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Strict but Not (Gender) Conservative:
Refining the Strict Church Thesis in Light of
Brazilian Pentecostalism

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Abstract

Since the 1972 publication of *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (Kelley), the critical distinction between (theologically) “conservative” and (culturally) “strict” has been obscured. In addition, because the strict church thesis (SCT) has been applied primarily in the U.S., the blurred concept of “conservative-strict” has been understood in American religious terms. Lack of clarity led to SCT’s appropriation by American religious leaders to claim that restrictive gender roles explain the growth of “conservative” churches, while “liberal” gender roles cause membership loss. To clarify the crucial distinction between “conservative” and “strict,” as well as to test the generalizability of the claim that restrictive gender roles promote church growth, I examine the literature on rapidly growing Brazilian Pentecostalism, a movement with “strict” membership requirements yet far more gender egalitarian than “conservative” U.S. churches. I then draw out the implications of this case to refine SCT to be more useful, especially in cross-cultural research. Specifically, I argue that research should focus on the level of “tension,” which is always an interaction between the church and its cultural context and cannot be determined by whether or not its theology is “conservative.”

Since the 1972 publication of *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (Kelley), there has been a tendency to blur the critical distinction between (theologically) “conservative” and (culturally) “strict.” In addition, because the strict church thesis (SCT) has been studied primarily in the context of U.S. religion, the blurred concept of “conservative-strict” has been understood in specifically American religious terms. This lack of conceptual clarity has allowed American religious leaders to (mis)appropriate SCT to claim that restrictive gender roles explain the growth of “conservative” churches, while “liberal” gender roles caused the decline of mainline denominations (e.g., Galli 2009). To recover the crucial theoretical distinction between “conservative” and “strict,” as well as to test the generalizability of the claim that restrictive gender roles are a necessary element of church growth, I examine the case of rapidly growing Brazilian Pentecostalism, a movement with both strict membership requirements and relatively egalitarian gender practices.¹

Contrary to expectations, egalitarian gender practices do not inhibit the rapid growth of Brazilian Pentecostalism but drive it. Growth with gender egalitarianism does not refute SCT but does reveal ways to refine the theory so that it can be applied cross-culturally. Most critically, “conservative” and “strict” must be kept conceptually distinct. “Conservative” refers to particular theological beliefs or practices, but “strictness” measures the distance between those beliefs/practices and those of the surrounding culture. Thus, “strictness” is always and necessarily culturally relative, requiring analysis of the relationship between church and culture.

Because conservative and strict became conflated in the application of SCT, I argue that “tension” (Johnson, 1963: 543) is a more useful concept.² One cannot infer the tension that a religious group experiences from the content of their beliefs and practices but can only measure it in relationship to cultural norms. Religious beliefs and practices that create tension in one cultural context will not necessarily do so in another. Although traditional gender practices in conservative American churches may provoke tension with a more egalitarian culture, I argue that in the Brazilian cultural context, it is *egalitarian* gender norms that create tension for Pentecostals. In fact, similar gender practices by American and Brazilian Pentecostals may produce different levels of tension because of their very different cultural contexts (McKinney and Neuhouser 2013). For example, in the U.S. allowing women to speak in church but not “preach” may cause tension

¹ The gender egalitarianism of Brazilian Pentecostals is not unique but also was true of early American Pentecostals (Anderson 2004).

² “Tension” is more useful not because strictness (properly understood) does not identify the critical characteristic of religious groups; it is more useful because it overtly refocuses attention on the fact that it is not *intrinsic* to a religious group’s beliefs and practices but a characteristic of the dynamic *relationship* between the group and its cultural context.

because it seems to deny the cultural ideal of full gender equality, while in Brazil the very same practice is viewed as a move toward gender equality that causes tension with the culture.

Tension is also a more useful concept because religious rules that require deviance from cultural norms may appear “strict” from the point of view of non-members but actually be experienced as release or freedom from cultural demands by converts. For example, some Brazilian Pentecostal women say they experience the adoption of modesty rules as release from the demands of an eroticized, machista culture that pressures them to dress immodestly (e.g., Mariz, 1994: 141). Thus, church members may experience the strictness of a rule differently, but they all experience tension when the religious practice is at odds with the culture. This subjective variability of “strictness” is another reason to replace strictness with the concept of tension.

Although all members may be required to adopt beliefs/behaviors that put them at odds with the culture, the “opportunity costs” of what must be given up may vary significantly (Iannaccone, 1995: 83). This variation has important implications for identifying *who* is most likely to convert because their rewards relative to costs are higher. For example, although Brazilian Pentecostalism requires both women and men to break from the culture’s patriarchal gender norms, the cultural norms tend to reward men more than women. It is not surprising, then, that Brazilian women are much more likely to pay the (relatively lower) cost of conversion to Pentecostalism than are Brazilian men. Thus, tension cannot be assumed to be the same for all members; because culture is gendered, tension (the relationship between culture and church) will be gendered as well.

Brazilian Pentecostalism not only problematizes the concept of “strict”; it also complicates our understanding of “conservative.” Brazilian Pentecostals agree with North American religious conservatives on the fundamentalist commitment to a “literalist” interpretation of the Bible as the authoritative word of God (Pew, 2006: 25), yet despite sharing the same “conservative” theology, North American fundamentalists are far more restrictive of female gender roles than Brazilian Pentecostals.³ Thus a common conservative theological foundation can produce very different practices.

This analysis demonstrates the importance of testing theory cross-culturally as a necessary step in clarifying concepts and improving predictions. Without such cross-cultural testing, SCT seemed to suggest that conservative gender roles are

³ There is debate about whether gender practices are as restrictive in conservative North American churches as their theology claims (e.g., Gallagher 2003; Griffith 1997; Wilcox 2004). This distinction is important, but advocating a non-egalitarian theology creates tension with American culture whether or not practices fully match beliefs. In fact, publicly affirming “strict” gender beliefs while permitting some behavioral latitude may be a useful strategy when the costs of conforming to religious rules become greater than the benefits (Iannaccone and Miles 1990).

necessary for church growth. Conservative North American church leaders accepted this erroneous conclusion and used it to justify the control and restriction of their female members. Brazilian Pentecostalism, however, demonstrates not only that conservative theology can empower women but that empowering women can also promote strong and growing churches.

To make this case, I proceed in four steps. First, I review the SCT literature to demonstrate how “strict” and “conservative” became conflated. Second, I examine how the resulting confusion allowed some religious leaders in the United States to use SCT to justify conservative gender theology and practice as necessary for church growth. Third, I survey the literature on Brazilian Pentecostalism to demonstrate that although it is theologically conservative, it is relatively open to women’s activity and authority and that these gender practices are a critical factor propelling rapid growth. Finally, I address how this analysis suggests ways to strengthen SCT.

STRICT CHURCH THEORY

Ironically, SCT has its origin in a book entitled *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (Kelley 1986 [1972]). “Conservative” was chosen for the title rather than “strict,” according to Kelley (1986 [1972]: xviii), because “a title...should speak to the awareness already present in potential readers rather than to those who have completed the book.” Apparently, he hoped that readers who started the book with the idea of “conservative churches” would be thinking of “strict churches” by the end. More than four decades later, this hope seems misplaced. The conflation of conservative with strict has caused misapplication of the theory by religious leaders as well as complicated the theory’s application outside the United States. It is critical, then, to understand how this confusion arose and how it can be clarified.

It was not just the book’s title that caused the confusion. Kelley assumed that conservative churches often *are* strict, and he occasionally lapsed into a comparison of conservative and liberal churches rather than strict and non-strict (e.g., 1986 [1972]: 27, 92). This conflation may have occurred because what primarily interested Kelley were not religious beliefs/practices themselves but religious outcomes—what caused growth or decline? The significance of religious beliefs/practices was not whether they were “orthodox,” because “adjectives [like “liberal” or “conservative”] don’t tell us much about their effectiveness as a religion” (Kelley, 1986 [1972]: 46). “Conservative” and “liberal” refer to the *substance* of a belief/practice, but what matters for church growth is how a belief/practice *functions* to mobilize members for action to attract converts. Whether a belief/practice does so is not given by its intrinsic content but its

“functional sense” (Kelley, 1986 [1972]: 45)—i.e., by how it shapes the relationship between church members and the culture.

For Kelley the critical issue is whether a belief or practice is “strict” in its effect. Strict churches make demands on members: “high-demand movements are relatively totalitarian...they want to dominate every aspect of their members’ lives (1987 [1972]: 101). Kelley recognized there is a point at which ever stricter demands limit growth, yet “the higher the demand a movement makes on its followers...the greater the individual impact of those who do respond” (1986 [1972]: 101). Strict churches, then, are strong churches because they require much of their members. Lenient churches are weak because they ask little of their members. Strictness is not the belief or practice in and of itself but whether or not it requires a costly change in behavior.

What Kelley’s argument lacked, however, was an elaboration of the mechanisms that make strict churches strong and lay the foundation for growth. In the more accurately titled article “Why Strict Churches are Strong,” Iannaccone (1994) employed rational choice models to demonstrate that strict churches limit free-riding when they “penalize or prohibit *alternative* activities that compete for members’ resources...such penalties and prohibitions tend to screen out the less committed members.... Only those willing to pay the price remain” (1187). Costly restrictions “strengthen’ a church in three ways: they raise overall levels of commitment, they increase average rates of participation, and they enhance the net benefits of membership” (Iannaccone, 1994: 1183). Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark (1995: 709) demonstrated that strict churches, by limiting free-riding, “have at their disposal vastly more volunteer labor than their mainline counterparts, per congregation and capita,” as well as higher per capita financial giving as a percentage of income. Thus, strict churches generate more resources (time and money) to do the work that can produce growth in members (Olson and Caddell 1994; Olson and Perl 2005).

According to Iannaccone strictness is “the degree to which a group limits and thereby increases the *cost* of non-group activities, such as socializing with members of other churches or pursuing ‘secular’ pastimes” (1994: 1182). Strictness, then, is created by membership requirements that establish strong group boundaries that limit interaction with non-members. Strict churches require members to reject some part of the host culture and thereby impose a cost sufficiently high to deter all but the most committed from joining, thereby reducing free-riding. Thus, a religious group is strict when its beliefs and practices create a “certain distance or *tension* between itself and society” (Iannaccone, 1994: 1203, emphasis added). Whether or not a belief/practice creates tension with society is dependent on its distance from societal beliefs/practices.⁴ Any

⁴ “Distance” from the culture is not easily measured, whether it is labeled “strictness” or “tension.” Religious groups have multiple beliefs/practices with different relationships to the culture. In

study of “strictness,” then, must include an analysis of the church within its cultural context (e.g., Iannaccone and Miles 1990).

Although this culturally relative understanding of strictness is embedded in the SCT literature, it was easy to miss for two reasons. First, SCT was tested on American religious groups, so American culture became the implicit standard by which to measure the level of tension induced by religious beliefs and practices. In fact, Iannaccone (1994: 1190) cites Hoge and Roozen (1974: E-4) as providing “an excellent operational definition of strictness”: “Does the denomination emphasize maintaining a separate and distinctive life style or morality.... Or does it affirm the American mainline life style...?” Thus, “the American mainline life style” became the de facto culture against which to measure strictness, i.e., how far from “the American mainline life style” are religious members required to deviate? Second, in the American cases analyzed, strictness and conservative theology seemed to be highly correlated (Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1994; Kelley 1986 [1972]). In their analysis of five U.S. denominations, Olson and Perl (2001: 762) concluded, “Denominations that have strict rules...also tend to have more theologically conservative... religious teachings.” The result was that “conservative” and “strict” became overtly conflated in the SCT literature—e.g., “strict/conservative counterparts” (Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark, 1995: 714), “strict, conservative congregations” (Olson and Perl, 2005: 124).

The concept of “strictness” in the SCT literature is problematic, then, not because of how it is defined but because the implicit cultural relativity of strictness became invisible when it was studied in a single culture. As the cultural context was a constant (always American), it became easy to forget that the beliefs and practices that made a religion more or less strict *in the United States* would not necessarily have the same effects in other cultural contexts.⁵ As a result, the high correlation between theologically conservative and “strict” in the United States blurred the two concepts. For example, in his 1994 article, Iannaccone specifically points out his choice to use “strict” rather than “conservative” in his title, but the following year Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark (1995: 705) begin by asking, “[W]hy have *theologically conservative* denominations prospered while the more *liberal* ‘mainline’ bodies declined?” [emphasis added]. The reader is left with the implication that “strictness” can be

addition, the culture is not homogenous, so a belief/practice can have various “distances” depending on which subculture is the point of comparison (e.g., Ferguson 2014). SCT has addressed these difficulties by creating scales based on surveys of religious experts. The same process can be replicated with “tension.” Because “tension” and “strictness” refer to the same concept (distance between group and culture), the results should be similar as well.

⁵ Iannaccone and Miles (1990) did study cultural variation over time with respect to the Mormon Church’s response to changing U.S. gender roles and concluded that the Mormon Church had to adjust the “amount of tension with secular society” in order to maintain a distance that would keep them distinct—i.e., “strict”—without alienating members (1247).

inferred simply from the group's theology and that "conservative theology" equals "strict." Although for Iannaccone and others doing research on "strictness" this equivalence was only convenient shorthand that worked in the context of U.S. religion, the fact that the cultural relativity of "strictness" was not kept clear led to almost immediate confusion when SCT became part of popular discourse on the state of religion in America. It is not surprising, then, that the distinction between "strict" and "conservative" was lost when SCT entered public discourse.⁶

MISAPPROPRIATION OF SCT IN POPULAR AMERICAN CULTURE

U.S. religious leaders—liberal and conservative—quickly adopted SCT. They were keenly aware that mainline Protestantism had been losing members for decades while conservative churches were growing:

- In an October 17, 2008, *Washington Post* column, George Will argued that as the Episcopal Church's "doctrines have become more elastic, the church has contracted."
- In a July 15, 2012, *New York Times* op-ed, Ross Douthat wrote, "Practically every denomination...that has tried to adapt itself to contemporary liberal values has seen an Episcopal-style plunge in church attendance." Conversely, the "most successful Christian bodies have often been politically conservative."
- Following the Episcopal Church's 2012 decision to approve a provisional church ritual for gay unions, the Bishop of South Carolina, the Rt. Rev. Mark Joseph Lawrence stated, "[T]hese two decisions will cause further decline..." (Bratu 2012).
- Conservative mega-church pastor Mark Driscoll (2006a) posted a similar warning that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is "bleeding out" because it got "off track of the mission of the gospel to fight over such things as homosexuality and feminism. These concerns are eating away at many liberal denominations...."

This explanatory framework is so well-accepted that a senior managing editor of *Christianity Today*, in an article entitled "How to Shrink a Church," wrote that SCT

has been a favorite among evangelicals since first articulated in Dean Kelley's 1972 *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing....* We evangelicals have long chalked up our success to this thesis. People are leaving liberal, mainline churches, we say, because liberals have compromised the gospel, and people are

⁶ The preferred term in popular discussions is "conservative" rather than "strict," perhaps because for religious practitioners, theology is the source of behavior and therefore causally prior.

flocking to evangelical churches precisely because we have remained true and firm in the faith (Galli 2009).

Clearly, many American religious observers are familiar at least with the title of Kelley's book.

Significantly, commonly used evidence for whether a church is theologically "conservative" or "liberal" have been its positions on sex and gender issues (Bartkowski and Hempel 2009).⁷ Beliefs regarding authority of scripture may be claimed as the theological line dividing "conservative" and "liberal,"⁸ but often, specific positions on sex and gender roles are the practical evidence for that belief. For example, Albert Mohler, Jr., President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, addressing the issue of female ordination, argued,

The real issue in this debate—and the only issue worth debating—is the authority and interpretation of the Bible. Given the revelation of God in Holy Scripture, Southern Baptists cannot follow the road to a feminized pulpit. The price would be the rejection of clear biblical teaching (Mohler 2009).

This use of gender to define theological conservatism is also evident in Mark Driscoll's (2006b) explanation of the "ten easy steps" to "destroy" a denomination: the first step is to "have a low view of scripture," but the next three all address gender issues (deny the distinct and different roles of women and men, ordain women, who then ordain gay men). Thus, it is often assumed that whether or not a church holds a "conservative" view of biblical authority can be discerned by its positions on sex and gender issues.

Books such as *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity* (Podles 1999) and *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Murrow 2005) have popularized this "feminization of the church" argument—liberal Christianity is a "feminized" and declining Christianity. The primary evidence of "feminization" is the increasing number of female clergy in the denominations most rapidly losing members (Murrow, 2005: 157–58; Podles, 1999: 135).⁹ For evidence of men's religious flight, these authors cite data from the 1998 National Congregation Study

⁷ Theological and gender conservatism have not always been correlated in American religion (McKinney and Neuhouser 2013). In fact, in the 1800s, the Holiness Movement, a "conservative movement in reaction to social and theological currents of the era...lifted feminism at least for a while to the level of principle" (Dayton and Dayton, 1976: 67).

⁸ "[F]undamentalist'...implies a strict belief in the divine inspiration and inerrancy of the entire Biblical text" (Jenkins, 2006: 11).

⁹ Ironically, in the 19th century, theologically conservative denominations with women pastors grew rapidly—e.g., The Salvation Army, The Church of the Nazarene, The Free Methodist Church (Dayton and Dayton 1976).

showing “liberal” mainline denominations have the highest percentages of female clergy and the highest gender gaps among members (e.g., Murrow, 2005: 54–56).

Acceptance of women in the pastoral role reverses centuries of Christian conviction and practice.... Once women begin to fill and represent roles of pastoral leadership men withdraw. This is true, not only in the pulpit, but in the pews. The evacuation of male worshippers from liberal churches is a noticeable phenomenon (Mohler 2007).

Female clergy are “overwhelmingly liberal” (Murrow, 2005: 173); therefore, they introduce changes that completely “feminize” the church, such as feminine images of God and Jesus, “inclusive language,” worship style (“sharing”), and even church decor (Murrow, 2005: 133–45; Podles, 1999: 113–38):

Many sanctuaries are painted a soft pink, eggshell white, or lavender, with cushiony pews and neutral carpet. The altar features fresh flowers while the walls are adorned with quilts and felt banners. Honestly, how do you expect men to connect with God in a space that feels so feminine (Murrow, 2005: 190)?

This “feminization of the church” argument is so accepted in American Christianity that *Christianity Today* published a review of “the new masculinity movement,” whose stated purpose is to fight against the simultaneous erosion of church membership and theological orthodoxy that “feminization” is assumed to cause (O’Brien, 2008: 48–52).

Thus, SCT entered public discourse in the following form: conservative churches grow; conservative refers to theological orthodoxy; traditional positions on sex and gender issues, such as women’s roles in the church, evidence theological orthodoxy. Conversely, a “feminized” church is not conservative and will not grow. That these claims came from conflating conservative and strict, however, suggests that they may be flawed. To test their generalizability requires an application of SCT to a case outside the U.S. with a focus on church-culture tension to avoid the problem of conflating (American) conservative and strict.

BRAZILIAN PENTECOSTALS: STRICT BUT NOT GENDER CONSERVATIVE

Modern Pentecostalism is rooted in the early 20th century American revivals at Bethel (Kansas) Bible School (1901) and Azusa Street, Los Angeles (1906) (Anderson, 2004: 39; Miller and Yamamori, 2007: 18). Within a hundred years, a handful of North American “Pentecostals” became a global movement claiming between 250 and 500 million followers, accounting for more than 25 percent of Christians worldwide (Miller and Yamamori, 2007: 19; Noll, 1997: 299).

“Pentecostalism has probably been the fastest growing religious movement in the twentieth century” (Anderson, 2004: 206), adding an estimated 19 million new members annually at the turn of the millennium (Jenkins, 2002: 63).

Latin American Pentecostalism has been a significant factor in this extraordinary growth. As late as 1940, Protestants of any kind accounted for only about one percent of the region’s population, but fifty years later, Protestants were 15 percent of the population, and 75 to 90 percent of these Protestants were Pentecostals (Chesnut, 2007: 83; Cleary, 1999: 134; Steigenga and Cleary, 2007: 3). Currently, there are over 140 million Pentecostals in Latin America, comprising half of global Pentecostals. Brazilian Pentecostals alone are half the Latin American total—a quarter of all Pentecostals worldwide (Anderson, 2004: 63).

Brazilian Pentecostalism exemplifies this explosive global growth. In 1907, William Durham, a Chicago pastor who participated in the Azusa Street revival, prophesied that an Italian immigrant, Luigi Francescon, would take Holy Spirit baptism to Italians. Three years later Francescon began preaching to the large Italian immigrant community in São Paulo, founding the *Congregação Cristã* denomination that today claims over a million members. Durham also prophesied that two Swedish immigrants, Gunnar Vingren and Daniel Berg, were called to “Pará” (the northern Brazilian state whose capital is Belém). The two men arrived in Belém in 1910; their ministry led to the creation of the *Assembleia de Deus* church, the largest Brazilian denomination with over four million members in 2000. By 2010, there were more than 35 million Pentecostals, 18 percent of the Brazilian population and nearly four times the share of all mainline Protestant churches combined (Coutinho and Golgher, 2012: 16).¹⁰

Strict...

Modern Pentecostalism is rooted in the 19th century American Holiness movement. Building on ideas and practices inherent in Methodist revivalism, Holiness leaders like Phoebe Palmer and Asa Mahan taught a baptism of the Holy Spirit that produced sanctified living (Anderson, 2004: 25–30; Freston, 2004: 225). Jesus forgives sins, but the Holy Spirit could bestow a “second blessing,” the power to live a morally pure life. This basic belief fueled the Pentecostal movement and inspired practices that simultaneously emphasized strict separation from worldly culture and undermined conservative patriarchal authority.

Brazilian Pentecostals view the world as an arena of conflict between spiritual forces of good and evil (Burdick, 1993: 218; Mariz 2000). The Holy Spirit rules

¹⁰ Calculated from Brazilian census data reported in Coutinho and Golgher (2012: 16) and World Bank (2017).

in the church, but in “the world” corrupt spiritual forces prevail, causing “evil, misfortune and affliction” (Anderson, 2004: 209). Ultimately, this spiritual conflict is a battle between demonic spirits and the Holy Spirit for possession/control of the physical body (Chesnut, 2003: 49, 55–56). The Holy Spirit has the power to heal and liberate the believer from evil/demonic forces and to steel the believer to resist temptation, but it is far better to avoid temptations altogether. Thus, separation from the world is essential to holy living and is enforced spatially, behaviorally, and socially.

First, Brazilian Pentecostals are urged to avoid spaces where evil forces reign, such as the “street,” a male sphere where men compete for status by proving their manhood (Chesnut, 2013: 70). Pentecostalism “rejects all the elements of the male prestige complex—drinking, gambling, fighting, and adultery as the work of the Devil” (Burdick, 1993: 114). Pentecostal men, then, are strongly warned to relocate to the home, where the influence of the Holy Spirit presides. The redirection of men into the home (a female sphere) is a direct attack on *machismo* (Brusco 1995; Steigenga and Cleary, 2007: 84). Rather than defining manliness by “macho” street behavior, godly men are defined by responsibly fulfilling familial roles in the home (Chesnut, 2003: 48–49, 135–36; B. Martin, 2003: 55). Thus, Pentecostalism restricts the physical location of Brazilian men but reinforces traditional norms that women’s place is in the home.

The expectation that members’ “free time” (not working or doing domestic tasks) is spent in godly activities such as attendance at church meetings or evangelization reinforces physical relocation from the street. Many Pentecostal churches have (lengthy) daily religious services and multiple services on Sunday (Corten, 1999: 48), as well as Bible studies, prayer meetings, and visitations in homes, neighborhoods, hospitals, and prisons. Lehmann (1996: 191) cites a study from Recife in which “one third of Assembleistas attended a church function every day, and 58 per cent four times a week.” The Pew 2006 national survey found that 86 percent of Pentecostals attend church at least once a week, compared to just 32 percent of other Brazilian Christians. Pentecostals also are more likely to pray, read the Bible, consume religious media, share their faith, and participate in additional religious activities (e.g., Bible study, prayer group) than other Brazilian Christians (Pew, 2006: 20–23). All this time in “holy” spaces leaves less opportunity for exposure to “the world’s” evil influences.

Second, regardless of where Pentecostals find themselves, they are held to strict rules for righteous living. Brazilian Pentecostals are more likely to believe in moral absolutes than any other Christian group, e.g., more opposed to behaviors such as extra-marital sex and drinking alcohol (Pew, 2006: 41–45). Although prohibitions against drinking, dancing, smoking, and sexual impropriety apply equally to women and men, in Brazil men are more likely to practice these behaviors. There are, however, specific modesty rules for women—no jewelry, no

make-up, no hair-cutting—that make Pentecostal women easily identifiable in public (Burdick, 1998: 132; Lehmann, 1996: 201–2). These rules restrict women’s choices, but many Brazilian Pentecostal women experience them as liberation from a highly eroticized culture that values women for their sexuality: “The appearance of decency and the conservative dress do in fact protect poor women from being treated like prostitutes” (Mariz, 1994: 141). Pentecostal women are taught that their “beauty” is God-given and internal (spirituality and character), not requiring external adornment:

In our church we say that women must come as they are, as God made them. Does God make anything ugly? Of course not. Why then all this need to beautify? This is like saying that God does not already make nature sufficiently beautiful (pastor quoted in Burdick, 1998: 132).

Modesty rules are in tension with urban Brazilian norms but also protect women from unwanted sexual attention and offer an alternate source of self-worth and attractiveness.

Pentecostal churches do not simply hope that members live up to these expectations; they impose rigorous discipline. Members found in violation of church rules are offered an opportunity to repent and change their behavior, but if they persist, they will be disciplined.¹¹ Commonly, punishment takes the form of exclusion from participation in specific roles (e.g., deacon or elder) or rituals (e.g., communion). Depending on the seriousness of the infraction, in addition to public repentance, a period of probation to demonstrate the sincerity of the repentance may be required before restoration to full fellowship in the congregation.¹²

Finally, Pentecostals are limited in their ability to develop and maintain social relations with non-Pentecostal kin, neighbors, and co-workers because of the sharp restrictions on their physical location and behavior. Pentecostals cannot participate in important cultural forms of social interaction, such as work or neighborhood gatherings where alcohol is consumed or Catholic rituals (baptism, weddings, and funerals) that define and sustain traditional Brazilian families (D. Martin, 1989: 71). Interaction with non-Pentecostals also is limited because of the extensive demands that the church makes on their time. Thus, for many converts the local congregation becomes a new “surrogate family” (D. Martin, 1989: 65), reinforced by the frequent use of kinship terms—*irmã* and *irmão* (sister and brother)—among fellow believers.

¹¹ In Brazil, these rules often are referred to as *lei* (i.e., law), making clear that they are not mere suggestions for behavior but obligations that incur consequences if violated.

¹² For example, a man I knew in Recife committed adultery and was prohibited from partaking of communion for one year by his *Assembleia* congregation.

The many requirements Pentecostalism places on members are quite costly, putting them in high tension with Brazilian culture generally, as well as with family, neighbors, and co-workers. Strict disciplinary mechanisms enforce demands and reduce free-riding by requiring that all members be extremely active and committed. Thus, Brazilian Pentecostal churches clearly are “strict” churches in high tension with the surrounding culture.

...But Not Gender Conservative

Brazilian Pentecostals are not expected to meet these strict behavioral standards by their own efforts. They are promised empowerment by the Holy Spirit, who will miraculously and powerfully transform their lives. In empowering believers the Holy Spirit has the freedom to use whomever it chooses to do whatever is needed in whatever way necessary:

Ordination by an organized church was irrelevant because Spirit baptism was the only credential necessary for ministry. The “call” was enough for both women and men. God was sovereign, choosing whom he willed (Johns, 1993a: 162).

In fact, God uses “what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Corinthians 1:27, NRSV). In Pentecostal theology, then, the only legitimate authority is spiritual. Sex, class, and race privilege may persist in the church, but it cannot be openly claimed as a theological right (Everts Powers, 1999: 321). This theology shapes practice: the Brazilian Assemblies of God “adopted one of the most democratic and participatory forms of church government”; in Belém, 80 percent of members surveyed reported having held some official church office (Chesnut, 2013: 79).

This emphasis on the equality of women and men based on the activity of the Holy Spirit paradoxically is paired with the belief that women and men are *essentially different* in nature. Brazilian Pentecostals accept the culturally dominant essentialist gender ideologies of *machismo* and *marianismo* (Stevens 1973). Although these ideologies place women in a socially subordinate relation to men, women are viewed as innately more spiritual than men (Riesbrodt and Chong, 1999: 66). Feminine traits of meekness, submission, and obedience are spiritual assets, and men are “forced to cultivate some of these traditionally ‘feminine’ traits” (Gill, 1990: 717). The Holy Spirit’s right to empower women to do God’s work and the recognition of traditional feminine qualities as spiritually valuable undercut attempts by Pentecostal men to claim gender privilege on the basis of this assumed difference (Chesnut, 2003: 130).

Miraculous spiritual gifts—speaking in tongues, healing, prophesizing—are key elements of Pentecostalism, and female members are more likely to report

receiving these gifts than men. Whether this disparity is because the Holy Spirit prefers to use “the weak” of the world to manifest divine power or because “the weak” are more likely to seek empowerment from the Holy Spirit, the result is the same. Chesnut (1997: 99), for example, found that 80 percent of female Assembly of God respondents in Belém had received spiritual gifts, compared to 62.5 percent of men. Gifted by the Spirit, women play extremely active roles in their churches:

[T]hey are able to participate and hold office in a wide range of church groups. In addition to conducting most of the door-to-door evangelizing as *visitadoras*, female *crentes* [believers] lead prayer circles, sing in the choir, teach Sunday school, expel demons, and even preach (Chesnut, 2003: 144–45).

In Belém, 75.8 percent of female Pentecostal respondents reported having served in at least one official church office (Chesnut, 1997: 135). Thus, female Pentecostals who have received spiritual gifts have claimed the right to take official roles in the church.

According to the North American “feminization of the church” argument, permitting female pastors is the ultimate proof that a church is no longer theologically conservative and therefore on the path to membership loss. Although many Brazilian Pentecostal denominations do not officially recognize women as pastors, there are significant exceptions. The Foursquare Gospel Church, founded in the U.S. by Aimee McPherson, now has more members in Brazil, where “more than a third of its pastors are women.” The *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), the fastest growing church in Brazil with over a million members, also ordains women pastors (Anderson, 2004: 72–73). Although most Assembly of God regional conventions do not ordain women, some do, such as the Federal District of Brasilia (Silva 2012).

Even official policies precluding female pastors do not prevent female leadership. If the Spirit compels women to speak out in the congregation, it would be disobedience for them to remain quiet and risky for men to silence them. Brazilian Pentecostals, then, have developed euphemisms that attach different labels to similar activities by women and men. If men can “preach a sermon,” women can “offer a word” (Chesnut, 2003: 145) or “give testimony” (Burdick, 1993: 108–15). If women who regularly “offer a word” cannot be pastors, then they are called “missionaries” or “evangelists” (Miller and Yamamori, 2007: 209). Female missionaries and evangelists often found and lead new congregations: “[S]isters in the faith, especially in the poorer congregations of the urban margins, often preach to their fellow believers” (Chesnut, 2003: 145). Pentecostal women, then, exercise significant church leadership (Anderson, 2004: 275).

Although preaching “God’s word” may be evidence of women’s equal authority with men in North American Protestant churches, in Brazilian Pentecostalism an even more authoritative “word of God” is “revelation” or prophecy. With the gift of prophecy, women can challenge men’s authority and behavior both in the church and the home. Pentecostal women in Belém were twice as likely as men to receive divine revelation (Chesnut, 1997: 99).¹³ In visions and dreams, women are given knowledge that often reveals “the sins and transgressions of men...and grants women the moral authority to challenge the sinful behavior of both Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal men” (Chesnut, 1997: 101). Burdick (1993: 114–15) provides an example of this feminine authority:

One man...was considering a clandestine rendezvous with an old flame when he was approached by Margarida; she told him that she had dreamt that he was about to go against God’s will. Naturally, he dropped the idea of the tryst at once.

Women are supposed to submit to men, but submission to God is more important. Women to whom divine knowledge has been revealed must submit to God by speaking authoritatively *for God to men*. Thus, Pentecostal women are empowered to be fearless prophets speaking God’s truth to men (D. Martin, 2002: 98).

Male pastors respect and even fear the power of prophetic women because female prophetic authority can challenge male priestly authority. In the 1970s, for example, the (male) President of the Assemblies of God in Belém warned his congregations to exercise the gift of prophecy with great caution and, perhaps not coincidentally, inaugurated the first seminary. Although women could not be prevented from speaking prophetically, they could be (and were) excluded from the seminary:¹⁴ “Prophecy and vision provoke such fear in powerful Pentecostal pastors because the recipient of these divine gifts, almost always female, can challenge the authority of priests” (Chesnut, 1997: 43).

Brazilian Pentecostal churches employ practices that proponents of the “feminization of the church” version of SCT predict will cause membership loss. Men are admonished to act in more “feminine” ways, rejecting the macho street culture, while women are empowered to speak in God’s name to men. Not only are women drawn to the empowerment of Spirit baptism, but their presence also shapes the forms and practices of Pentecostal churches (Chesnut, 2003: 43; B. Martin 2003). Elizabeth Brusco (1995: 129, 135) argues that Latin American

¹³ “The spiritual gift of prophecy...is almost exclusively received by women...converting women into respected moral authorities whose divine revelations can challenge the authority and conduct of brothers in the faith” (Chesnut, 2003: 132).

¹⁴ As institutionalization tames revivalism, male authority based in control of religious organizations often replaces practices that promote gender egalitarianism (Daniels, 2014: 81).

Pentecostalism is a “strategic women’s movement” because “the predominance of women...determines, to a very great extent, both the form or organization of the churches and the content of their religious teaching and expression.” Yet these “feminine” Pentecostal churches in Brazil have been growing rapidly.

...and Growing

Since its arrival in Brazil, Pentecostalism has grown by an annual average of 17.6 percent (Johnson, 2013: 324). From 1980 to 2010, the number of Brazilian Pentecostals grew 265.1 percent—over four times the population growth rate (60.4%).¹⁵ As a result, Pentecostals surged from 3 percent of the 1980 population (3.65 million) to 18.1 percent in 2010 (35.33 million).¹⁶ In the same period, mainline Protestant churches grew slowly, increasing their share from 3.5 to 4.0 percent, while the percentage of Catholics dropped significantly from 88.3 to 65.4 percent (Coutinho and Golgher, 2012: 16). Catholic losses would have been even larger if an estimated 33.7 million members (22%) who had received a “baptism of the Holy Spirit” had not chosen to remain in the church as “charismatic Catholics” (Cleary, 2011: 96–97).¹⁷

What role do Brazilian women play in this growth? There are two important dimensions of this question. First, do women converts make up a significant portion of the numerical growth? Second, what role do Pentecostal women play in recruiting more converts? Answers to these questions are critical because the North American “feminization of the church” version of SCT predicts that a “feminized” church not only will shrink but also will have a preponderance of female members because it will repel men.

Everyone agrees that a major component of rapid Pentecostal growth, both in Brazil and the rest of Latin America, has been the conversion of women.¹⁸ Regionally, there are claims as high as twice as many female as male adherents and in some denominations a ratio of four to one (Chesnut, 2003: 43). This gender imbalance could be interpreted that women are attracted to Pentecostalism, but men are repelled. This interpretation must be examined carefully, however, as it is based primarily on observations of gender ratios in church services and other religious activities. Evidence that women are significantly *more active* in

¹⁵ Prior to 1980, the Brazilian census grouped Pentecostals with Protestants (Freston, 2004: 230).

¹⁶ See endnote 10.

¹⁷ Protestant growth also would have been reduced without the 6 percent of their members who identify as “charismatics” (Pew, 2006: 4).

¹⁸ “Since poor women of color are relegated to the least desirable social and physical spaces in Latin America on account of their sex, class, and skin color, it should be of little surprise that they enthusiastically embrace the opportunity to be carried away by a supernatural power from a mundane place of poverty and crime to a heavenly bliss” (Chesnut, 2003: 130).

Pentecostal churches does not necessarily mean that there are far more female than male *members*.

It is critical, then, to examine membership data. According to the 2010 Brazilian census, 57.8 percent of self-identifying Pentecostals were women (calculated from data in Coutinho and Golgher, 2012: 18).¹⁹ The 2006 Pew survey found an even smaller female majority: 53 percent. In all other Brazilian Christian groups, women represented 51 percent of the total membership (Pew, 2006: 38). Thus, women are a majority of those self-identifying as Pentecostal, but the gender imbalance is not nearly as large as that claimed in observational studies, and Pentecostal membership is only slightly less attractive to men than other forms of Brazilian Christianity.

In fact, Brazilian Pentecostalism is not growing *despite* the predominant presence of women but “is largely sustained and spread by sisters of faith” (Chesnut, 2003: 43). Women are drawn to Pentecostalism because it offers them opportunities to exercise new forms of spiritual authority (Chesnut, 2003: 145), and research shows that it is the exercise of this spiritual authority by women that is a primary source of rapid growth. Thus, Brazilian Pentecostalism presents the apparent paradox of rapidly growing churches that not only are “feminine” but also credit growth to women’s active participation²⁰—an outcome that strongly contradicts the “feminization of the church” (mis)application of SCT.

Speaking in tongues is the spiritual gift most often associated with Pentecostalism by outsiders, but no gift is more central to Pentecostal conversion than that of divine healing.²¹

In the...countries where Pentecostal growth is occurring most rapidly, as many as 80–90 percent of first-generation Christians attribute their conversions *primarily* to having received divine healing for themselves or a family member (Brown, 2011: 3).

The “disease of poverty” (Chesnut, 2013: 169) afflicts millions of Brazilians with water-borne illness, contagious diseases, and parasites, as well as alcohol and drug addiction, violence, and other stress-related maladies. It is not surprising that the message of a God who loves them enough and is powerful enough to heal their infirmities attracts poor Brazilians lacking access to quality medical care (Chesnut, 2003: 45–46; 2013).

¹⁹ Women were 50.8 percent of the entire Brazilian population in 2010 (World Bank 2017).

²⁰ “Even though male pastors and evangelists attract most of the attention, their main function is reinforcing converts who originally came to church because they were recruited person-to-person by family members and neighbors who are predominantly female” (Stoll, 1993: 8).

²¹ “Divine healing” includes healing of physical ailments, exorcism of evil spirits (*libertação*), and healing of psychological or emotional distress (often attributed to demonic possession or external influence) (Corten, 1999: 50–52).

Divine healing has driven Pentecostal growth since the first missionaries arrived in Belém during a serious outbreak of yellow fever: “With little access to the city’s precarious health care facilities...many ill Belenses and their families came to the Assembly of God as a last resort” (Chesnut, 1997: 28). Eighty years later, 86.4 percent of Pentecostal informants in Belém had experienced divine healing, while only 46.8 percent regularly spoke in tongues (Chesnut, 1997: 80). In fact, “the great majority of my informants in Belém converted to Pentecostalism during or shortly after a serious illness” (Chesnut, 1997: 5). In the 2006 Pew national survey (17–18), 77 percent of Pentecostals had experienced or witnessed a divine healing, while only 29 percent had spoken in tongues. In addition, 80 percent had experienced or witnessed an exorcism, another form of divine healing. The connections between poverty, lack of medical care, divine healing, and Pentecostal conversion are so strong that Lima Bezerra (2009: 131) concludes, “Pentecostalism will continue to flourish in Brazil as long as there are people in need of health care.” Thus, the offer of divine healing is a powerful draw for non-believers to enter Pentecostal church doors, and successful healing is a powerful reason to stay.²²

Women engage with divine healing to spur church growth in four ways: as *consumers* of divine healing, as *connectors* of the sick to the church’s ministry of healing, as *convincers* of the sick that the Holy Spirit has the power to heal, and as a majority of the *providers* of divine cure.

Poor women who suffer from multiple forms of disease, stress, and violence are highly motivated to seek healing. “No one ‘converts’ to a medical clinic” (Bomann, 2011: 201), but divine healing often produces an intense emotional experience resulting in female conversion:

When doctors...tell us that the illness a person is suffering has no cure, that the only thing left to do is die. I want to say that there is a greater doctor than earthly doctors, who does not give up and who is ready to offer healing.... I was dying of uterine cancer. I spent ten years suffering when I wasn’t a believer. But I knew someone...interceding for cancer patients. I vowed then to serve Jesus for the rest of my life if he cured me. He healed me immediately (anonymous testimony quoted in Chesnut, 2013: 174).

This experience of divine love and healing makes the Pentecostal price for conversion—strictness—an easy choice.

Women are responsible not only for their own health but also for the entire household. When they are unable to maintain the health of those in their care, they

²² “More than any of its other line of products, it is the Pentecostal belief that Jesus and the Holy Spirit have the power to cure believers of their spiritual, somatic, and psychological ills that impels more Latin Americans to affiliate with *crente* [believer] churches” (Chesnut, 2003: 44).

frequently seek out Pentecostal healers, which have the advantage of being free, unlike medical care or the healing offered in Afro-Brazilian religions (Burdick, 1993: 75; Chesnut, 2011: 177–78). In Belém, 25 percent of men came to the church through their wives, while only 4.3 percent of women had come through their husbands (Chesnut, 2013: 172). A husband’s cure is doubly beneficial for Pentecostal women; the husband is healed of his physical, psychological, or spiritual illness and, through conversion, becomes a “healthy” family member (Lehmann, 1996: 194–200).²³

Women also are responsible for the maintenance of community networks and are the primary connection between sick friends and neighbors and the healing ministry of the church. Pentecostal women do not limit their healing ministry to those in their pre-existing networks. Laywomen share the good news of healing to strangers house-to-house, as well as in prisons and hospitals, and are “probably responsible for more individual sales of Pentecostal...products than are male pastors” (Chesnut, 2003: 143):

In the Assemblies of God, laywomen evangelists, called *visitadoras* (visitors) proselytize not only door to door but also in hospitals filled with those who are especially predisposed to accept a dose of divine healing (Chesnut, 2013: 72).

Once the sick person comes to the church in hopes of healing, Pentecostal women play another critical role by providing convincing testimonies of their own healing or of family members by a God both powerful and loving enough to end their suffering. As their testimonies of healing follow one after another, the sick begin to hope and even to believe that they too can be healed (Burdick, 1993: 108–10; Chesnut, 2013: 174–75).

Having gone out to find the sick, brought them into the church, and convinced them that miraculous healing is possible, it is not surprising that Pentecostal women also are more likely than men to be providers of divine cure (B. Martin, 2003: 54): “The gift of healing appears to be limited to pastors and especially devout believers, usually female” (Chesnut, 2011: 176):

In some churches, divine healing so dominates the liturgy that the sanctuary resembles a hospital. The stern [female] *obreiras* (ushers)²⁴ who patrol the pews of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Foursquare Gospel, and God is Love (*Deus é Amor*) wear celestial blue or off-white nurses’ uniforms. As spiritual nurses, the *obreiras* perform triage on the patients in the pews. An *obreira* attends to the mildly afflicted with a vice-grip maneuver in which her hands, positioned at the front and back of the patient’s head, force out the

²³ Brusco (1995) makes the same argument in greater detail for Colombian Pentecostals.

²⁴ Chesnut translates *obreira* as “usher,” but the word literally means “worker,” and the subsequent description makes clear they do far more than show people to their seats.

demon(s). Those tormented by stronger fiends are sent, sometimes dragged, to the altar where the spiritual medic, the pastor, operates (Chesnut, 2011: 176).

Although the male pastor presides over this healing service, the role of the female *obreiras* is critical and certainly not passive. Women are doing most of the healing and doing it with authority and power, even forcefully. The *obreiras* seem to be in complete control as they physically handle the sick, both male and female. They also determine whom the pastor, who awaits the *obreiras* decisions, will and will not heal. Invisible in this scene are laymen.

Brazilian Pentecostal churches are growing rapidly but are not gender conservative. Women exercise significant authority and participate in a wide range of activities critical to their churches' functioning. Largely due to the time, energy, and labor invested by women in the practice of their faith, their churches are growing. Women are drawn to the church for what it offers them, but they also draw others, including men, into churches that by North American terms are "feminine." Thus, the "feminization of the church" argument fails to explain one of the most significant contemporary global instances of church growth, but what are the implications for SCT?

TOWARD A MORE CROSS-CULTURALLY ROBUST STRICT CHURCH THEORY

What do we learn from the paradox of a gender egalitarian but rapidly growing Brazilian Pentecostalism? First and foremost, "strict" and "conservative" must be kept conceptually distinct. Strictness measures the distance from the surrounding culture that a religious group requires of its members. This distance entails a cost to converts who must engage in cultural deviance to enjoy the benefits of membership. It is this investment that mitigates against free-riding and strengthens the group in ways that can lead to numerical growth. Strictness, then, is *always* culturally specific. For example, a religious requirement that directs women to the domestic sphere may be "strict" in the context of contemporary North American culture but not in traditional Brazilian culture. Thus, every test of SCT must be culturally nuanced, including research in North America.

Although the SCT literature acknowledges the culturally relative nature of strictness, this insight was blurred by research on American religion where theologically conservative and strict religion were highly correlated (in the latter half of the 20th century) and then ignored by applications of the theory in popular culture. It would be helpful, then, to have a term that highlights and reclaims the cultural relativity of strictness. Fortunately, such a term is available: "tension." Benton Johnson (1963: 542) pointed out that all religious organizations "range along a continuum from complete rejection to complete acceptance of the

environment.” A religious group “tends to be in a state of *tension* [emphasis added]” when it enforces “norms on...adherents that are sharply distinct from norms common in secular quarters...” (Johnson, 1963: 544). What is critical, then, is how religious rules impact the relationship of the religious organization and its members to the cultural environment—do they create tension? The level of tension can change, even without a change in the strictness of the rules, if societal norms move toward or away from the religious rules (McKinney and Neuhouser 2013).²⁵ Thus, tension sharply focuses analysis on the cultural context and reduces the likelihood that unexamined cultural assumptions about strictness or conservativeness go unchecked. The concept of tension has the advantage of having a carefully worked-out theoretical relationship to growth and strength of religious organizations (Stark and Finke 2000), as well as research confirming the relationships (Finke and Stark 1992). In addition, this term is not new to the SCT literature but is frequently used to explain strictness. In the seminal article “Why Strict Churches are Strong,” Iannaccone (1994: 1203) states, “To remain strong, a group must maintain certain distance or *tension* between itself and society” [emphasis added].²⁶ Thus, “tension” fits the SCT understanding of “strictness” but has the advantage of not being confused with conservative theology because it focuses attention on the relationship between religious group and culture.

Second, the religious group is not the only one demanding conformity; culture demands it as well. “Strict” religious rules, then, are not necessarily a “cost” of membership; they may be experienced as a release from “strict” cultural demands. For example, when Brazilian women adopt the “strict” modesty rules of Pentecostalism, is this the price they are willing to pay in order to become a part of the church community? Or do the modesty rules release them from “strict” cultural demands that they dress “immodestly” in an eroticized culture? If it is the latter, women may experience modesty rules more as a benefit of conversion than a cost. Whether the rule “restricts” or “frees” someone is a subjective experience that requires careful attention to how the rules are experienced. Either way, the distance between the religious and cultural demands creates tension.

Some tensions are more costly than others. The opportunity costs of modest dress for Brazilian women may be far lower than the opportunity costs for Brazilian men to give up the status of macho street culture. All converts are required to adopt counter-cultural norms, but women may “purchase” the

²⁵ In the U.S., religious prohibitions against smoking became less “strict” when secular campaigns on its harmful physical effects reduced both the practice and status of smoking in the culture.

²⁶ Iannaccone and Miles (1990: 1247) conclude their analysis of Mormon response to changing American gender norms by stating that the Mormon Church had to adjust the “amount of *tension* with secular society” [emphasis added] in order to maintain a distance that would keep them distinct, i.e., strict, without alienating members.

resulting tension at lower cost than men because what they are giving up may be less valuable to them than what men give up. For women, the price of tension is a move from an unequal gender world to one of greater gender egalitarianism, while for men the price of tension may entail a loss of gender privilege. Given the patriarchal nature of Brazilian culture, it is not surprising that women are more likely to convert than men.

Third, Brazilian Pentecostals problematize the concept of “conservative.” In North America “conservative” is linked to a literalist position on “the authority and interpretation of the Bible” (Mohler 2009). This orientation to scripture is assumed to lead automatically to specific positions on issues such as gender roles. By this definition Brazilian Pentecostals are theologically conservative. According to the Pew survey, 81 percent of Brazilian Pentecostals believe that “the Bible is the word of God and is to be taken literally,” while only 65 percent of all other Brazilian Christians share that belief (Pew, 2006: 25). Thus, the vast majority of Brazilian Pentecostals claim the most theologically conservative orientation toward the Bible, but they do not share the gender beliefs and practices of most contemporary conservative North American Christians.²⁷

Brazilian Pentecostals believe in the divine authorship and inerrancy of the Bible, but this belief is not their only one. Unlike fundamentalists who believe that the Bible is the *completed* divine revelation (Woodberry and Smith 1998), Pentecostals believe that God continues to speak through the Holy Spirit (Johns, 1993a: 163). Pentecostals do not reject Paul’s admonition that women keep silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:34) as “wrong”; it was “true” for that time and place, but that text does not prevent the Holy Spirit from speaking through women today. Thus, Pentecostal understanding of “literal interpretation” differs from that of fundamentalists. Where fundamentalists read the Bible for abstract rules to apply universally, Pentecostals read the Bible “literally” through the lens of application to their unique life situations (Johns, 1993b: 87).

Most Pentecostals in Latin America are fundamentalists in an unreflective way. They agree with fundamentalist beliefs such as biblical inerrancy when explained; but what really matters is not whether the biblical miracles happened as told, but whether the same miracles happen today (Freston, 2004: 226).

Pentecostals, then, can accept that conservative and literal readings of a Biblical text can produce, with the illumination of the Holy Spirit, different applications for different situations.

It may seem paradoxical for Brazilian Pentecostals to be strict, theologically conservative, *and* gender egalitarian, but it is not inconsistent. A “Pentecostal-

²⁷ Many U.S. Pentecostal groups also ordained women early in their histories, as did many Holiness denominations (Everts Powers 1999; Dayton and Dayton 1976).

conservative” reading logically produces a very different interpretation of the biblical teaching on gender roles than that produced by a North American “fundamentalist-conservative” reading.²⁸ Brazilian Pentecostalism demonstrates that gender egalitarianism does not require theological liberalism but can be generated by a theologically conservative approach to the Bible. We cannot assume, then, that all conservative theology is the same and will produce the same practices or produce the same amount of tension with the culture (Woodberry and Smith 1998).

Fourth, and most fundamentally, Brazilian Pentecostalism demonstrates the necessity of testing theory cross-culturally. Without cross-cultural comparison, it is far too easy for unexamined assumptions to shape research and analysis. Whenever this happens our understanding of the social world is skewed, but when these unexamined assumptions make their way into popular culture as sociologically accepted “facts,” the negative consequences are magnified. In this case, the “strictness” thesis was transformed into the “feminization of the church” thesis, which has been and continues to be used as a weapon to justify the restriction and control of religious women. Brazilian Pentecostalism demonstrates that religious empowerment not only is positive for women but also can produce strong and growing churches.

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²⁸ Riesbrodt and Chong (1999: 56–57) distinguish between “charismatic fundamentalism” and “literalist-legalistic fundamentalism.”

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