



## THE BLAZING CENTER FOR WOMEN IN THE CHURCH TODAY

BY MARILYN WILLIAMS

### TEXT:

### Acts 2:16-18

*This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy."*

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When the Holy Spirit came upon the church and into the hearts of the first followers of Jesus, on the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel's prophecy in the Old Testament to help the crowd understand what was happening. God has always intended to pour out the Holy Spirit on both men and women in his church, as equal partners, workers and leaders for and in the kingdom. In the Evangelical Covenant Church, we believe what Peter preached is the blazing center for our theology of women.

I am Marilyn Williams, an ordained minister with the Evangelical Covenant Church, and I have the distinct honor of serving at Covenant Offices as the first director of women's initiatives. This is a brand-new model of ministry for women in the Covenant. We seek to expand upon the rich heritage of women's ministries within our denomination by fostering the flourishing of women into our five mission priorities.

It is a new day for women; and we have intentionally stepped out of the old silo model to equip and empower women not in one area of ministry, but in all areas of ministry! We are committed to the flourishing of female disciples of Christ in all areas of kingdom witness, service, and leadership. In this new ministry model, men and women will work more collaboratively within our denominational mission priorities to foster the flourishing of women in every stage of life, ministry context, and personal call. We believe this is God's original intention.

What do I mean by God's original intention? Let me explain something referred to as "The trajectory of the Holy Spirit." My seminary professor of theology, Dr. Glen Scorgie, used the art of pass-receiving in football as an illustration to help Christians better understand how God intends men and women to interact in his kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Like the quarterback in a football game, God has a plan, a designated trajectory in mind. Even though we are not always ready to execute that plan, God continues to work out his intention through the work of the Holy Spirit.

One such example of the trajectory of the Holy Spirit at work in human history is the issue of slavery and racism. Sadly, the legality of human slavery, even supported by many evangelical churches, existed in the United States until the 1860s. One hundred years later, the residual inequities of Emancipation required further working of the Holy Spirit to move within the hearts of his people toward the civil rights movement. Clearly, as we long for the full expression of God's freedom to be realized on the earth, God is continuing to lead his church down the field, toward his intended trajectory of freedom and dignity for all God's children. What might have once been unclear to us has become more and more clear. Like a dimmer switch, the Holy Spirit is slowly but surely opening our eyes to God's original intention for his creation.



**It is becoming more and more evident today that God is moving his people toward a fuller understanding and application of equality, freedom, and mutuality between men and women.** “Fuller understanding” is key here. It requires of us to understand this is not “our” new thing, or even God’s new thing. Having a fuller understanding of what God is doing requires us to understand that what God is doing today has been part of God’s intentional plan all along.

However, as we all know, understanding male and female interaction in the kingdom has not always been a simple play for God’s church. Just as it is no simple skill for a pass-receiver to anticipate where the ball will land from the moment it is released, it has not been simple for the church to understand God’s intended movement through the Scriptures, and through church history, for men and women to work together in partnership with him.

Yet God is patient and consistent. Throughout the course of church history, we can see God moving his people steadily away from the ways of this world and toward the culture of his kingdom. Like the pass-receiver who must keep his eyes on the ball and learn to read the pass, the church in each generation must also learn to identify and then move with the trajectory of the Holy Spirit. Just as God revealed truth about slavery and just as God continues to convict his church about racism, God is working to move men and women into equal partners in his kingdom. Sadly, this too has taken God’s children quite a long time to receive God’s intended trajectory. Up until 1920, women did not have the legal right to own property as sole proprietors, attend universities, or vote. Although some would view the feminist movement as a temptation for the church to follow secular society instead of God’s leading, contemporary feminism has its roots in evangelical Christianity. Tracing back to the 19th century when women fought slavery, demanded the right to vote, turned over unjust laws, organized and inspired philanthropic volunteers, and bravely went out into the remote parts of the world as missionaries

and Bible translators, “Christian feminism” predated the secular feminism we are familiar with today. Although secular feminism certainly has its flaws, we can relate to its rebellion against movements that directly conflict with our Christian values for women as divine image bearers.

**Because the church has been commissioned by God to be a light, a vanguard, in the world, showing the world the way of the kingdom, it is necessary for the church take a closer look and begin to move toward God’s trajectory intention for women.** As evangelicals we look beyond tradition and culture for our kingdom direction—we look first and foremost to the word of God, and a careful and holistic study of the word. We begin our search for God’s trajectory regarding men and women in the kingdom by understanding there is a redemptive narrative to the word of God. Redemption is the central impulse of the gospel. Primary to the word of God is the redemptive act of saving and regenerating our souls through faith in Christ. One part of this renewal is the Holy Spirit’s work to redeem humanity into its original intention. Relationships between male and females is a significant part of this plan!

In Genesis 1:26-27, we read, “God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them: male and female he created them.”

Counter to emergent human theologies which came through church history, God is not more like a man than a woman. God is not male. Neither male nor female is more like God; but rather, together we are partners in our ability to reflect the image of God and portray God’s dignity. God also commissioned them, male and female, to steward, multiply, and rule his creation. What comprises the image of God in humanity is not male nor female, but the ability to lead and govern as God models, to understand the difference between right and wrong, to make moral judgments as God would make, and to be in relationship with God and one another. Both men and women have been commissioned to partner with God by pursuing our God-given identity and personal call. Men



and women are peers in bearing the image of God and being commissioned to govern and steward God's creation. Therefore, how we relate to one another as women and men is radically significant in our ability to bear God's image on the earth. Perhaps this is why the prophet Joel, recited by Peter at Pentecost, spoke of such a time when the Spirit of God would be equally poured out upon men and women!

**God set it up from the beginning for men and women to work together in fulfillment of their commission.**

Adam, by himself, was not adequate to fulfill this great commission. He needed a helper suitable for him. God declared everything he made as "good" until Adam was missing a suitable partner. Suitable did not mean one who was inferior to him, but one like him—one who could work with him in all God had commissioned humanity to be and to do. Without an equal partner, God declared for the first time, something was not good. Once Eve was created, God declared his creation good again. God's plan for community is based on the equal participation of man and woman, brothers and sisters in Christ, to bear God's image and do God's work on earth. Man and woman were created to work interdependently. Where Christian men and women are not working together, the full image of God is lacking, and we lack what God considers "good."

Now, we have context for Joel's prophecy. The Old Testament not only records God's displeasure over power structures that oppress the vulnerable; the prophets in the Old Testament longed for the day when creation would be redeemed, and worldly social barriers and oppression would be eliminated. The prophets cried out for shalom: peace with God and within all God's people. God had promised a Messiah who would come to redeem and restore his people into a new shalom, a new kind of community different from what any human being had experienced since before the Fall. For this reason, God in Christ is seen as an ezer, a helper, protector, and deliverer from the result of sin entering the world and corrupting our ways.

The prophecies about the Messiah pointed to a ministry of healing and reconciliation from the corrupt and oppressive systems of this world. Throughout the pages of the Old Testament we see God as helper, coming to the aid of the oppressed, and empowering women like Tamar, Abigail, Ruth, Huldah, Deborah, Jael, Esther, Rahab, and ultimately Mary, the woman who bore Jesus's own body within her womb, to transcend power structures of this world and become key agents in his spiritual trajectory. Although male privilege was rampant in the time of the Old Testament and women had few rights and very little opportunities, the Spirit of God was at work to liberate humanity from forces of oppression, and restore God's original design of gender equality, freedom, and mutuality.

**The Spirit the prophet Joel is referring to is the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost through Jesus's ministry.**

It wasn't just what Jesus said, but it was how he related to women that was revolutionary. In Luke 8:1-3, we are told women were included among his disciples. In the Gospels, we see Jesus going out of his way to reach out to women and invite them into his mission. The Samaritan woman (found in John chapter 4), who became the first evangelist among her people, is another example. Women felt safe to come to Jesus. The sinful, repentant woman, who isn't even referred to by name, was esteemed by Jesus in Luke 7:36-50, as a model student to Simon the Pharisee. Just before his death, Jesus defended Mary of Bethany against cruel accusations regarding her assertive claim as his disciple in Mark 14. Upon his resurrection, in John 20, Jesus revealed his resurrected body to Mary Magdalene, identified as one of Jesus's disciples in Luke 8:1-3, and sent her to instruct the other male disciples. Therefore, it should not surprise us that the Book of Acts, often referred to as the Acts of the Holy Spirit, begins with Jesus's disciples joining "together constantly in prayer" and includes men women awaiting for their next assignment from Jesus (Acts 2:14).

Pentecost launches the church into Joel's prophetic promise that God's men and women, young and old of all



nations, will receive spiritual power for kingdom witness, service, and leadership. Later, we see Paul, in Acts 16:14, partnering with Lydia for the formation of the new house church in Philippi. We also see the Holy Spirit prophesying through Philip's daughters in Acts 21:8-9. (Just to be clear, prophesying not only gave room for the Spirit to instruct and inform God's church, but also included the sharing of God's holy word to God's people.) The remainder of the New Testament builds on the egalitarian work Jesus introduced to his church and the continued trajectory of God's original intention for men and women to partner together in and for his church.

The witness of the early church was a faithful and supernatural expression of Jesus's support of women and the continued empowerment given to men and women at Pentecost. It is also helpful to point out early church fathers, such as Chrysostom, Tertullian, and others, recognized women with ministry responsibilities such as instruction, baptisms, and communions. Women make up 1/3 of the 26 ministry leaders mentioned in Romans 16. Paul refers to these women, such as Junia and Phoebe, as equal partners and with the same titles he gives his male ministry leaders. New Testament scholar Richard Baukman informs us when names are listed in the New Testament, this tells us that person was widely recognized as leader and teacher in the New Testament Community.<sup>2</sup> The church began with the Holy Spirit empowering both men and women for kingdom witness and service, which ran counter to the predominant culture of that day.

Although the church continued to limp under its familiar brokenness and power struggles, the Holy Spirit continued to point the church where God wants to go. These women, and many more, kept the ball moving forward, even though it will be another 2,000 years of struggle. And yet, God does not fail. He does not fumble. We see the Holy Spirit working mightily in women such as Joan of Arc, early church mothers, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Fanny Crosby, Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, Aimee

Semple McPherson, Rosa Parks, Phoebe Palmer, Henrietta Meers, Mother Teresa, and many more receivers of God's trajectory for men and women partnering together for God's church. The Holy Spirit has been working to deliver women out of the oppression of the church and into the flourishing of the kingdom since the Fall of humanity broke this equitable partnership into power struggles between men and women (Genesis 3:16).

**Therefore, how we relate to one another as male and female is destined to reflect God's image within us.** For this reason and many more biblical standards,

the Evangelical Covenant Church stepped out in the evangelical world in 1976 to ordain women as equally called and gifted for every area of service and leadership in the church, marketplace, and in the home. The trajectory of the Holy Spirit, that which Peter preached as a fulfillment of what the Prophet Joel preached hundreds of years prior, is the Blazing Center of our theology of women.

We affirm this position by acknowledging the priesthood of all believers as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in 61:6: "You will be called priests of the LORD, ministers of our God" (NLT). The priesthood of all believers (also called the common priesthood of the baptized) affirms every Christian can minister to others in a priestly role (helping people to reconcile with God), a prophetic role (proclaiming God's truth), and a servant-leader role (leading God's people) according to the spiritual gifts and call God imparts to them. Therefore, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are not gender-based. In all the lists of the gifts of the Spirit, including the gifts of teaching and leading, there is not one hint of gender distinction. It's not that no one is to lead in God's kingdom, but spiritual authority is determined by God, not our gender or any other ism! The Lord commends those in his church to various roles and positions of service through the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the measure of faith he pours out on every believer (2 Corinthians 10:18). We must understand, the kingdom of God is built on spiritual power, not human status. This was the vision the prophet Joel proclaimed



would come through the work of the Holy Spirit.

**This is the result of God's intention, Jesus's ministry, and the work of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, whereby anyone, male or female, who put their faith in Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, will receive the Holy Spirit and become an agent of God's reconciling and redeeming grace.** Because, as Paul explained in Galatians 3:28 (CEV), "Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman." Christ has equally redeemed all people, both men and women, to become one in Christ together, redeeming their partnership in bearing the image and rule of God on the earth. This applies to the home, the marketplace, and the church! According to the gospel of the Lord Jesus, the Christ, women are equal partners in marriage and equally called to all areas of Christian discipleship, church witness, and church leadership!

Because separate is not equal! This is also why we have moved into a new and intentional model of ministry for women today: the integration of Women's initiatives away from a siloed independent model and into all five of our mission priorities. We see God's trajectory, and we receive God's charge to move more fully into what the prophet Joel proclaimed would come through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit! We believe this new model will move us alongside what the Holy Spirit is doing for women in today's world, as never before.

As part of this movement, we are hosting a web page on our denominational website ([covchurch.org/women/](http://covchurch.org/women/)) where women can get connected into any area of ministry they are called and gifted for. We will also include biblical resources and support for all women to flourish in their journey as female disciples of Christ.

So, I ask you, "What would it look like to foster the flourishing of women in their God-given call and spiritual gifting at your church?"

1. Do you have women who preach?
2. Do you have women on your leadership team/elder board?
3. Are women mentoring other women?
4. Are women being mentored in their spiritual call and gifting?

Without gender parity in our churches the thief of our souls is stealing from our churches the full witness of the Spirit and the other half of the reflection of the image of God in our churches! God gave us a sneak preview of the work of the Holy Spirit through the prophet Joel. Later, Peter proclaimed the fulfillment of that promise at Pentecost. God has always intended to pour out the Holy Spirit on both men and women in his church, as equal partners and workers. "For such a time as this" has been modeled for us and is continually given to every generation in the church. Now is the time to unify as sisters and brothers. Now is the time to humble ourselves to the trajectory of the Holy Spirit's work today. Now is the time to come together and show the world what Genesis 1:26-27 truly looks like!

1. Glen Scorgie, *The Journey Back to Eden: Restoring the Creator's Design for Women and Men* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005).

2. Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Eerdmans, 2002).



The Evangelical Covenant Church

MAKE AND DEEPEN DISCIPLES