

Healing and forgiveness: Women in Pentecostal churches in Alajuela, Costa Rica

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Introduction

The majority of believers in the Pentecostal movement is female. Mostly women contribute to church life. There have been – and still are, in fact – notable female preachers. Especially in the *machismo*-dominated culture of Latin America there is an increase in domestic gender equality among Pentecostal families. Yet in religious doctrine, women's roles are subordinate to male superiority. This ambivalent mindset characterizes the "Pentecostal gender paradox" (Martin 2001): There is significant friction between the *de iure* system of patriarchal authority in the congregation and at home and the *de facto* change that is happening in both spheres.

Given this friction, I try to find answers to the following questions: Why is the Pentecostal movement so disproportionately successful among women? And how are these women's lives affected by membership in Pentecostal congregations?

In order to find answers to these questions for a Costa Rican environment, I spent six months on a field study in Alajuela, a town of 50,000 inhabitants, conducting 83 qualitative interviews and participatory observation. I mostly interviewed female pastors and members of Pentecostal congregations, but also male pastors or priests and both charismatic and non-charismatic female Catholics.

Current state of research

The discussion on the significance of the Pentecostal movement on Latin American women has since 1995 been dominated by the work of Elizabeth Brusco who described the Columbian Pentecostal movement as a strategic women's movement against *machismo*. According to Brusco, protestant belief counters the notion of *machismo* with a newly defined male gender role. Due to the conversion, the living spheres, values and goals of men and women overlap. While the man can still be head of the household, he no longer spends money on alcohol, tobacco or extramarital relationships and children, so that the newly available resources help to raise the standard of living of the wife and children. Thus, the

Pentecostal movement revolutionizes the domestic sphere, which is of crucial importance to women (Brusco 1995).

All subsequent studies refer to Brusco's results and discuss the question whether the Latin American Pentecostal movement actually serves the emancipation of women or rather patriarchal oppression.

From a structural-functional point of view, Brusco's theses may be valid. However, they neglect the women's perspective. The women I talked to do not want to be emancipated and firmly believe it is God's will for them to subordinate to their husbands. Their question is: How can I live as well as possible in the face of pains and violations I suffered in the past, and despite the problems in my current life?

Thesis and examples

One of the central findings in my study is that many women who experienced severe violations and subsequently entered a crisis were able to overcome this crisis after learning to forgive through the help of a Pentecostal church.

The violations can usually be traced back to husbands, fathers, mothers or strangers who assaulted the women sexually, physically and / or psychically and led to depressions, inferiority complexes, anxiety and aggressive behavior, especially aimed at the women's own children. Oftentimes, current problems with the husband or the children make the women seek support in a Pentecostal church. There they usually find female pastors or members of staff who in helping with the current problem enable the women to deal with their previous history. These women told me that through this help they were able to alter themselves and their relationships in such a way that they are now able to lead better lives.

In the Pentecostal churches in Alajuela there is a consensus that the decisive step towards inner healing is to forgive the offenders. Forgiveness is crucial in attaining secularistic healing as well as eschatological salvation: The belief is that God's forgiveness depends on a person's own achievements in forgiving. The possibility of negative sanctions in the afterlife heightens people's motivation to work on their own ability to forgive. Additionally, pastors and congregational staff help the women through pastoral care to attain forgiveness and restore their relationship to God, themselves and to others.

Theologically, there is a distinction between spirit and soul. The soul is considered the seat of reason, will and the emotions and is treated with a mixture of pastoral care and

psychotherapy. The spirit is considered the spiritual dimension of a human being which is responsible for the relationship with God and for the wellbeing in the afterlife (cf. Harrison 1987:30). Problems of the spirit – i.e. demons, curses, etc. – are encountered with spiritual warfare.

I will briefly discuss five of these different ministries and methods which are often combined in practice, as well as their respective backgrounds: counseling, healing prayer, ministry prayer, a method I chose to call “role play” and Theophostic Prayer Ministry.

Counseling

Counseling is a central service in all churches, carried out by male and female pastors as well as laymen and -women. Counseling typically consists of talks, prayer and imparting God's will as revealed in the bible. Beyond that, counseling methods may vary.

In Alajuela, the Pentecostal-charismatic discourse on counseling has been shaped by *El Club 700*. This TV-show originated as *the 700 Club* in the USA and since the 1970s, viewers have been able to call in to have counselors pray for them (cf. Weinberg 2012:75). For this purpose, Alajuela hosted an office from 1987 to 1999 where counseling could take place over the phone or in face-to-face sessions and where new counselors could be trained. Over the course of my interviews, many women told me that they had been counseled or trained as a counselor there or that they were receiving training by a lady who herself had been trained at *the 700 Club*. The theoretical foundation of this counseling work consists of a collection of eight booklets entitled “The Foundations of Christian Counseling”, published by *the 700 Club*. These writings are shaped by the prosperity gospel and a focus on family issues. They are characterized by the assumption that belief and the right behaviour will lead to being blessed by God in financial and personal matters. Thus counseling consists of evangelization, prayer, biblically justified guidelines for individual ethics and practical advice for a successful marital and family life. It is this belief that dominates the current Pentecostal counseling practice in Alajuela.

Healing Prayer

Healing prayer is based on the belief that pre-natal and infantile experiences decisively shape the personality. In order to deal with traumata from this period of development, the person's history from conception to the present day is recapitulated in a lengthy prayer.

Painful memories mentioned before the prayer and consciously unknown events revealed by the Holy Spirit are named and addressed and the person is promised God's love and propinquity, especially for those painful moments. God is praised and thanked for the creation of the person and for all His achievements in this person's life.

The healing prayer stems from the Inner Healing movement which has spread worldwide throughout the Charismatic scene since the 1970s. While in the Pentecostal churches in Alajuela it is just one method of inner healing, it is *the* method of choice among Catholic Charismatic Renewal groups. I assume that it was brought to Alajuela's Pentecostal churches by converted Charismatic Catholics.

Ministry prayer

Ministry prayer is a common practice throughout the world, often in connection with a call to the altar, when persons come to the altar during service or other events and the congregation prays for them. Ministry prayer is a form of pastoral care, as the prayer is often preceded by a personal conversation, commonly accompanied with abundant physical contact: the women get hugged, hands are placed on the head or other parts of the body or occasionally they are anointed. Bodily reactions to ministry prayer include falling, crying, shaking or jumping.

Usually the preceding sermon determines the topic of the prayer. A sermon on forgiveness will typically lead to a conversation during ministry prayer about who needs to be forgiven, before this is addressed in prayer.

Role play

I was told about this method by numerous women who use it when working with others or who experienced it themselves. It may have been taken from the G12 Vision movement.

The role play can take place in the course of a counseling session, during personal prayer in a church service, in prayer groups or during retreats. The pastor or counselor takes on the role of an offender who caused the woman pain and initiates a dialogue as it would take place between victim and offender. He or she encourages the woman to name the deeds and the hurt they caused. Some women who underwent this treatment told me that it was the first opportunity for them to openly express their feelings and talk about their experiences. The person representing the offender admits its guilt, asks for forgiveness and asserts its love. All

the women who told me about such conversations emphasized how much this experience had helped them in the process of healing and forgiving.

Theophostic Prayer Ministry

This method was developed in 1995 in the USA by Southern Baptist Church pastor Edward Smith. It is often associated with the Inner Healing Movement as it is based on the assumption that present emotional pain does not result from a current situation but has its roots in negative childhood experiences to be healed in prayer. This happens when a person seeking help remembers the situation in which he or she first experienced the present negative emotion and when the negative self-concept is identified which is anchored in this situation. For example, remembering being raped may lead a woman to the lie "I am not worth anything." In prayer, this lie is offered up to Jesus and he is asked for his truth to replace the lie (Smith 2007). Recipients of TPM report of sentences forming in their minds that replace the lie, of mental imagery, of feeling inner peace or of sensing Jesus near them. When they reencounter the memory, they experience no pain any more. According to the victims, TPM makes it easier to forgive offenders.

TPM came to Costa Rica through personal contact: Pharmaceutist Zelmira Valverde learned about TPM from a member of Smith's staff. Valverde travelled to the US several times to receive TPM instruction and repeatedly invited Smith to Costa Rica to teach seminars. Later Valverde started a foundation in which she offers TPM courses herself. According to her, approximately 250 people have completed their TPM training in Costa Rica. Valverde follows Smith's teachings, differing only on the subject of spiritual warfare. While this aspect is strictly limited in Smith's concept, it is a central feature of many of Valverde's TPM sessions.

Conclusion

Counseling, healing prayer, ministry prayer, role play and Theophostic Prayer Ministry are pastoral care offers and methods. Conversations, prayer and God's will as manifest in the bible in varying proportions form the center of these different methods that often cannot be clearly distinguished from one another in practice. The consensus is that forgiveness is the key to inner healing. Forgiveness is facilitated both by fear of sanctions in the afterlife and by the aforementioned methods and offers of pastoral care. In the Pentecostal-charismatic congregations, the women learn to deal with their past by learning to forgive. They thus

alter themselves and their relationships and are enabled to live new lives under the given circumstances.

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