

# PERMITTED TO PREACH ? WOMEN'S MINISTRY AMONG EVANGELICALS IN FRANCE.

A Consideration of Biblical Teaching and Practice, with  
Special Reference to the French Assemblies of God

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## **Abstract**

This study analyses the doctrine and practice of the largest French Pentecostal denomination in the area of women in the pastoral ministry, against the background of the French social and evangelical context and the wider contemporary debate in evangelicalism. It was born out of the author's own personal experience, first simply as a Christian *woman*, then as an *Assemblées de Dieu de France (ADD)* pastor's wife, with a desire to understand and evaluate that experience in the light of the Bible. *Are women permitted to preach?*

Part One examines the biblical texts that are commonly used to ban women from the pastoral ministry and seeks to dismantle a closed hermeneutical circle that misinterprets Pauline teaching and limits the liberating message of the gospel.

Part Two looks at evidence of gender bias in the most widely used francophone Bible version, the *Louis Segond* version. Part Three seeks to understand how the biblical texts have been interpreted and applied in the *ADD* through historical investigation of the limited documents available and a short survey of existing teaching.

The question of women in ministry is embedded deep within soteriological, ecclesiological, eschatological and pneumatological concerns, and touches the very heart of biblical and Pentecostal theology. The conclusions reached lead the author to suggest that to welcome women into ministry would be a necessary part of maintaining the *ADD's* Pentecostal identity.

## Conclusion

I have attempted to show that the Scriptural concept of 'headship' wrongly interpreted as 'authority' is the major stumbling block for women's ministry. It is the 'fence' at which complementarians balk, and on which those who ambiguously allow women to minister under male authority uncomfortably sit. It leads to a misinterpretation of Pauline appeals to creation order that is then read back into Genesis 2.

Classical Pentecostalism, living out the biblical concepts of call, gifting and anointing<sup>1</sup> did not have the resources to adequately address the doctrinal difficulties raised by the traditional denominations and as a result, practice suffered in some places, including France. Most early Pentecostals accepted male headship as *authority* in the home; causing pressure to extend this to the church. This is not logical; *head* applies in the head-body imagery that Paul uses for one-flesh marriage (Eph 5) and the spiritual union of Christ and the church. Logically, if one argues from creation that all women must submit in the church, one should also argue that all men should be church leaders!

The strength of the egalitarian position lies in its broader basis in Scripture and the theology of salvation. Reflecting an evangelical commitment to the unity of Scripture, I believe it adequately explains the 'problematic' Pauline passages through exegetical analysis, demonstrating that there are no Scriptural barriers to women entering the pastoral ministry. It harmonises theologically with original Pentecostal doctrine and practice<sup>2</sup> which is still contested by non-charismatic evangelicals. French Pentecostals must reconsider where spiritual authority is located: the masculine gender, or the Holy Spirit's gifting of a member of Christ's body?

Put Pentecostally, according to Acts 2, God sovereignly calls women, like Deborah, Huldah, Junia, Priscilla and Phoebe. Pentecostal practice around the world has demonstrated historically, through women like Maria Woodworth-Etter, Amy

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<sup>1</sup> Chapman, 'Rise and Demise', p.217

<sup>2</sup>The link between doctrine *and practice* in Scripture deserves further study. Pentecostal scholar Roger Stronstad argues that programmatic Lukan narrative justifies the Pentecostal theology of the Baptism in the Spirit, whereas conservative scholars subordinate it to 'didactic' Pauline passages. What can Acts 10-11:18 tell us about the *evidence of the Holy Spirit* in women's ministries? See: R. Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1984)

Semple McPherson, Kathryn Kuhlman and many others,<sup>3</sup> even within *ADD* history itself through the examples of Mme de Rougement, Clarice Scott, Germaine Jacoud etc, that evangelical women can function as evangelists and pastors. Unfortunately, in the *ADD*, the desire to obey Scripture 'to the letter' has obscured the necessity of contextualising Paul's 'difficult' passages. However, in my opinion, the widely-used *Louis Segond* translation has, by reflecting the traditional position handed down through the centuries via Catholicism, greatly reinforced this approach.

Following an impromptu gathering of pastors' wives at the March 2008 National Congress, in which this author participated, permission was obtained for an 'official' meeting at the March 2009 Congress. The theme formulated by the wives for this occasion was: *Associated with our husbands in serving God, we are faced with the difficulties of the ministry. How does our feminine sensibility meet these challenges?* This summarises well the present attitudes to and of women. Positively, it tacitly recognizes the challenges many hardworking pastors' wives face. The 'old' *ADD* outlook subsuming the 'ministerial' identity of the pastor's wife within her husband's pastoral identity is alive and well!

New informal meetings between pastors' wives may help develop self-worth and pastoral responsibility towards other women in the churches. Several regional women's conferences have been organised; I was privileged to participate in the organisation of the first of these in my own region. Thus a wind of change is blowing. 'Womens service in the church' is now officially (since March 2009) on the agenda for debate, probably in 2010, which represents a major change. Reluctance to cause dissension over this sensitive issue has meant that any small changes are localised. I suspect there is in reality a great diversity of opinion, and a desire on the part of an indeterminate number of French *ADD* pastors to offer greater ministry opportunities to women. And as a *Pentecostal*, I do not wish to be pessimistic about the future.

The question of women in ministry lies at the heart of Pentecostal theology and identity. Its historical and prophetic roots spring from the Old Testament charismatic ministry of prophecy and the Pentecostal outpouring of Acts 2. Among its early proponents Acts 2:17-18 was 'frequently cited as demonstrating that, far from

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<sup>3</sup> Including *Laura Pethrus*, *Mary Boddy*, *Mrs Wigglesworth*

being unbiblical, women in public ministry was actually a positive sign of the work of the Holy Spirit as God's plan is reaching its glorious culmination in these last days'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Larsen, 'Evangelical Distinctive', p.233-234