Women in God’s Army

BY DAVID G. ROEBUCK

When they refused to let us preach we invited the congregation to come out in the big road in front of the tabernacle where we preached with much liberty. We came out singing “While the Years Roll On.” The power fell, the saints began to shout, dance and talk in tongues.1

Evangelist Sallie O. Lee (ca. 1874–1949) and her evangelistic team had arrived in Calhoun, Georgia, expecting to worship in the local union tabernacle. In 1915, the Church of God owned very few buildings and often relied on public facilities when they were available, a tent if they could afford one, or a brush arbor if the weather permitted. But in Calhoun the trustees of the tabernacle refused their request because Church of God people were known for disturbing the neighborhood wherever they went. Undaunted, the evangelistic team moved to the road and later to a mill shed, where Lee reported that worshippers saw “supernatural fire” in their services.2

Such occurrences were not unusual for Lee, who frequently wrote to the Church of God Evangel about being “in the battle for the Lord.” According to her Evangel obituary, Lee held an evangelist’s license for thirty-seven years, retiring from ministry in 1934.3 Evangel subscribers frequently read her reports of evangelistic activities, prayer requests and church doctrine.

Ammarilous Lorena Jane Cotton (1855–1933) received her evangelist’s license on January 29, 1911, at the Fulton Springs, Alabama, Church of God. Her ministerial certificate authorized her “to publish, I preach and defend the gospel of Jesus Christ as taught by the Holy Apostles.” Written beneath this authorization were the words “and is recommended to the love and fellowship of the saints.”4

Cotton was a prolific writer for the Evangel with no less than forty articles published between 1914 and 1930. These included reports of her own ministry, the activities of other ministers, descriptions of camp meetings and Assemblies, and numerous articles on various theological topics.

Cotton often traveled as part of an evangelistic team. Sometimes the team would be two or more women; other times it would include one or more married couples. Much of her ministry was conducted in a tent, although she would often visit churches between her tent meetings. Frequently Cotton stayed in the same location until there was enough support to call in a male minister to baptize converts and set a Church of God in order. For example, on one occasion she preached in Safety Harbor, Florida, for five weeks.5

In 1915, Lula L. Jones (1881–1961) appealed to Evangel readers to pray that she could be freed from some of the cares of life in order to enter evangelistic work. About that time she assisted Lorena Cotton in the work at Safety Harbor, Florida.6 Three months later she wrote again, “There are so many calls for laborers. How I long to be out in the vineyard to stay, for I do not want to be idle when Jesus comes.”7 God answered Jones’ prayer. Reporting a five-week meeting in Hudson, Florida, two years later, she exclaimed, “I am praising God for the privilege of being...”8
out in the great harvest field which truly is white." In her thirty years of ministry Jones planted and served as pastor of nine churches, and she reportedly pioneered another nine of which she did not remain as pastor. Licensed as an evangelist in 1916, she preached 1,634 sermons as a Church of God minister.8

Responding to the Call

Lee, Cotton, and Jones are examples of many women who responded to the call of God and the Church of God to enter the harvest field. General Overseer A. J. Tomlinson and other Church of God leaders believed that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was evidence that Jesus would return soon. An urgent call went out for both men and women to win the lost in these last days.

O, God, give us an army of men and women who will fear nothing but God. Set them on fire with such holy zeal that no cries of fanaticism, delusion of the devil, manifestations of the flesh, or anything else will check the fervor or impede the progress until this glorious gospel is heralded to the uttermost parts of the earth; and the full blaze of Pentecostal power, with all the signs, wonders and divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Ghost are a blaze and utilized for the glory of God, as at the beginning of the blessed glorious gospel Age.9

This acceptance of women in the ministry was remarkable for the time. When the Minutes first listed the names of ministers in 1913, 12.2 percent were women. This peaked at around 18.2 percent in 1950.10

Total equality between male and female ministers has never existed in the Church of God. When explaining the Church of God's acceptance of women ministers was within certain understood cultural and ecclesiastical boundaries.13

Interestingly, Tomlinson's interpretation was not the only position available to the Church of God. The holiness tradition included other ways of interpreting the Scriptures regarding women. Many, such as Luther Lee and

Additionally, by 1910, Tomlinson had effectively excluded women from participating in any of the business or official activities of the church. When explaining the possible reasons for continuing to exclude women, Tomlinson defined "church" as "government."” Thus, according to Tomlinson, Paul prohibited women from participating in business meetings rather than prohibiting them from preaching in a worship service. "Let the good sisters feel at perfect liberty to preach the gospel, pray for the sick or well, testify, exhort, etc., but humbly hold themselves aloof from taking charge of the governmental affairs."14 Clearly, the Church of God's acceptance of women ministers was within certain understood cultural and ecclesiastical boundaries.15

---See WOMEN, page 5---
Nora Chambers—Education Pioneer

BY TATIANA GORBACHEVA

Nora I. Chambers was a pioneer in Church of God education. Selected by the Elders to be the first Bible Training School teacher, she answered the challenge of the infant denomination. Her faithfulness to her calling resulted in trained ministers who won many to the Lord.

Chambers’ ministerial experience and educational training made her an obvious choice as teacher for the fledgling school. She had studied at what is now Holmes College of the Bible in Greenville, South Carolina. In 1911 with a group of students she started preaching holiness in the mountains of North Carolina and Georgia. Life in the mountains was poor, and the people worked hard to feed their large families. Sunday services, usually at Baptist or Methodist churches, were perhaps the most entertaining part of everyday life. Being far from the cities, people in the mountains “had not heard about holiness.” Therefore, they responded to the group’s preaching with violent persecution because they believed it was “tearing up their churches.” In an interview with The Lightheaded Pathway, Chambers testified: “Persecution began and became worse and worse until the Lord said, ‘It’s enough . . . .’ We were stoned many times, poisoned, and fired at. One of the band was beaten until he became unconscious. . . . But God revealed Himself to us in many ways . . . .” It was a difficult time, but later looking back on her life, Chambers observed that in these two years of persecution, “God was dearest to me.”

The call to preach the gospel that Nora Chambers felt in her early years gave her a life-long zeal for the evangelistic ministry, but we know very little about her preaching ministry. One report in the Evangel stated that the result of the ten-day meeting conducted by Chambers and Sister Sallie O. Lee in Spring Place, Georgia, was great victory and blessing, and five people received the Holy Ghost. We also know that she was involved in meetings at Crane Eater near Calhoun, Georgia, and at Cohutta, Georgia.

Nora Chambers and her husband Fred Chambers spent fourteen years “on the battlefield” assisting various ministers in gospel work, but perhaps she is best known as the first teacher of the Bible Training School.

In 1910 Nora Chambers became acquainted with the Church of God through Edward John Boehmer, one of the evangelistic team members. Then when R. G. Spurling convinced her “that the Church of God is the true Bible church” she was happy to join the growing denomination. By 1913 Chambers had moved to Cleveland and was working as a proofreader in the Evangel office.

A. J. Tomlinson, general overseer of the Church of God, saw how education could aid in preaching the gospel to the lost. However, he had to make addresses to the General Assemblies in 1911, 1914 and 1917 before the Assembly agreed to open the Bible Training School. It was not easy to find a location and funding for the school. But for Superintendent Tomlinson to find “a teacher with formal training was nearly impossible.”

Nora Chambers was his choice to be the teacher of this first educational venture of the Church of God. She had two years teaching experience at Holmes Bible School at Altamont in South Carolina and was a credentialed Church of God minister.

Despite her qualifications, Chambers expressed surprise at being selected as teacher. According to Chambers, when the general overseer said, “Sister Chambers, you have been selected to teach the Bible Training School, and we want you to begin January 1,” she “insisted that a man should be chosen for that position, but finally consented when all [her] suggestions met opposition.” Thus, Chambers assumed the responsibility as the first teacher of the Bible Training School.

On January 1, 1918, Chambers met with the first BTS class at 2524 Gaul Street, Cleveland, Tennessee, in an upstairs room of the publishing house. The first day was both exciting and frightening for her: “I didn’t think I could carry it, but as the students prepared their lessons, I prayed. Soon I felt the presence of an unseen guest. He assured me that He would be with
“Evangelist’s License or Certificate” of Nora I. Chambers signed by R. G. Spurling. The Church of God used this form of the evangelist’s credentials between 1909 and 1914. Although it authorized the evangelist “to publish, preach and defend the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to baptize, to administer the Lord’s Supper and the washing of the Saints [sic] feet,” there is no evidence that women ministers officiated in the church ordinances. In 1914, the Church of God began to issue a separate license for women which authorized the evangelist to “publish, preach, and defend the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and do all of the work that may devolve on her as a prophetess or female minister of the Gospel.” See examples of licenses in Information Files, Hal Bernard Dixon Jr. Pentecostal Research Center. [Editor]

us and help us, and He did!”

Twelve students began the first semester, but only six of them were able to finish the three-month term. Tuition was one dollar per week. They studied the Bible along with Hurbut’s Teacher-Training Lessons, geography, spelling, English and music.

According to Earl Hamilton, a member of the first graduating class, Tomlinson as Superintendent “was always available in giving assistance to the students as well as to Mrs. Chambers on matters of great importance,” but “all of the regular teaching was done by Mrs. Chambers.” The success of the school included imparting knowledge, but it went far beyond that. Jesse Danehower, reflecting on those days, said “we students and Sister Chambers spent many precious and happy hours reading, studying, praying and shouting the high praise of God [sic]. It was here that I became established in the Church of God.”

At the end of the first term J. B. Ellis expressed high appreciation for the work done by the school: “Through the efforts of the committee, the broad faith of our General Overseer, the consecrated talent and ability of Sister Chambers coupled with the support of friends of the students, we have had the first term of the Bible Training School.” Although the first term was not well attended, two of the students became outstanding preachers in the Church of God—the Reverend Earl Hamilton and the Reverend Jesse Danehower. Paul H. Walker, later a great leader of the church, enrolled in the third term.

In 1920, J. B. Ellis was selected as principal of the school while Sister Chambers was retained as a teacher. For six years, this “altruistic and tireless woman” passed on her knowledge and passion for God’s kingdom to that generation of young ministers.

During the years of teaching at Bible Training School, Nora Chambers also worked in the Church of God Publishing House reading proof and doing other work. When in 1929 The Lighted Pathway magazine, dedicated to the Young People’s Endeavor, was born, Chambers helped to mail it to subscribers for seven years. For three years she edited the Children’s Page in The Lighted Pathway, and for four years she wrote weekly Bible lessons for Junior Jewels. Children had a special place in her heart; she served as matron of the Orphanage for about four years. Additionally, Nora Chambers was an active worker in the North Cleveland church for many years.

Sister Chambers died in 1953 in Phoenix, Arizona. She was a member of the Church of God for forty-three fruitful years.

It is difficult to overestimate the work that was done by Nora Chambers for she was actively involved in various spheres of ministry. As a teacher of admirable skill, she left a mark on the lives of her students. Among them were John C. Jernigan, Hallie Cheesser, Zeno C. Tharp, Paul H. Walker, C. J. Hindmon, Grant Williams, L. C. Chambers, E. M. Ellis, Joe Little and Jesse Danehower, all of whom were outstanding leaders of the Church of God.
The Bible Training School later became Lee College and is now Lee University. A small seed nurtured by this faithful woman has grown to a large tree and is bearing good fruit.

NOTES
1 "Bible Training School Celebrates Silver Anniversary." The Lighted Pathway, April 1943, 10.
2 Nora Chambers, "When God Was Dearest to Me," The Lighted Pathway, October 1951, 14.
3 A more colorful description of life in the mountains at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries can be seen in Charles W. Conn, Like a Mighty Army, def. ed. (Cleveland, Tenn.: Pathway Press, 1996), 3-9.
4 "When God Was Dearest," 14.
5 "When God Was Dearest," 14. Conn mentions that the beaten man was Fred Chambers, Nora's husband. See Conn, Like A Mighty Army, def. ed., 149; and Fred G. Chambers, unpublished manuscript (Hal Bernard Dixon Jr. Pentecostal Research Center).
6 Nora Chambers, "Spring Place, Ga.," Church of God Evangel, July 25, 1914, 8.
8 "Youth Interviews Experience," The Lighted Pathway, June 1949, 14.
10 Conn, Like a Mighty Army, def. ed., 148.
12 Joleen Kurtz, "Lee College 75 Years," Reflections . . . upon Church of God Heritage 4 (Summer/Fall 1994): 2. See also Minutes of the Sixth Annual Assembly of the Churches of God, 5, 8; Minutes of the Ninth Annual Assembly of the Churches of God, 29; and Minutes of the Thirteenth Annual Assembly of the Churches of God, 19-20.
14 "Youth Interviews," 14.
15 Kurtz, 3.
16 "Youth Interviews," 14.
18 R. E. Hamilton, personal correspondence; quoted in Ray, 37.
19 Hamilton; quoted in Ray, 38.
20 Jesse Denehower, personal correspondence; quoted in Ray, 37.
21 J. B. Ellis, "The Bible Training School," Church of God Evangel, April 13, 1918, 2.
22 Charles W. Conn, Like a Mighty Army, rev. ed. (Cleveland, Tenn.: Pathway Press, 1977), 150. See Ray, appendix A, 199, for class photograph.
23 Ray, 41; "Youth Interviews," 14; and Conn, Like A Mighty Army, def. ed., 185.
24 "Youth Interviews," 14.
25 "Court of Praise," 15.

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B. T. Roberts, taught that the Scriptures allowed women to fill church offices and to possess the authority of those offices. They suggested that the subordination of women to the authority of men was a consequence of the Fall from which women have been redeemed in Christ according to Galatians 3:28. Further, when rightfully ordained to a church office, women are not usurping authority over men because the church has granted them that authority.14 With Tomlinson as general overseer, however, the Church of God did not consider these alternative interpretations of Scripture.

Later Trends
In the last half century, two distinct and somewhat opposite trends have developed for women in the Church of God. On the one hand, the percentage of women ministers has significantly declined since 1950. Although this trend seems to be gradually reversing in the 1990s, only 7.7 percent of Church of God ministers were women in 1990 compared to over 18 percent in 1950. During the time of this decline, the Church of God has followed the lead of American culture and evangelical Christianity in emphasizing the importance of women in the home. Additionally, we have experienced great growth in departmentalization and bureaucracy with women generally excluded from administrative ministry. Further, the very successful Ladies Ministries Department has emphasized the roles of women outside the pulpit. These developments have contributed to the near reduction of the Church of God's ministerial force to a male army and a dramatic lack of ministerial role models for young women.15

At the same time, the Church of God has gradually abandoned Tomlinson's understanding of the church. Women now participate in most levels of church business including local church conferences and the General Assembly in both the Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy. Although women are officially excluded from the rank of ordained minister, many denominations consider Church of God practices to be ordination. These include the setting forth for ministry, laying on of hands, and granting authorities to officiate in the Lord's Supper, water baptism, and receiving members into the church. The fact that some groups who have amalgamated with the Church of God already ordain women, such as the Full Gospel Church of God in South Africa and the Bethel Church of God in Indonesia, also complicates this issue.

Further, some Church of God teachers are recognizing alternative possibilities for interpreting the biblical passages concerning women. In 1986, Dr. Daniel L. Black noted that some Bible scholars suggest that Paul's prohibitions may have been "culturally conditioned" for that time. Recognizing...
that the Bible gives examples of women being called and gifted in contrast with customs and historic traditions, Black wrote that a sensitivity to both the Word and the Holy Spirit compel Pentecostals not to settle for tradition but rather to ask questions regarding the gifts and callings that the Holy Spirit has given to women. Black reminded Evangel readers that the debate regarding the role of women was not settled and would continue. Using Acts 15 as a model, Dr. John Christopher Thomas has suggested that the Holy Spirit leads the Christian community in the proper emphasis of biblical texts, especially when there appears to be diversity of meaning within the biblical texts. Thus, the Spirit may lead us to emphasize texts which feature the ministry of women over those that seemingly limit the roles of women.

Black and Thomas have highlighted the ongoing dilemma for the Church of God. We must find an interpretation of Scripture regarding women that takes seriously our commitment to the Word of God. At the same time our Pentecostal heritage reveals that God has chosen to use women in bringing about the spread of the Church of God and the Pentecostal movement. Do we dare enter the twenty-first century, especially if we hope for revival and world harvest, with only a portion of God’s ministerial army?

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2 Lcc, “Calhoun, Ga.,” 2.
5 For examples of Evangel articles written by Cotton, see “Cortex, Fla.,” October 10, 1914, 3; “Safety Harbor, Fla.,” December 12, 1914, 2; and “Concord, Tenn.,” December 9, 1916, 3.
7 Lula L. Jones, “Clearwater, Fla.,” Evangel, April 24, 1915, 4.
10 David G. Roebuck, “Limiting Liberty: The Church of God and Women Ministers, 1886-1996” (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1997), 60. These numbers differ from reports of higher percentages which do not take into account the fact that the deacons were an ordained order of ministry in the Church of God for many years.
Religion in the Mountains

By Charles W. Conn

Due to the recent illness and home going of Edna Minor Conn, the regular column by Dr. Charles W. Conn was unavailable for publication. This excerpt from the recent revision of Like a Mighty Army describes religious life in the Unicoi Mountains about the time the Church of God was born. The staff of the Dixon Pentecostal Research Center expresses its deepest sympathy to Dr. Conn and his family.

The people were fervent in their religious faith, which was almost totally Protestant. Not only was Catholicism little known and would have been rejected prima facie—but most of the people vigorously rejected any views contrary to their own. Denominational differences that were treated with lighthearted banter in most localities were issues of insult and hostility in the lower Appalachians. One preacher characterized his sectarian rivals as “hirelings, caterpillars, letter-learned Pharisees, hypocrites, varlets, Seed of the Serpent, foolish builders whom the Devil drives into the ministry, dead dogs that cannot bark, blind men, dead men, men possessed of the Devil, Rebels and enemies of God.” This classic sample of invective is distinguished only by its eloquence—its vehemence and intolerance are strictly run-of-the-mill.

The churches of the region were predominately Baptist, Methodist, and independent congregations. Sharp distinctions existed between the Regular Baptists, Missionary Baptists, and Primitive Baptists, all of which were highly evangelistic and ardent in worship. The Methodists, who claimed fewer members, were generally regarded as the “educated,” and thus the “formal,” group of the region. The nondenominational, or independent, churches were bodies of kindred beliefs and worship styles. Such churches were numerous throughout the mountains, possibly the most numerous of all the groups.

Just as life was hard, so the religion that accompanied it was rigid. But there were notable exceptions to the rigorous religion, as we shall see; many Christians of the region understood the love, mercy, and faith of Jesus Christ. Sometime between Easter and harvesttime, every church almost certainly had its “protracted meeting,” a series of evangelistic services that stimulated some spiritual response and provided a social outlet for the people and a break from the monotony of summer labor. But for the most part, true Christian faith was rare. Ritual had replaced the simple faith in Christ; churches sought adherents to themselves more than to Christ; sin was excused or embraced in spirit if not in word; being a “good Christian” meant being a good churchman, meaning one’s own denomination. The situation, while not exclusive to the mountains, was in great evidence there. It had become grievous to many sincere Christians who waited patiently, hoping and praying for renewal of true faith and worship.

Of all regions of the nation, the Unicoi Mountains seemed least likely to produce men or events of national moment—much less to launch a movement of global import. Yet it was here that the Church of God was born.

Excerpt from Like a Mighty Army, def. ed., 8–9. Reprinted with permission.

NOTES


A philosopher once said, "The past is never dead; it is not even past." This fact about the nature of history was illustrated to good effect by Rafiki, the prophet-like baboon in Disney's production of the "The Lion King." Simba, the anointed heir to the throne of Pride Rock, had been deceived by his wicked uncle, Scar, and made to believe that he was responsible for his father's death. Rather than face the consequences, Simba elected to give up his throne and run away. Later, after growing up with a guilty conscience, Providence brought him again in contact with Rafiki, who discerned and understood his predicament. In order to convince Simba to go home and claim the throne that had been usurped by his wicked uncle, Rafiki taught Simba a lesson about the nature of history. His ingenious method was illustrated by whacking Simba on the head with his staff. Still smarting from the incident, Simba asked Rafiki why he did it. Whereupon, Rafiki exclaimed, "It doesn't matter; it's in the past!"

The fact is, we live every day with our past, both personally and collectively, as the people of God. Judeo-Christian history is thus an indispensable part of a good education. God Himself is the God of history as well as of eternity. He entered into covenant with the children of Jacob ("Israel") collectively, and they became a "kingdom of priests" and a "holy nation." Thus, the promise made to Abraham and his seed was incorporated by all who promised to "keep...[the] covenant" of God's law and government (vv. 5–6). The saintly Stephen called this congregation "the church in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38); and the apostle Peter used this same reference to illustrate the nature and purpose of the New Testament church as a "holy nation" and a "royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9).

Like the Old Testament model, the New Testament church is a visible, interdisciplinary community of faith, incorporated by covenant under the law and government of God. And although the Old Covenant was fulfilled and superseded by the New (Jer. 31:31–33; Heb. 8:6–13), still the church is God's covenant-keeping people unfolding through history His prophetic plan (cp. Ex. 19:5; Deut. 7:12, 29:9; Ps. 132:12–13; with Jn. 14:15, 23; 15:10, 16; Heb. 8:6–13; 10:16–29; Rev. 1:3; 3:10–12; 22:14–21).

It is important, therefore, to identify the moments when God entered into human history by special revelations and manifestations of the Spirit—particularly in the incarnate Christ—to call and ordain humans to be His "peculiar people"—"a city that is set on a hill" (Matt. 5:14; 1 Pet. 2:9). These historic moments are important because they have guided our path in the past and have set our course for the future.

The church is still on an historic journey; and the last chapter of God's prophetic church is still being fulfilled. Indeed, the church is historical by nature, both in its origin and eschatological development. And thus no generation of the church lives and works in a vacuum. Each generation is connected or disconnected by its predecessors. This generation in the Church of God has entered into the labors and restored covenant community begun in our fathers and mothers. Thus, with great profit we may contemplate their...