Perez, a minister from Puerto Rico, ran as one of fourteen for a position held by a Presbyter who was also up for re-election. While Perez was not elected, her nomination was a precedent-setting event that drew the attention of the media. One reporter noted that while women were able to serve in any capacity within the fellowship’s hierarchy, there appeared to be some hostility toward women. The article assumed this hostility was the result of the rise of feminism, but I would contend that it ran deeper than just a feminist backlash. The perceived hostility felt by the author of this article is rooted in a dissonance-filled rhetoric that began long before the Assemblies of God became a player in American evangelicalism. As a result of this dissonance, women struggle to be accepted and hired as pastors, which in turn limits their ability to reach the point of being elected to regional or national leadership positions. It was noted in the article that, at the time, only 8.6 percent of the Assemblies’ ordained ministers were women.

While this perceived backlash was fiction than reality, within a couple of years, the message coming out of the General Council was very different. In 1997, the General Council speakers docket included only the third woman ever to serve as a keynote speaker in the main session of the meetings and the first woman to do so in eighteen years. Her message: women preachers in the Assemblies of God can succeed, and they can receive respect and recognition for their work. Janie Boulware-Wead, who had been featured in the *Enrichment Journal* as one of five women changing the perception of women in ministry, had just been appointed the director of Hispanic Project 2000, a new part of the Division of Home Missions (now called US Missions), was that speaker. In addition to her service as a foreign and home missionary for the Assemblies of God, Boulware-Wead was a single mother who had gained the attention of the fellowship’s leaders by pioneering six Hispanic churches in Northwest Arkansas in five years.

In her address, Boulware-Wead stated emphatically, “Women, there has never been a greater day of opportunity than today. The Lord of the harvest is an equal opportunity employer!” She went on to point out that women in the Assemblies of God have had the best success when they have pioneered ministry works such as planting churches, establishing mission posts, and embarking on evangelistic tours. Clearly by her actions, Boulware-Wead had taken her own advice and rather than wait to be hired, she had gone out on her own and found opportunities to take ownership of her calling. This decision is very like that of her sisters throughout the history of the Assemblies of God; however, her sermon defined a distinct shift in the rhetoric of the General Council that had spent years haggling over policy and ways to “fit women in” to the ministry model of the Assemblies of God. While women had often pioneered works, they were limited in what functions they were allowed to perform in a flourishing work or, often at the behest of leadership, women were replaced by male counterparts once the work was established. What makes Boulware-Wead stand out in this particular period was that her pioneering spirit had caught the attention of Trask. Unlike his predecessors, Trask did not simply pay lip service to the work of Boulware-Wead; instead, he gave her a platform to share her message and a position with which she could carry out more than just rhetoric. Rather than immediately place a rhetorical constraint in the way of this self-created opportunity, Trask opened the opportunity further and made an example of her for others. Trask did not merely advocate that local pastors create opportunities for women, he gave a woman a national platform to speak for herself on the value and necessity of the female voice within the Assemblies of God. No General Superintendent before him had given a female speaker at a General Council meeting such a platform with the explicit purpose of encouraging women to take responsibility for their calling and empowerment.

**The Election of George O. Wood, the Son of a Preacher Woman**

In 2007, another shift within the Assemblies of God’s highest positions of leadership would continue to renew the rhetoric on the role of women. Just prior to the General Council gathering in the summer of 2007, General Superintendent Trask announced that he would retire and leave his term early. Wood, who previously had served as General Secretary, was elected to serve out the remaining two years of Trask’s term. While Wood had served for several years as an executive in the national leadership as well as at the local and district levels of the Assemblies of God, his selection ushered in several unique changes to the fellowship. Unlike his predecessors, Wood held both a doctoral degree in pastoral theology and a juris doctorate in law, and he was arguably the most educated chief executive in the history of the Assemblies of God. This distinction is significant because historically Pentecostals have not placed an emphasis on formal education, particularly graduate education, and have been criticized for being almost hostile toward intellectualism. However, that approach began to shift as the Assemblies of God embraced a liberal arts model within their own colleges and universities and a new appreciation for education rose in tandem with a growing educated class of Pentecostals. Younger and more educated Pentecostals, both men and women took notice that within the early days of the movement their
forefathers and mothers were heavily involved in many areas of social reform. Historically, Pentecostals were pacifists, conscientious objectors, advocates for civil rights in the African-American community, and early leaders in the women’s suffrage movement. This rediscovered appreciation of the role that early Pentecostals played in significant social reform movements created a population within the Assemblies of God that was less reactionary to these movements. They were more likely to connect Pentecostalism with social reform movements than to view social reform as antithetical to their own religious belief and practice.

As Wood’s educational status lent credibility to a more educated constituency so did his personal experience with women ministers. In speeches, articles, and interviews on the subject of women’s service, he was quick to point out that the greatest influence on his views on women came from his mother who served as a single missionary in Tibet for several years before marrying and continuing her ministry with her husband in China. As a result, he has an extensive record of promoting women within his own sphere of ministerial influence, including working to formulate the constitution and bylaws at churches in which he served to allow for women to serve as elders and deacons and hiring women to serve on his pastoral staff.

The Ethos of Credentialed Women

As General Secretary, Wood wrote extensively on the need for women to become credentialed. The reason, he argued, is not gender specific, but it is the same for men and women: credentials complete a process of preparation, the culture desires that professionals demonstrate their qualifications, and the credential provides a means for ministers to participate in the decisions that affect the direction of the Assemblies of God through their vote at district and general councils. The bottom line is this: credentials provide credibility and the wellbeing of the fellowship is dependent on the involvement and wise counsel of all (men and women) who serve. 410

Wood’s arguments on credentials reach back to a more educated and thoughtful approach to ministry. While Wood’s Pentecostal theology accepted that the Holy Spirit empowers one for ministry, he recognized a need for preparation and acceptance within the culture as endorsements for ministry. This broad view was a significant rhetorical shift from previous leaders in the Assemblies of God because it did not distinguish women as a separate entity in ministry. A woman’s opportunity for full participation in Pentecostal ministry became equal to that of a man’s, required all of the same preparation, and that preparation required full consecration as a minister of the gospel. Rhetorically, Wood created space for women’s full participation and rather than immediately placing constraints on this space, he expanded the rhetorical space by not distinguishing the requirements for ministry as being gender specific.

A Distinctive Doctrine of Women in Ministry

Finally, Wood’s position on women’s roles that returned to the earliest ideology of Pentecostal practice. According to Wood, the Assemblies of God tilts differently than other denominations in the evangelical tradition on two specific areas: pneumatology and women. He claimed a specific theology is at play where the text informs experience and experience informs the text. Wood believed that this theology must be emphasized and re-emphasized. He argued that some in the Assemblies of God have been too influenced by the voices of conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism. In his assessment, the hierarchical model of leadership does not work. The unique theology of the Assemblies of God, which depends upon the anointing of the Holy Spirit as empowerment for service, assumes that women can receive this empowerment and, therefore, demands their service. Women do not need to prove their call to ministry, they need to do ministry. 411

Wood’s admonition for women to become credentialed and his elevation of women to the doctrinal level of pneumatology also signals a significant shift in the rhetoric of the Assemblies of God. For decades, leaders in the Assemblies continually placed rhetorical constraints in the way of women who served or sought to serve within the fellowship by specifically limiting their ability to become credentialed in the same manner as their male counterparts and dismissing their beliefs on pneumatology by restricting female voices within the fellowship. George Wood’s sustained vocal support for women and his involvement in establishing positions for women in the local churches, at the district level, and within the General Council at each point in his service distinctly boosted the opportunities for women to once again find empowerment to serve in their callings.

A Woman Shall Lead With Them

Further evidence of this shift came the very same year Wood was elected to serve out the remainder of Trask’s tenure as General Superintendent. A change in policy adopted at the 2005 General Council meeting added representatives to the Executive Presbytery from non-Hispanic foreign language districts and ethnic fellowships. This new group of Presbytery members provided wide-ranging
contributions and diversity to the body of leadership. What the Presbytery still lacked was gender diversity and youth. As a result, the Executive Presbytery sponsored a resolution that recommended that the Executive branch expand again to include one ordained minister under the age of 40 and one ordained woman.

The sponsorship of this resolution should not be overlooked. The need to continue to diversify the highest levels of leadership within the Assemblies of God was not something that was brought to the General Council by a women’s group or by any one specific district that might be more open to the voice of women and younger leaders. This resolution was written and sponsored by the Executive Presbytery as a recognition of where they were lacking in perspective and in demonstrating action and not simply language that allows for women to serve at any level of ministry office.

The resolution was not without controversy. Debate over the resolution included a sustained theological discussion by one delegate who objected to the resolution on the grounds of the Pauline limitations in 2 Timothy as well as discussion as to the need for “affirmative-action” to promote women to positions that they should have naturally ascended to like their male counterparts. However, following the conclusion of this debate and a corrective issued to the delegate who insisted that biblically women were ineligible to serve in such a capacity, the resolution was adopted. In 2009, for the first time in the history of the Assemblies of God, a woman would be elected to the highest leadership board in the fellowship.

While women like Carmen Perez and Beth Grant had seen their names put forward as nominees to serve in various national capacities, no woman had ever been elected to these offices. This action by the leadership of the Assemblies of God was the most far-reaching opportunity for women throughout the history of the fellowship. However, it would be another two years before the election would take place. While this historic vote to change policy was significant, policy alone had never been enough for the women in the Assemblies of God.

Once again, Wood’s leadership made a significant impact in creating opportunities for women beyond what mere policy had been able to accomplish. Wood, along with the Executive Presbytery, determined to invite one woman and one minister under the age of 40 to serve as auditors at each of the executive meetings held between the conclusion of the 2007 General Council meeting and the permanent election of these representatives in 2009. These auditors would not have the vote of full membership on the Executive Presbytery, but would be able to provide counsel and perspective to the meetings and decisions before the governing board. Once again, where opportunity had too often been met with immediate constraint, a shift in policy as well as practice had taken place. Opportunity now seemed to mean just that: an opportunity for women to have a literal seat at the table of leadership and service within the movement that has been one of the first to open the door to the female voice.

While the election of a woman to the Executive Presbytery would create a position of full leadership at the national level, the inclusion of auditors to Presbytery meetings in the interim is also significant. At each of the nine meetings between 2007 and 2009, a different woman was chosen to represent the female point of view. While one might argue that it was constraining to these women to be token representatives with no vote, I would contend that the variety of women from different areas of ministry and their ability to be more than mere observers was a unique opportunity for women’s service and exerted influence within the executive leadership. The two-year time span between the passing of the resolution authorizing a woman’s service and the election of a woman to the Executive Presbytery could have been a time when the voice of women was essentially put aside. The leadership of the Assemblies of God, however, made a distinct choice to create further opportunity for women where none had previously existed.

The Female Voice of Leadership 100 Years in the Making

On August 5, 2009, at the 53rd gathering of the General Council of the Assemblies of God, following nearly 100 years of mixed history and rhetoric surrounding the role of women, the council voted to elect Dr. A. Elizabeth (Beth) Grant to the Executive Presbytery. Grant was one of four women including Dr. Deborah Gill, Linda Stamps-Dismore, and Jane Boulware-Wead who were nominated after each district submitted potential candidates and the Executive Presbytery nominated and narrowed the group for the vote. It took three ballots to achieve the required majority ending 95 years of male-only leadership in the national ranks of the Assemblies of God.

While the shift in direction is distinct, old habits also seemed to die hard. The districts also submitted potential nominees for the Executive position for a minister under the age of 40. This position could also have been held by a female minister, but all of the names submitted by the districts were male. This remnant of male dominance is striking because of the organizational nature of the Assemblies of God. While argument persists on the need for “affirmative action” with regard to promoting women within the fellowship, the autonomy of the local church represented in the power of the district offices demonstrates that when given the freedom to promote a female without compulsion, local structures show little support for women’s leadership. Much work remains to create a more affirming culture for women at the district level. These opportunities will only materialize if more women are allowed the freedom to minister in the local church. A more detailed analysis of the cultures that exist at the local and district levels of the Assemblies of God is necessary. The greatest constraints to women’s ministry work resides in these cultures, and the constraints at that level are deeper than those exposed through this study.
Recognition of the challenges faced by women at the local and district level did not go unnoticed by the first woman elected to a national position in the Assemblies of God. In her acceptance speech upon the electing ballot, Grant appealed to her male counterparts on the local church level by encouraging them to recognize the call of God on women in their churches, particularly little girls and young women. Grant exhorted these pastors to verbally say, “We see God’s hand on you. He has called you. He is with you.” This appeal is consistent with the one made to fellow pastors by Gill in her seminal article published in the *Enrichment* journal. Pastors in the local church and the district officials who oversee these ministers play a crucial role in changing the opportunities for women to serve and in eliminating the constraints that have plagued their work since the earliest days of the Pentecostal movement.

To her female counterparts, Grant also appealed to inspire the fellowship by their obedience to the call to ministry by stating, “We live in strategic days. It is time to say yes to God. Men and women together [sic].” Grant continued, “God is who calls and who orders our steps. We have a history of one hundred years of women who heard the call and obeyed,” she included, with a hint of sarcasm at the election process. She concluded her thoughts using some humor in saying, “Thank you for hanging in there [through a long election process], after 95 years, what’s a few hours? Spouses will never look the same in the Assemblies of God.”  

The rhetorical approach in this appeal is also significant. Grant does not appeal to her female colleagues with the language of power overcoming oppression. She does not single women out as a driving force in ministry apart from men. Rather, in her appeal to women, she turns her language back to that of classical Pentecostal calling: empowered by the Holy Spirit and trusting that the God who has called them will not allow the rhetorical constraints of mankind to inhibit their call. But, she adds, women must be obedient to this call. By employing strong, yet historically driven rhetorical invention, Grant enables women to engage in the work of Pentecostal ministry, but she does not negate the men whom they will need to come alongside them. The most effective form of ministry includes both men and women if it is going to be successful at reclaiming a sense of urgency to see a lost world come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

By engaging in a hint of sarcasm and humor, Grant reminds the constituency that this partnership in ministry is not limited to men as the pastoral leader and the woman as the dutiful spouse. Rather, this partnership in ministry can also be achieved when the dutiful spouse is, in fact, the husband of the Pastor.

In an article highlighting her multiple ministry roles, including her work as co-founder of Project Rescue (a ministry focused on women and children caught up in sex trafficking), serving on the Executive Presbytery, and chairing the Network for Women Ministers (then known as the Network for Women in Ministry), Grant highlights why the female voice is so necessary in the Assemblies of God. She states, “When more than 6,000 women are credentialed—and many more are not, but week after week are doing what God has called them to do—that is quite a group of women.” She continues, “To me, this is a very treasured responsibility and a privilege to represent that body of women, many of whom inspire me.”

The significance of Grant’s election and her influence over the policy and practice of the Assemblies of God with regard to women’s roles will take several years of history to assess fully. However, her election alone is a significant shift in the application of policy and practice within the Assemblies of God and ends nearly a century of constraints for women seeking to take responsibility for their call and the empowerment for service they believed they had been given by their Pentecostal experience.

*The Network for Women in Ministry*

In addition to Grant’s election to the Executive Presbytery, she also continued to serve as the national Chairperson for what was then called “The Network for Women in Ministry” or simply, “The Network.” Originally named the Taskforce for Women in Ministry, “The Network” was moved in 2008 from the status of taskforce to that of an official department within the national headquarters of the Assemblies of God. With this new designation, specific funds and national sponsorship of biennial conferences were supplied by the General Council and provided a level of credibility to the gatherings as official ministry endeavors on par with other national departments, including the Alliance for Higher Education, U.S. Missions, and Assemblies of God World Missions.

In 2016, the Network was renamed The Network of Women Ministers in order to further distinguish this department from the national Women’s Ministries Department. While their efforts may overlap in some areas, their purposes and focus are entirely different. According to the website, the Network of Women Ministers exists to

Connect and inspire credentialed women ministers, and those seeking credentials. We are dedicated to building community among our women ministers and providing leadership development opportunities. Our aim is to model biblical leadership through the various ministries in which we serve. We want to equip districts and the local church body to empower women to leadership within their churches and allow younger generations to see God’s spirit poured out on all flesh.”

This statement is distinct from the Women’s Ministries Department whose purpose is ministry to women as opposed to the
ministry of women. These distinct purposes are separate and yet, their histories are intertwined. In 1925, Etta Calhoun formed the Women’s Missionary Council, the organization that would become the Women’s Ministries Department, when her own opportunities for ministry were constrained. In what would become a pattern for women like Calhoun, when constraints were placed on women’s roles and opportunities, women who were convinced of their call moved past those constraints and created opportunities, as Grant states, to take responsibility for their calling. According to Grant, the call to ministry is not a call to women to rule or to seek positions of power, but rather a call to pour oneself out in ministry. In other words, the call to ministry is about giving of oneself in service rather than focusing on a hierarchy of leadership.

The rhetorical approach taken by Grant is also of interest. In 2008, the General Council sponsored a national conference that took on the moniker of “conversations.” Playing on the social needs of women and the concept of networking, the conference was planned around conversations among women who serve in specific areas of ministry as well as mixes of these groups to discourse and respond to the various speakers and workshops presented during the course of the three-day event. Specific groups of ministry were identified including those who serve as senior or lead pastors, youth pastors, children’s pastors, missionaries (both foreign and domestic), and educators to name a select few. These “conversations” took place around circular tables with a discussion facilitator and were in response to sessions termed “narrative sessions” where the stories of women actively engaged in various stages and types of ministry were shared. On the final morning of the conference a “dialogue” session was held with then General Superintendent George Wood participating in what was sub-titled, “Everything we ever wanted to know about women in ministry, but were afraid to ask.” This question-and-answer session with Wood allowed him to share his vision regarding the role of women in the Assemblies both in terms of theology and practice as well as to answer specific questions about how this practice could be carried out more fully in the future compared with past experiences.

The conference rhetoric was replete with language that focused on community, mentoring, narrative, and discourse in a manner both female-centered as well as utilizing feminine strengths in communication such as relationship and service. Billed as a “unique experience for women in ministry” the conference both affirmed the multiplicity of ministry areas where women serve, but created an environment where women’s voices were heard in a context that women understand best.

In a letter of greeting included in the Conversations ’08 program book, Wood stated, “Women have been at the heart of the diverse ministries of the Assemblies of God since it’s founding. It is the desire of the executive leadership to see a growing army of women mobilized . . . to fulfill God’s call with excellence and a greater anointing.” This desire as expressed by Wood on behalf of the executive leadership of the Assemblies of God again signaled a significant shift of purpose specifically directed to women. This purposeful change in the rhetorical stance of the leadership of the Assemblies of God allowed for a greater opportunity to see the rhetorical topography changed and in turn a greater opportunity for the female voice to be heard. The Network held another Conversations conference in 2010 opposite the General Council meetings to bring a specific focus to women in ministry, but later the Network added events to the Council week rather than hosting a separate conference.

Breaking Down the Rhetorical Barriers to Successful Service

While these changes and shifts are dramatic and certainly seem to indicate a culture change at the highest levels with the Assemblies of God, challenges remain. Kate Cory, a presenter at the Conversations ’08 conference and a nationally appointed U.S. missionary, rose to question Wood during the question and answer session with an issue that continues to haunt women in the Assemblies of God: acceptance at the local level. Cory expressed the challenges faced by women such as herself who are required to raise funds to support their missionary work. She described in detail the obstacles she faces in meeting with male pastors upon whom she and others like her depend for opportunities to share their vision for ministry and appeal for funds. Cory expressed frustration at being told by her male counterparts that they would not be able to meet with her because it would be inappropriate for them to be seen in public or to meet privately with a female. Having come from a background in corporate America, this assumption was a foreign concept to Cory who found it remarkable that excuses such these were tolerated within the fellowship. Cory went so far as to assert that she found this stance taken by male pastors to objectify men more than women, which is the claim that seems so commonplace in media and the workplace.

Wood’s response to the narrative Cory laid out was sympathetic, but while he affirmed her work and her right to serve as a woman within the Assemblies of God, he could offer little by way of change. As has been discussed over and over in this chapter, the greatest constraint women continue to face with regard to their ministry opportunities falls at the feet of the local church. The autonomy of the local church and, therefore, the autonomy of the pastor of that church prevents the General Council from specifically dictating how women will be treated. This situation goes beyond the issues presented by Cory with regard to the raising of funds for her work, and presents a challenge to those who desire employment as staff members at these churches. However, rather than dismissing Cory’s frustration, Wood asked her to write a piece for the Enrichment journal on the challenges she faces and why the local church is so important in bringing about a full embrace of women within the church.

While these constraints are significant and can be as discouraging as any other placed in the path of women throughout the
history of the Assemblies of God, the rhetorical position taken by Wood seems to maintain a willingness to find even the smallest of open doors. In order to create opportunities in places where constraint remains dominant, Wood sought to be proactive in utilizing the tools and resources to continually send the message that women are welcome in the ministry of the Assemblies of God.

In the twenty-four years of Wood’s executive leadership in the Assemblies of God first as General Secretary and then later as General Superintendent, he set out to encourage a shift in the make up of the leadership face of the Assemblies of God. The Network of Women Ministers, while it has struggled to gain a significant place of influence in the overall fellowship, is just one of those areas. The establishment of the Network creates a presence in the national office, but until the appointment of Crystal Martin in 2017, the chairperson for the Network was a non-resident appointee (meaning she did not work at the National Leadership and Resource Center located in Springfield, Missouri), and in addition to being led by a non-resident, the Network has not been led by a woman who has served as a lead pastor or in a significant ministry position apart from the position held by her husband. This scenario also has created significant challenges to the functional purpose and the influence of the Network beyond being a place for women to seek resources. For the Network to have significant impact, more work will need to be done to develop it as a department not just for women to seek information and support but also as a means of education and resourcing for male pastors, local church boards, and district offices.

FROM BENEVOLENT NEGLECT TO FULL EMPOWERMENT FOR SERVICE

If the culture of the Assemblies of God is to become a place where women can thrive in ministry positions, issues such as those addressed by Cory as well as theological and scriptural challenges to women’s roles in the church must continue to be confronted with a strong rhetorical stance. Anything less will only serve to set the Assemblies of God back rather than setting it apart as a vanguard of example to other evangelical traditions.

The implications of the rhetorical shift occurring within the Assemblies of God are numerous and profound. Not since the earliest days of the Pentecostal movement has such a sustained effort been engaged on the part of women for women along with the affirmation of those who lead the fellowship. It would seem that the argument presented by Benvenuti, Gill and others has not fallen on deaf ears, but rather the mantle of ministry has been placed firmly on the shoulders of women who not only are strong enough to bear its weight, but also who are no longer interested in arguing for their right to participate in ministry. They join a new generation of male leaders who are willing to engage the past, submit to examination, and use their rhetoric to affirm their sisters in the empowerment of the Holy Spirit for the work they have been called to do. The rhetorical opportunity is not limited to simply acknowledging the female voice within Pentecostalism. It extends to create the possibility for the Assemblies of God to stand out within the evangelical community and set the example rather than being swallowed up by the culture. This opportunity came during the General Council in 2017 when Dr. Melissa J. Alfaro was the first woman elected to the national governing body, to serve as the executive presbyter for ministers under the age of 40, a position not specifically intended to represent women. Alfaro is a product of the Assemblies of God from her childhood through her education at Southwestern Assemblies of God University. Alfaro, a Latina woman who is a pastor ordained in a language and ethnic district, is the first in her family to graduate both high school and college along with graduate and postgraduate degrees. Her presence on the executive presbytery marks a distinct shift not only in who can but also who does serve in this national role. In addition, Alfaro is now one of two women to serve as executive presbyter as well as one of two people of Hispanic descent in that body. She serves alongside an African-American executive presbyter, one ethnic/language executive presbyter, and she is one of 6 out of 21 executive presbyters who are not Caucasian and male.

As a result of the intentional promotion of women and other underrepresented people by leaders such as Dr. George O. Wood, the role of women can no longer be left to benevolent neglect. Rather, what the Assemblies of God now seeks to do is lead by example so that the Pentecostal tradition provides options for women who seek to reconcile their calling with an empowerment for service. Progress and influence come slowly, but change is afoot in the Assemblies of God, and now is the time to set the standard for others in the tradition as well as those in other areas of the evangelical community to see this change come to fruition. Speaking in a business session during the General Council in 2017, George Wood addressed this change specifically as he noted the representation in the executive as well as the general presbytery and that intentional legislative action helped make the change possible. Wood proclaimed that at one time the Assemblies of God did have a quota system. To be a national leader in the Assemblies of God, you had to be white and male. “No more!” he proclaimed! “That era is over in the governing structures in the Assemblies of God!”

Cavaness, “Biographical Study.”

McClure, “Many Roles, One Call,” 11.
A 1990 report by the National Council of Churches seemed to reveal that the Assemblies of God had seen dramatic change in the number of women serving in ministry. However, this progress was due in large part to methods of reporting. In earlier studies, the Assemblies of God only submitted the names of women who were ordained, but in the 1990 study, the numbers submitted included those who held a license to preach in addition to those who were ordained. These are two of the four forms of credentials issued in the Assemblies at the time. While the comparisons seemed to show dramatic change, the numbers are questionable as the majority of credentialed women held licenses rather than ordination certificates and more than half of these women were retired and not actively serving as pastors, evangelists, or missionaries. See also Tinlin and Blumhofer, “Decade of Decline or Harvest?”

Grant, “Celebration and Commitment to Community.”

Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, 32.

Ibid., 106.

General Council of the Assemblies of God, *Role of Women.*

Tackett, “Embourgeoisement of the Assemblies of God.”

General Council of the Assemblies of God, *Role of Women.*

Medhurst, “Filled with the Spirit,” 565.

Ibid., 567.

Ibid., 568.

Ibid.

Booze, “God Who Calls is Faithful,” 17–21.

Dr. Gill now serves as a professor of biblical studies and exposition at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary at Evangel University. In 2009, Gill became the first female to be appointed to the position of full professor at the Assemblies of God’s only denominationally owned seminary. In addition to her academic work, Dr. Gill is a founding member of Christians for Biblical Equality, an interdenominational organization that promotes gender equality. She is also a published author on the subject of women in ministry, having several articles in academic and popular periodicals, co-authoring a book with Dr. Barbara Cavaness and speaking publicly on the biblical and theological position for women in ministry.

Gill, “Called by God,” 35.


Benvenuti, “Anointed, Gifted and Called,” 231.

Ibid., 230.

Attanasi, “Fellowship Convenes Conference for Women.”

Assemblies of God Women in Ministry Task Force, “National Conferences for Women in Ministry Slate.”

Attanasi, “Fellowship Convenes Conference for Women.”

Knoth, “Women in Ministry a Reality at Conference.”


Trask, “Ask the Superintendent,” 8.


Boulware-Wead, “Lord Send a Revival.”

Wood, “Why Credentials Are Important.”

Ibid.

General Council of the Assemblies of God, 52nd General Council, August 8–11, 2007.

Grant, “Executive Presbytery Election Speech.”

McCure, “Many Roles, One Call.” 11.


Wood, “Everything We Ever Wanted to Know.”
Wood, Business Session.
What am I Supposed to Do? Let People Go to Hell?

A Rhetoric of Empowered Women

So in spite of opposition, examples and visible models of women ministers who were a part of the initial fabric of our Fellowship encouraged younger women. Sure, there was opposition, but the sheer fact is so many were called.

—Dr. Byron Klaus, President, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary

When people would say, “Women shouldn’t be doing this,” my response was “God called me. What am I supposed to do? Let people go to hell?”

—Rev. Martha Klaus, recounting to her son, Byron, on opposition to her ministry

THE LIFE AND MINISTRY of Martha Klaus is reminiscent of others of her generation of Assemblies of God women called to the ministry work of the church. Her call to a life of ministry was not dramatic. Rather, in a private moment warming her hands over the family stove in the dead of Nebraska winter, sixteen-year-old Martha heard the voice of the Lord prompt her to dedicate her life to serve the church. Credentialed in 1937 at age eighteen, Martha traveled and held revivals and vacation Bible schools throughout the Midwest and up and down the coast of California. She held services in mining camps, at cattle sale barns, and in places even the burliest of cowboys would have found a little rough.

When she first applied for ordination, she was denied because her husband (whom she married in 1945) was not yet credentialed, and it would be unseemly for a wife to be ordained before her husband. Yet, despite this obstacle, Martha and her husband Arthur set out together to pastor on the plains of North Dakota, ministering primarily to German-Russian immigrants. They would be ordained together in 1949 and continue to serve as co-pastors. Wherever they served together in their 40-plus-year ministry career, their names both appeared on the marquee with Arthur preaching in the morning and Martha in the evening. According to their son, Byron, who recently retired as the president of the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, “Mom’s ministry really occurred before my dad’s. The parishioners in the churches they pastored never questioned whether she was fully a minister. At times my father’s role was more prominent because she took on a mother’s role. But even though that was the case, there was never anyone who would have said when my mom preached, ‘Oh we’re getting the B team.’ My mom was called; dad never doubted that.”

Narrative after narrative has provided a similar account. Women, called into the unlikeliest of vocations during the unlikeliest of times, faced challenges and constraints dictated not by those outside their faith communities but from within their own ranks, their fellow ministers. In spite of the unlikely circumstances that provided opportunity where none was culturally granted and despite the constraints that seemed to come more from those who also claimed to be among the called, these women persevered and forged a legacy that serves to inspire and challenge a new generation of women who believe that they too have heard the voice of God calling them to a life of service to his Kingdom within the Pentecostal tradition. How these young women will be received remains to be seen. While the times have certainly changed vocationally for women who seek opportunity in medicine, politics, or law, the discourse on women in ministry remains complex. For every story of acceptance and success another tells of rejection and discontent.

A REVIEW OF PURPOSE

I have set out to explore the impact of tensions generated in the rhetoric of opportunity and constraint faced by women seeking positions of ministry in the Pentecostal movement and more specifically in the Assemblies of God. This tension manifests itself in the historical context and in relationship to the prevailing culture. These discrepancies and the resulting tensions are profoundly rhetorical. They are primarily rooted in the way people talk—or how they use words, language, and symbols and are, in turn, used by them. The historical, cultural, and theological context in which the Pentecostal movement emerges contributes to this discourse and permeates the formation of ideology and practice that creates dissonance and tension both within the fellowship and to the outside observer. The challenge for me as a rhetorical scholar is how and how well people invented and deployed these messages in
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response to each situation. The relationship between the church and women is distinct and how Pentecostals have talked about this relationship has several implications.

I demonstrate that women have played and continue to play a disproportionately prominent role in the Pentecostal movement as compared to their counterparts in Evangelicalism. I have explored how the role of women in leadership within the Pentecostal church is about more than feminism and more than garnering women a seat at the table. Rather, women empowered to lead in the church is a total reconceptualization of who God is and how we approach the work of the church in our culture as well as a quiet subversion of centuries of religious identity and ideology.

I have argued that the inclusion of women in leadership positions within the Assemblies of God is doctrinally as distinctive as their pneumatology. I contend that the shift the Assemblies of God made in their distinctive theology and pneumatology creates a greater rhetorical space for women in the church. If the Baptism in the Holy Spirit is an empowerment for service and the Spirit pours out on daughters, what are they empowered to do in their service? I demonstrate that theologically and rhetorically, the fathers of the Assemblies of God saw it both ways. Theologically, the Spirit was available to these prophesying daughters, but when it came to creating both physical and rhetorical space for women to serve, their previous theological leanings and cultural norms weighed heavily against granting women a new place in the emerging hierarchy of the fellowship.

I have argued that the Assemblies of God lost sight of its unique cultural and religious identity. Despite a radical beginning and a unique approach to theology, as the Assemblies of God grew and developed into an individual institution, strategic choices were made that may have precipitated rapid growth and development in the United States and around the world. Yet, in the process these choices sacrificed distinct elements of their unique history and ideology. These choices contributed to the tensions faced by women who sensed a calling to church ministry and leadership. I built upon previous scholarship, which argues that the Pentecostal tradition, as exemplified in the Assemblies of God sacrificed its moment in time to be a catalyst for the changing role of women in the church and in American culture.

Finally, I have argued that these issues faced by the Assemblies of God mirror broader rhetorical problems in the evangelical community. The idea of women in church leadership challenges religious convention and American culture. Several competing voices emerge on the role women have to play within the home, the society and the church. I examined the way evangelical rhetoric creates and shapes both policy and perception on the place of women in public, private, and religious spheres.

My purpose in writing this book is to heed the warning of Blumhofer regarding dissonance and mixed messages in multiple narratives. At the same time, I have also exposed and addressed the rhetorical underpinnings of the discrepancies that I believe have existed and continue to permeate the role of women in American religion and church leadership. The vast narrative of history could not be ignored, but I have focused my research on the history of the Pentecostal movement in the United States, with sustained examination of the Assemblies of God. The history and exigence of the Pentecostal movement and the birth of the Assemblies of God is an extraordinary event and noteworthy from a rhetorical perspective.

While I believe that my work contributes substantially to the body of gender theory and rhetorical criticism, rather than use a feminist rhetorical approach that engages in critical analysis of patriarchy and power, I have focused my examination on the ways women negotiate and renegotiate rhetorical space throughout the history of the Assemblies of God. I have examined how they used and were used by symbols as they conceptualized their theology and practiced their faith. I have examined what their theology means and how they practice it authentically and try to do proper justice to it as they engage in public life.

It was important to first provide a foundation for understanding the Pentecostal movement, the Assemblies of God, and the cultural landscape in which this movement was birthed. In so doing, I have provided a detailed historical account of the theological foundations of Pentecostal belief as well as an account of the development and growth of the Assemblies of God with particular focus on their approach to women's leadership. Finally, I have created a more complete picture of the role women have played in the Assemblies of God by providing a narrative account of specific women who have created, shaped, and left a legacy in their contributions to the work of the church that extends beyond their gender or the time period in which they served.

The Assemblies of God stands today at a critical moment in which the role of women in ministry is again at the forefront of denominational policy and discourse. How the Assemblies handles the situation rhetorically and practically will determine whether the dissonance felt by women who are currently serving or considering service in ministry will continue or the counter-cultural revolution of the past will be redeemed. Therefore, the significance of this book goes beyond the historic place of the Assemblies of God and the greater Pentecostal movement and seeks a better understanding of the influence of rhetoric on shaping the role of women in Pentecostal ministry for the present and into the future.

The Pentecostal movement and the Assemblies of God specifically have made a significant impact in the United States and abroad and their practices are uniquely centered in tensions that are critical to understanding this movement as well as greater evangelical Christian culture. They are caught up in the tensions of theological conservatism driven by certain assumptions about the nature of mankind and their ability to experience God versus a history of restorationism, revivalism, anti-elitism, and the countercultural nature of their own movement. Historians have noted that the strength of evangelical movements has been in their identification with people and their passion about communicating their message. Pentecostalism is democratic in structure and
spirit and therefore belongs to the people rather than to the elites. The result is a measure of the importance of an issue by its popular reception or the adequacy of a method by the number of people it attracts. Therefore, messages receive a greater value based on the quantity rather than the quality of the message being sent.

The focus of my work has revolved around this tension and how women have worked through it to create and maintain rhetorical space in spite of the dissonance. The role of women in the Assemblies of God is centered in the pull between what is popular and what is possible. The tension exists in the rhetoric of the Assemblies of God and their prophesying daughters both past and present.

These challenges are created, shaped, reinforced and naturalized by how people in the early days of the Pentecostal movement and how members of the Assemblies of God in the present day use words, language, and symbols and are in turn used by them. My work analyzes how the rhetoric of Pentecostals as a whole and within the Assemblies of God specifically, has created a gap of dissonance with regard to the role of women in leadership positions and has damaged the ability of the movement to continue in the vanguard of restorationism. This position has created a mistrust within the organization as well as in the greater culture they are trying to reach with their message.

The construction of this rhetorical history has provided a unique lens for describing and assessing actors, events, and cultures within the Pentecostal movement and the Assemblies of God as they wrestled to shape their theology and witness in the American religious landscape. Rhetorical history concerns itself with the role of persuasion and allows a closer look at those engaged as actors of persuasion. Rhetorical history is a lens for assessing the theological and cultural legacies of those who have led in Pentecostalism as well as those who have found a way to navigate through the tensions to create rhetorical space for women who participate in the work of spreading the Pentecostal message.

Women like Martha Klaus and her sisters in ministry were and continue to be agents who are called to spread the gospel in the context of ordained ministry wherever and whenever possible through preaching and leading. Listening to their male counterparts argue over the matter creates a rhetorical tension that challenges women’s identification with men as ministers and vice versa.

The holiness and later Pentecostal revivals created an exigency or a sense of urgency to spread the message of Jesus as Savior, Baptizer, Healer and Soon-coming King. This sense of urgency created a space for women and provided an empowerment for service. However, among fellow laborers and in religious gatherings was an audience bound up with varying perceptions of what ministry looked like and who could legitimately present the discourse. These constraints have played a significant role in the social construction of Pentecostal culture and discourse.

In addition, a more fundamental theological tension exists inherently in the Pentecostal movement. The tension between radicalism and conservatism is a continuing exigence that also needed to be negotiated and renegotiated. The result is a constant and very fundamental “imperfection” that exists among core denominational distinctives and in the larger movement that requires a continual rhetorical effort to engage—whether to ameliorate the imperfections or to strategically amplify the imperfections so as to increase pressure for some sort of social or theological change. This tension touches the core of Pentecostalism’s relationship to the larger evangelical community as well as American religious culture.

I have attempted to fully examine the constraints and social construction of Pentecostal discourse, unpack the history of the movement, and to take on the responsibility as a rhetorical critic to reconstruct the goals, strategies, and vision of the movement through a careful study of the surviving artifacts of the participants. It has not been my intention to simply examine the history of the Assemblies of God from the standpoint of the evolution of ideas, but from the perspective of how messages are created and used by people to influence and relate to one another.

By engaging in this perspective, as a critic, I have been able to gain an insight into how the adherents to the Pentecostal movement and the founding fathers and mothers of the Assemblies of God used rhetoric to both create a space for women as active participants in ministry while at the same time creating a dissonance through that same rhetorical practice by the dichotomy of their policy and practice. It has been my contention that key rhetors including ministers at the local level as well as denominational officials used rhetoric to ameliorate the theological tensions in the Assemblies of God by closing and/or preempting those same spaces. While this dissonance falls outside the confines of the present work, it does speak to an important aspect of the context in which this rhetorical space was negotiated and renegotiated. The rhetoric employed by ministers within the local church who have acted as agents of this amelioration and preemption of theological tension and rhetorical space remains an area where further study must be conducted.

As Turner has argued, rhetorical history provides an understanding of rhetoric as a process; it creates an appreciation of both the commonalities and the distinctiveness of rhetorical situations and responses. Rhetorical history tests theory and compliments criticism while at the same time standing alone as a unique approach to scholarship. This position runs counter to the notion that history is simply a mirror of the past. Rather than looking at isolated instances that are static in time, rhetorical history allows the scholar and the reader to view rhetoric as a dynamic process of social construction, maintenance, and change. Rhetorical scholars replace the mirror to reveal people who are “working within their societal context to create stories about the past.”

The value of my study is not in the mirror of Pentecostalism’s past, but rather in the description and analysis of a dynamic
process that has created and shaped the construction of Pentecostal culture and rhetorical practice. The delicate dance between those who favor a greater role for women and those who favor a more traditional approach to women’s involvement is inherently rhetorical. The time has come to put down the mirror of reflection and engage the rhetorical situation so as to see what has been, what is, and what can be. As a rhetorical scholar, my intention is to work within the context of the present to create stories about the past in an effort to move toward a better understanding of how rhetoric creates both opportunities and constraints that have resulted and continue to result in discursive tension and dissonance for women leaders in the Assemblies of God.

I have used as my guide to analyzing the rhetorical history of the Assemblies of God, Zarefsky’s seminal work on the four senses of rhetorical history. It is Zarefsky’s final sense—the study of historical events from a rhetorical perspective—that I have used to reveal the challenges and insights into the rhetoric of the Assemblies of God with regard to the role of women. As Zarefsky instructs, I have engaged this sense by starting with the assumption that the rhetorical historian has the same subject matter as any other historian, but the perspective focused not on facts and figures, but on the messages created by early Pentecostals and used by them to both influence and relate to one another.

As a rhetorical historian approaching my texts from this perspective, I have endeavored to view history as a series of rhetorical problems that call for public persuasion to advance a cause or overcome some impasse. How and how well did people in these rhetorical situations invent and deploy messages in response to the situation? I have attempted to fulfill Zarefsky’s charge that studies of this type may offer a powerful answer to the elusive “so what?” question. Through this analysis I believe that I have been able to see significant aspects about the history of the Assemblies of God and the role of women that other perspectives may have missed or did not know existed.

This analysis of historical events from a rhetorical perspective has revealed the forces of history; the visions, goals, and strategies employed by the Assemblies of God to both create a space for women, while at the same time creating a rhetorical tension that continues to permeate the culture. These challenges to women’s empowerment have been present in the rhetoric regarding the role of women in the Assemblies of God and in the fabric of American culture. What does this work on women in the Assemblies of God contribute to the larger issues of a woman’s role in the home and the community? And in turn, how does that impact the place of the Assemblies of God and the Pentecostal movement in American culture? What does this work tell us about rhetorical history and about the role of gender in contributing to the public moral argument? It has been my desire to do more than hold up a mirror of reflection, but to offer up a critique by which we can move toward a better understanding of the power of rhetoric and its impact on the role of women in leadership within the Assemblies of God. As a result of asking these questions and offering up this critique, I believe that I have demonstrated a more consistent case for their distinct and necessary contribution.

Multiple challenges exist with regard to women in the Assemblies of God including those examined here. First, a perception persists that a “Golden Age” for women in ministry positions in the Assemblies of God once existed. While the numbers of women, per capita, serving in the fellowship may have been greater in the early, formative years of the movement, contradictions in message still existed regarding their role, abilities, and freedom to function within the organization.

Second, the tradition of the Pentecostal movement and the Assemblies of God is full of multiple narratives and competing messages. The nature of the organization itself contributes to this challenge. The lack of a strong central organization makes the Assemblies of God unique and, at the same time, allows for dissonance in both the theological and cultural practices of the organization.

Third, the culture in which the Assemblies of God exists also provides challenges to the role(s) of women. Within this challenge resides the role of religion in American culture and how women are perceived and accepted in American religious life. The Assemblies of God is relatively young in the story of American religion and its exigence requires our attention. As a result, I have examined the role the Assemblies of God plays within the Evangelical community and how this relationship contributes to the rhetoric of women’s leadership. Even more so than within the Pentecostal tradition, the Evangelical movement has a long history of rejecting women in roles of leadership, specifically leadership outside the domestic sphere and especially within the church. How the Assemblies of God has functioned and continues to function within the greater Evangelical community demands our attention.

Finally, I have spent considerable time looking at the problem noted by Sociologist Margaret Poloma: the Assemblies of God and Pentecostal movement as a whole was at one time a counter-cultural social movement that challenged the notions of the secular culture as much as that of the religious culture. I have also focused on the reaction to the rise of secular social movements such as the modern feminist and the growth of the “religious right.” These movements have had a powerful impact on the rhetoric surrounding women’s leadership.

CONTRIBUTING TO RHETORICAL THEORY

As a result of this analysis, I believe that my examination of the history of the role of women in the Assemblies of God from a rhetorical perspective provides a significant contribution to rhetorical theory. Specifically, I believe that my study contributes to the rhetorical study of gender, evangelical rhetoric, and expands the role of rhetorical history as a means of inquiry.
While this is not specifically a study in feminist theory, I believe that it does contribute significantly to the study of gender and rhetoric. The Assemblies of God demonstrates the formation of a rhetoric of gender identity that despite significant constraints reveals and affirms the voices and experiences of women. The rhetorical history presented in this study reveals women as rhetors who bear the mark of empowered servants of their God and are not victims of a power struggle, but rather presents them as creators of their own rhetorical space despite the social, cultural, and rhetorical constraints placed in their way. This rhetorical history is about more than feminism and the examination of power and oppression, but rather this study is about how women used their belief in a Pentecostal paradigm to rhetorically negotiate and renegotiate their role in the church, and as a result, many were successful in maintaining a rhetorical space for their daughters, granddaughters, and generations to come. As I have stated several times, the empowerment of women for service and the rhetorical negotiation these women engaged in as a result is a reconceptualization of who God is and how he relates to his people, what it means to be a woman, and how we relate to one another as being co-created in the image of God.

This study provides an alternative to a traditional understanding of gender study. The purpose is not simply to garner women a seat at the table and increase the number of women on the ministry rolls within the Assemblies of God. Rather, the purpose is to look at how women used the unique perspective of Pentecostal theology and practice to create rhetorical space that had previously not existed and how this unique perspective challenged the religious dynamic, the cultural landscape, and the relationship between men and women.

Inherent in Pentecostal theology is an affirming and empowering paradigm that provides an identity beyond what the modern church had ever encountered. It is relevant to men and women as well as those within and outside of the Pentecostal tradition. Pentecostal theology reveals more about the nature of who God is and what is possible when we as human beings set aside our preconceived notions and allow God to reveal himself through us in sacred symbolic action. The power of the call of God on men and women, Pentecostal, Reformed, Catholic, or Non-Denominational is one that is both intensely personal and authoritative—it demands that we both contemplate and act. For anyone who has felt the call of God on their life but questioned how they might be chosen to represent the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to the world, I want to provide an opportunity to engage in a narrative that is affirming of that call, restores a sense of sacred pursuit, and demonstrates that in spite of the challenges of mankind, it is the Spirit of God who provides empowerment and the language for negotiating the rhetorical space necessary. When one operates in that empowerment, opportunities can be created where they did not previously exist and constraints can be negotiated to create a space for those who have previously been prevented from full participation in the Great Commission.

Throughout this history the rhetorical position of the women called to serve has remained consistent. They were empowered by the Spirit of God and not the preconceived ideas of mankind. Reluctance to this call is a strong theme throughout the history of women in the Assemblies of God; however, when women answered the call and engaged in ministry service, they were more reluctant to be quiet and to leave their work. These women and many men who embraced the Pentecostal empowerment of women were more determined to engage in their ministry when their roles were questioned. In the constraints, women found their voice and the ability to create new and unique means of ministry service. The history of the Assemblies of God and the narrative of women who have identified themselves with this fellowship is a dramatic example of how gender can on the surface appear to be a disqualifier for full participation. Instead, it emerged as a means to engage in discourse regarding an understanding of how God relates to his people and to ask who would not have received the gospel message without the presence of the female voice.

In addition to gender studies, a growing body of scholarship examines evangelical religious rhetoric. The evangelical community is a force to be reckoned with in the study of culture, politics, and religious understanding. Rhetoric has played a role in moving the Assemblies of God from the fringes of religious society to one of the largest and most influential organizations within the evangelical community. As a result of this move toward the mainstream, the Assemblies of God has adopted the rhetoric of evangelicalism, which has meant a diminishing of distinctive doctrines like the open-ended position of women’s authority. Within the history of the Pentecostal movement and the Assemblies of God is a shared inheritance with much of the evangelical world including an acceptance of modernist epistemology and a shared engagement in what has been termed the “culture wars.” Whereas the Assemblies of God may have been in a position of prophetic resistance in relationship to the rest of American religious culture, they have sacrificed much of what has made them unique and become a power player within the culture.

I have set out to provide a more sustained examination of the Pentecostal movement and the Assemblies of God from a rhetorical perspective. How women have engaged in rhetoric to negotiate and renegotiate their role in the Assemblies of God and the Pentecostal tradition serves as a foundational case study to examine the opportunities and constraints that women have been presented with in the whole of evangelicalism.

While certainly the challenges faced by the Assemblies of God mirror those present in the greater evangelical community, as I have argued, this mirror does not tell the complete story. By focusing on the Assemblies of God as a unique player in the evangelical community, I have been able to demonstrate that evangelical influence does not tell the entire story. Simply to lump all of the perspectives present in evangelicalism into one category does a disservice to the depth of diversity of belief and practice that resides within those denominations and fellowships. I have attempted to reveal the unique doctrine and practices present in the Assemblies...
of God that serve as a catalyst for addressing the challenges faced by evangelical women. Unfortunately, the analysis of this history reveals a cultural accommodation that has stifled and, in some cases, sacrificed completely these unique doctrines and practices. By bringing the history of women in the Assemblies of God back to the forefront of scholarly inquiry, I hope my analysis presents an opportunity to see how a shift in rhetorical practice could provide an opportunity for the Assemblies of God to engage their evangelical brothers and sisters on the subject of women and nourish a shift in perspective throughout the entire community. If the greatest challenge to women desiring to serve in ministry is, as George Wood says, a succumbing to cultural pressure, the Assemblies of God stands at a unique place of power and influence to reverse this accommodation and again be at the forefront of cultural change.

Finally, the rhetorical historian engages the known historical record from the perspective of how messages are created and used by people to influence and relate to one another. A study of rhetorical history runs counter to the notion that history is simply a mirror of the past. Rather than looking at isolated instances that are static in time, this inquiry views rhetoric as a dynamic process of social construction, maintenance, and change. Rhetorical scholars reveal people who are “working within their societal context to create stories about the past”. and in these narratives, the more complete picture emerges of how women in the Assemblies of God were able to embrace the paradigm of Pentecostalism and work within their context to engage a dynamic process of social construction, maintenance and change. Their efforts did not always yield the numerical success we would expect to see from a successful social change, but in spite of constant constraint and a lack of institutional empowerment, women remained a part of and an influence in the formation and success of the Assemblies of God.

My work is not simply centered on Pentecostalism’s past, but rather this work explores the dynamic process that has created and shaped the rhetorical construction of Pentecostal culture. The delicate dance between those who favor a greater role for women and those who favor a more traditional approach to women’s involvement is inherently rhetorical. Through a historical lens, I have taken my inquiry one step further to engage the rhetorical situation so as to see what has been, what is, and what can be. I have worked within the context of the present to tell the stories about the past in an effort to move toward a new rhetoric for women leaders in the Assemblies of God. While the purpose of this book is not one of advocacy, inherent in the context of this examination is the desire to see the Assemblies of God move from a rhetorical perspective that speaks richly of the history of women ministers as though their contribution is something of the past to a rhetoric that encourages and inspires future generations of women whose participation is present and active going forward. I believe that by presenting this perspective I have begun to offer a powerful answer to the elusive “so what?” question. It is my belief that through analysis of important historical events viewed from a rhetorical perspective, one can see significant aspects about those events that other perspectives might have missed. This approach enhances the richness of rhetorical scholarship and provides an opportunity to highlight the truly interdisciplinary nature of rhetorical scholarship.

**IMPLICATIONS OF THE PRESENT STUDY FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

It has been my intention from the beginning to engage in a scholarly endeavor that was not only contemplative but also rich with practical application and implications. I desire that this study not only further rhetorical scholarship, but also foster discourse and understanding of how we engage in rhetoric and what that means for how we practice our faith and try to live it authentically in the public square.

What I see as the final objective is to reveal the past in order to increase our understanding that rhetoric has consequences. In this case, the rhetoric of the women’s roles within the Assemblies of God has provided opportunity that defied religious convention, challenged the culture, and created space for the message of Pentecostalism to be presented with a female voice. At the very same time, some actors who engaged in a rhetoric of empowerment used their discourse to create serious constraints for the women of their generation and generations to come. This dissonance created a rhetorical tension that robbed the Assemblies of God and the Pentecostal movement from truly changing the religious landscape, providing a catalyst for women’s involvement in other aspects of the culture, and expanding the influence of that feminine voice.

This book does not solve the challenges faced by women, nor does it answer all of the questions raised in this inquiry. What it does is begin the journey toward further discourse on the importance of the female voice to the Pentecostal identity. It has been my intention to better answer the “so what” question, but not shut the door on the questions that remain. The exploration of the intersection of women, Pentecostalism, and evangelicalism is just beginning, and the interplay of these constituencies demands future scholarly inquiry. I have offered up what I see as the topography of the rhetorical landscape over the course of a given history, and I offer this rhetorical landscape to others as opportunities for future research and study.

I believe this study has implications for theological reflection, specifically in the area of gender reconciliation and the definition of leadership. It also has significant implications for the Assemblies of God. By focusing on the Assemblies of God as a representation of the Pentecostal tradition, this book provides a look at how the issue of women’s roles has impacted the fellowship and those who choose the Assemblies of God as their ecclesiastical home. As is often the case, this book does not provide prescriptive answers, and in some ways, it creates additional questions that require attention and critical scholarship. Finally, some
implications appear in this study for rhetoricians who choose to engage the topic of faith-based rhetoric and the people and organizations that make up evangelicalism.

I believe this book provides for women and men of faith, who believe they bear the image of God and are called to engage the good news of the Gospel of Jesus, a fresh theological reflection on what it means to be called into the ministry of Christ, beyond rigidly defined gender roles and ever-tightening boundary lines. I provide a renewed point of discussion to explore biblical identity and calling in ways that honor the Scripture and lived encounters with the Holy Spirit. The gap between what is typically examined as feminist concern and strict biblical interpretation is wide. This process of reflection and examination can benefit congregations and denominations inside and outside of the Pentecostal tradition to serve the world through active participation and an affirmation of all members to answer the call of the Great Commission. This shift in perspective on gender relationships and ministry service can reach beyond the purview of scholarly endeavor and provide answers for some of the most heinous injustices of patriarchy including domestic violence, pornography, and human trafficking as well as the silencing of God’s daughters. To realize the full implications of gender reconciliation in the church requires from both men and women first to acknowledge that the need for reconciliation exits, the acknowledgement of past hurts and wounds, an offer of confession and repentance, and forgiveness and healing. By engaging in this very practical framework, opportunity abounds for full restitution, restoration, and fresh discourse on a shared pursuit.

I believe a book of this kind provides a launching point for further scholarly inquiry into why gender remains such a challenge within the church. In a report from the Vatican, the ordination of women was linked along with sexual abuse of children as one of the church’s most serious crimes. For the first time, the ordination of women will be considered a “delicta graviora,” which is the most grievous category of crimes against the church, and women will face automatic excommunication, and priests who participate in the affirmation of women’s ordinations will be immediately removed from the priesthood. While the Vatican insists that this does not imply the two are in any way equivalent to one another, the statement is clear for Bishops in the United States that the “church is making a very clear statement about the core values of faith and worship.”

While the Assemblies of God is significantly different in its theology, doctrine, and approach to ministry from its Catholic brothers and sisters, they share the banner of Christianity and the common pursuit of the Great Commission. The challenges women face in the church are not an issue of the past, but are relevant for the ministry of the church today and going forward. How the evangelical church responds to their own perceptions of women’s ordination will have a great impact on how the church universal is perceived in light of this decision from the Catholic Church. As a fellowship whose doctrine stands in stark contrast to that of the Vatican regarding women’s ordination, the Assemblies of God has an opportunity to once again consider their own rhetoric on the issue of women’s roles and once again be a vanguard voice for women and the church.

I also believe there are several implications for the Assemblies of God. The Assemblies of God is facing the challenges of defining the distinctives of their doctrine and their commitment to a renewed emphasis on their core values: evangelize the lost, worship God, disciple believers, and demonstrate God’s love through compassion. I identify women as a crucial link to setting their tradition apart as one that defied culture rather than succumbing to it. The reconciliation of gender in a community of faith is a powerful demonstration of the reconciliation offered by Christ to a fallen world. When once we were eternally set apart from God because of the choices of mankind, we were reconciled to God and brought into full citizenship in the Kingdom of God through the redemption of Christ on the Cross. The return of men and women to one another and to their shared responsibility in the Kingdom creates a unique opportunity for the church to demonstrate revolution rather than reaction.

Early Pentecostals were furious writers and have left a vast treasure, much of which remains unseen and unstudied. The opportunities for examination are immense, and each new scholarly endeavor provides a more complete picture of whom and what the Assemblies of God is and can be. However, a lack of critical examination particularly self-critical examination must be rectified. Pentecostals can no longer fear their own history and must understand even that which may indicate unseemliness is an opportunity for reflection, correction, and growth.

In addition to the archived materials of the past, testimony has long served as an important means of communicating God’s mysterious work in the lives of Pentecostals. The testimonies, the sharing of miraculous signs and wonders, assured women a seat at the table and gave them a voice of participation in the work of the church. Further study of the rhetoric of testimony and its power to create, shape, and interpret religious experience, and how it was used to build the church will provide insight and critical examination of the unique rhetorical landscape of the Assemblies of God.

Another implication for the Assemblies of God revealed in this book and demanding of further inquiry is the hierarchical structure of the Assemblies of God and the ways this power structure is successful and the ways it inhibits potential opportunities for change or growth. One of the outcomes has been the revelation of the power of the local church and how this autonomy creates significant constraints for institutional adjustment. I avoid the term institutional change here intentionally. The role of women in the Assemblies of God is not a new issue that the fellowship is just now contending with and finding an ideological position on. From the moment of its inception, the Assemblies of God has grappled with how to answer the “woman question” and how to do so while still maintaining a distinctive doctrinal position that would seem to provide a clear answer to the question. If the pneumatology of
the Assemblies of God is open to women and through it they are empowered for ministry service, then women must be a part of the ministry ranks in significant and visible ways.

While the national headquarters of the Assemblies of God over time has come to embrace a full empowerment for women’s service and to present its position as an official doctrinal statement and reaffirm this doctrine in constitution and bylaws, a great disconnect between what is believed at the national level and what is practiced at the local level remains. When the role of women has been up for discussion, a great floor debate on where the Assemblies of God stands or should stand persists. The number of women who serve as lead pastors in the Assemblies remains dramatically low (less than 700 of nearly 9,000 credentialed women) despite efforts to raise the profile of women in General Council meetings, official publications, and by other means. Further study directed specifically at the local church and focused on the perceptions of the male pastorate are necessary to gain a better understanding of where further constraint exists and why.

Rhetorical historians and critics are provided an example of how women have effectively negotiated and renegotiated their roles within the Assemblies of God. They did so through the embracing of doctrine, which provided their empowerment not by the exhortation of mankind, but through the bestowing of a gift of supernatural power. At a time when doctrine is a polarizing topic within communities of faith and outside of these communities, rhetorical scholars must dedicate our efforts to fostering discourse and understanding on the powerful role that both epistemology and experience plays in affirming or constraining the voices of women in the church.

This analysis of the rhetoric of women’s leadership in the Assemblies of God has supplied the field of rhetorical studies with an example of how women, despite constant and persistent constraint created a rhetorical space for their participation in the Pentecostal tradition and the Assemblies of God, specifically. While women on the whole have been a disenfranchised group within the church, the women who negotiated their place in the ministry of Pentecostalism were from a variety socioeconomic backgrounds, had varying degrees of education or other pedigree, but possessed something greater than what would typically define those who challenged the rhetorical landscape of a particular social movement. These women possessed a belief that they had received a supernatural empowerment for service, and they used this belief to construct a rhetorical space for their participation and their influence. For the rhetorician, this is not the typical construction of gender or social movement analysis. The supernatural dimension of religious experience provides a new and distinct avenue of rhetorical inquiry.

I hope that through this work that rhetorical studies of gender, evangelical religious movements, and reconciliation of the two is enhanced and furthered. The rhetorical landscape created and shaped by the Assemblies of God and its position on women provides a model for understanding the power of language, words and symbols, to both create and constrain. The messages created and deployed by the Assemblies of God and its women is not entirely unique to this movement and has practical implications for future rhetorical study. These are lessons, given the position of the Vatican and other religious communities that remain important and demand our scholarly attention.

Throughout my research on this topic, I have encountered narrative after narrative from family, friends, and colleagues of the impact of women in their own lives, ministries, and religious experiences. Many of these narratives serve as a source of inspiration, some of frustration, and others pure discouragement and defeat. While these narratives are varied in their successes and failures, the result of these women’s engagement with Pentecostalism and their desire to be obedient to their call despite constraints, is the same: lives altered and transformed. From the former church elder raised in abuse and poverty who wandered into the crusades of evangelist Hattie Hammond to the influence of an aunt who when left widowed took up the banner of ministry and rode horseback through the mountains of Kentucky to bring the gospel of Jesus with little regard for the danger or dignity of a woman, to the daughter of immigrants who through the ministry of the Assemblies of God defied the odds to become the first women elected to a national leadership position, the narratives have one consistent strain: these women served as a catalyst for change not only in the church and the culture, but in the lives of people they encountered.

In July 2010, the Assemblies of God paid tribute to the longest continually serving pastor of a single congregation in the fellowship’s history. Mary Watford Stabler pastored Faith Chapel Assembly of God in Scratch Ankle, Alabama, for 71 years and had no plans to retire. As one who began her ministry during the throes of the great depression, Stabler was viewed with great skepticism because of her Pentecostal doctrine and because of her gender. In the early days, much of the resistance to her message came because she was a pioneering female pastor. According to Stabler, “I didn’t try to argue with them when they came against me. I had a lot of opposition, but the Lord always stood for me.”

419 Byron Klaus interview by Crabtree, “‘Mr. and Mrs.’ On the Church Marquee,” July 2005. See also, Martha Klaus interview by Crabtree, “He Preached Morning and She Preached Nights,” July 2005.

420 Hatch, Democratization of American Christianity, 214–19.
422. Turner, Doing Rhetorical History, 15.
423. Ibid., 8.
427. Turner, Doing Rhetorical History, 8.
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