


The story of a modern-day Red Tenant

Empowering women through Bible reading

Renee Reimer

Welcomed into the church

My disclaimer for much of my life, especially when it comes to any religious checkbox, is that I grew up in a household with both parents as pastors. As a thirty-year-old whose mother was one of the first ordained women in the Mennonite church, I have come to realize my two-pastor-parents household was quite an empowering household in which to grow up. Women in ministry was never a question for me because I knew



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Being a pastors' kid is not what brought me to seminary six years ago; my love for the church did. It was the love that I experienced running through the pews on Thursdays after our neighborhood church supper and the love that I received from the adults in my church

who engaged my questions about the Bible as a junior high student. It was my love for leading music with my church community in high school and college, the pure joy of creating music while worshiping God. I did not go to seminary because others expected it of me, but rather I went to engage the Bible with the church in new ways.

A female biblical lens

Seminary was where I first learned that the sanctuary is not a joyous place for everyone and that I cannot always read the Bible in the literal sense. With these realizations, I began reading any theological book I could get my hands on that might help me make sense of what I had understood the church to be. By the time I graduated from seminary, my personal library on biblical women had grown exponentially, and my school projects had



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primarily focused on the empowerment of women. My senior seminar project, "Embodying My Female Authority: A Case Study on Uncomfortable Pastoral Encounters," explored ways pastors, especially young female pastors, give and give and give, while congregations take and take and take.

My four years of studying taught me about stories in the Bible I had never heard before. I began to wonder how my life would have been shaped differently

if I had heard more from the voices of biblical women. I wondered if my female authority in the church would be less of a struggle to claim if the presence of biblical women was more than just a side note in the church's reading of Scripture.

Re-claiming female authority

Church and American culture alike rarely speak about female authority in a positive sense. Both continue to resist it, including churches that hire female pastors while subtly undermining their authority. Female authority is the notion that women have the power to claim their own truth and present it in the same way men do without daily questioning. It is the belief that women have every right and capability to lead and empower others to do the same. Even having grown up in an empowered household, I struggle to claim this authority.

My bold statements regarding female authority and the harm we as churches continue to perpetrate against women come from my experience and those of my peers. Patriarchal systems continue to dominate the church, and the Bible includes only snippets of women's voices and presence. How do these foundational structures and male-centered stories impact the people growing up in the pews? How does our reading (or not


reading) of certain biblical stories contribute to the faith development and empowerment of every person who reads or hears those words? How does every child of God learn that God has indeed called their truth into being? God has called all of us to read and interpret the Bible in community, regardless of our race, gender, or sexual orientation.

When we only hear selected portions and voices from the Scripture that we claim to be a guiding principle for our whole lives, we limit the faith formation in our churches. We do not present the complete story of the kin-dom of God to children when we place only one gender behind the pulpit. We perpetuate harm when we fail to cultivate cultures where every individual is taught to claim their voice, body, and power with all the authority God gave them.

Cultivating a community of biblical engagers

I have become convinced that the church needs to focus on spreading the message to every person that God has called them and their truth into being. We then need to work together as a church to empower every person to speak their truth. I was fortunate to have communities who read the Bible with me as a youth and young adult and left the door

open for my questions, my wonderment about who God was, and my disgust at the treatment of women in the Bible. I was never once told or subtly pressured to believe that God intended men to be above women. I was never spoon-fed my now belief that the Bible was written in a patriarchal society by patriarchal men and then traditionally interpreted by men caught up in patriarchy. Instead, I was given a wealth of resources to expand my knowledge and reading of the biblical text. I was given space to verbally



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process the idea that maybe the stories of biblical women interacting with Jesus are God's way of showing us that we were getting it wrong; women are also called by God to speak truth through the Bible. The church today needs to hear more from these biblical women who teach us about God.

I have explored ways we can engage these conversations together through several projects. One project is a series of lesson plans for young families to use together that centers on ways preschool children can learn

to claim their bodies as their own and use their words with authority. These important messages need to be taught while children are growing into their own identity. One lesson this series teaches young children and families is that our bodies are not meant to make others happy. If we do not want to give someone a hug, we are not obligated to (no matter if that person is sad, is our grandmother, or tries to pressure us into it). This series also honors children asking *Why?* People at any age deserve to know



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why and to be able to have conversations with the people around them.

Another resource I developed is a curriculum for high school women and their mother, guardian, or mentor to do together that focuses on the importance of being able to set their own boundaries.

I wrote this curriculum because young women need to know that their opinions matter, their words matter, their bodies matter, their truth matters.

During a seminary internship, I worked with college-aged adults who were caring for the well-being of hundreds of children and youth for eight weeks. I learned that many people do not share my unconditional love of the church. Many of the people whom the church has put into authority have misused their power by keeping those with less authority on the margins, teaching a one-sided theology, offering superficial authority to those under the age of thirty, and putting too much energy into talking about social justice issues rather than taking action for social justice in our world. The internship reinforced what I had come to realize in seminary: the church has not shared the full story of the Bible.

The modern-day Red Tenants

After I graduated from seminary, I accepted the call to pastor at one of the few churches associated with a Mennonite college. One of the highlights of this job is engaging with the young adults across the street on the Bethel College (Kansas) campus. This job seemed the perfect opportunity to foster a community that empowered women into their authority, wrestle with the Scriptures churches have typically ignored, and create a space for marginalized people to love Scripture again.

In the second month of my pastorate, I began leading a weekly Bible study for Bethel College women in which our goal is to empower and be empowered. We call ourselves The Red Tenants. This term derives from

Anita Diamant’s book *The Red Tent*, a fictional story about Dinah, the daughter of Leah and Jacob (Genesis 30:21; 34:1–31). Diamant’s book gives Dinah’s account of life in ancient womanhood, where she—the only daughter of Jacob—grows up with four mothers, one father, and twelve brothers. Dinah grows into her identity as a woman by listening to and learning from four powerful women—Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah—in the red tent (a tent women went to while they were “unclean”).

As modern-day Red Tenants, our Bible study seeks to reclaim the “uncleanliness” that the Bible and society have assigned to women. We aim to learn from the biblical women that went before us by reading their stories, weeping with their pain, and practicing our authoritative voices to set our physical boundaries and claim our faith. We hope that by giving voice to the women of the Bible—those named and unnamed, those whose stories we know and whose stories we are now discovering—our voices will help these women’s stories to find their rightful place in the church and continue to speak to generations to come. We read the Bible from a feminist perspective in order to reclaim it for ourselves. We read the so-called texts of terror (the story of Hagar, Tamar, an unnamed concubine, Jephthah’s

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daughter, and other biblical stories of violence toward women) with open hearts to love the women who experienced harm. We read with open ears to listen to their stories so we can sit with them in their pain when those who were present with them did not. This biblical circle

has become a space where we relearn Scripture with a new lens and notice how God was walking with women in the Bible and wrestle with how God is walking with us today.

The first semester together we gave voice to Mary, Michal, Elizabeth, the unnamed women caught in adultery, Tamar, Jephthah’s daughter, Ruth, Mary Magdalene, Deborah, Rahab, Esther, and Eve. One week we practiced physically saying *no* with our words and bodies by practicing our reactions to someone invading our space. Another week we created colorful origami with words of encouragement to give to women at a local detainee immigration center. On the week that we studied the unnamed women caught in adultery, we wrote on stones words that hold us back from living into our full authority as women. We discussed why we picked these words and then went outside to throw those stones at the ground as a way to release those feelings of shame. Over the course of this semester,

we explored ways God had empowered these women and found ways to reclaim our own power as women. We applied what we were learning from the Bible to what we were experiencing as Red Tenants today.

The next semester we used *lectio divina* to engage with Sarah and Hagar, Leah and Rachel, Mary and Martha, the women at the tomb, Rebekah, the bent-over woman, the bleeding woman, and the Syrophoenician woman. We debated the controversy some of these texts may have presented in their time, why these words are important today, what Jesus may have been writing in the sand. We came up with possible names for the unnamed women. Together we learned that these were complex relationships among the women. Some of them were persecuted and then continued to persecute the women in lower societal standards. We discussed ways we as women today also use our privilege to harm others and worked at finding ways to walk alongside women who are more on the margins than ourselves.

The third semester, we sat around a campfire each week as we listened to women we looked up to talk about their favorite biblical woman. We learned from one another about a variety of biblical women that our mentors see as leaders and how these biblical women helped to form their faith. The story of Zelephoad's daughters was especially important to one woman as she first discerned her call into ministry through this story.

Together, we are striving to create space for female authority to speak truth by listening to the biblical woman as they spoke their truth. We are coming into who God has called us into being and standing tall as we pave a formative path for others to claim their God given authority and calling. God has called each one of us into being to speak our truth with authority. Let us all empower those around us to do the same.

About the author

Renee Reimer graduated from AMBS in 2019 with an MDiv and serves as one of the pastors at Bethel College Mennonite Church in North Newton, Kansas. She recently joined the board of Dove's Nest as part of her calling to help churches cultivate a place where children and youth learn about boundaries and healthy sexuality in ways that empower them as they emerge into adulthood. Renee lives in Newton, Kansas, with her two farm cats, Adam and Eve.