

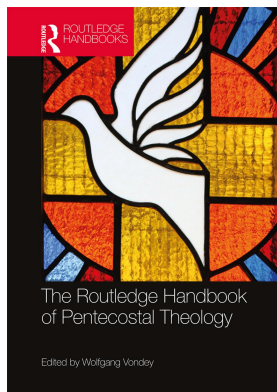
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FEMINIST THEOLOGIES

Deconstructing the patriarchal gender paradigm

Lisa P. Stephenson

For the last decade I have regularly taught a course on “feminist theology” at a predominant Pentecostal university in North America. And, every time I teach the course, I have countless students and colleagues question the congruity of these two realities: “Can a Pentecostal be a feminist?”—“Can a feminist be a Pentecostal?” Whatever images “feminist” conjures up, for many, what we understand to be “Pentecostal” does not appear among them. Yet, despite the suspicion others may have about the compatibility of Pentecostal and feminist theology, a handful of Pentecostal scholars have found a way to bring these two seemingly disparate worlds into a fruitful relationship.

An overarching characteristic of Pentecostal feminist theologies is their attempt to address the bipolar theology and treatment of women in the tradition. On the one hand, Pentecostals’ belief in the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh has resulted in the empowerment of women in significant ways, especially in the early days of the movement and in certain international contexts. On the other hand, Pentecostalism has never been a completely egalitarian tradition, and claims to empowerment have been simultaneously juxtaposed with claims to divine (and typically patriarchal) order (see Chapter 10). The result is a frustrating paradox of liberation and limitation for women in the movement noted worldwide (Flora 1975; Gill 1990; Drogus 1998; Mariz and Machado 1998; Sloomweg 1998; Fraser 2003; Boadi 2005; Brusco 2009, 2010; Hollingsworth and Browning 2010; Samah 2013; Miller 2016). Given these tensions, much of the work of Pentecostal feminist theologies centers around the issue of women’s empowerment, in both the domestic and the public sphere. As constructive Pentecostal theology is continuing to emerge and develop, the voices of those who write from a Pentecostal feminist perspective need to be heard. The beauty of Pentecost is the polyphonic nature of the gift of the Spirit, and among the persons to be heeded are also those who speak with feminist tongues. This essay, therefore, seeks to highlight the ways in which Pentecostal feminist theologies have taken shape, as well as to suggest ways in which they might continue to develop. I begin by utilizing Anne Carr’s (1988) threefold definition of feminist theology as a rubric around which to situate the various forms of Pentecostal feminist theologies. I then survey the current scholarship in these areas to demonstrate the breadth of the field thus far and conclude with some reflections on the potential direction this discussion can take in the future.

The shape of Pentecostal feminist theologies

Feminist theology is no newcomer to the contemporary theological scene. This field of study has been in full bloom for decades, as women across the globe have devoted their energies to critiquing and re-envisioning the Christian tradition. Though there is not always a consensus among those who bear this label—in either method or content—there is a general conviction that the patriarchal gender paradigm, which associates males as superior and dominant and females as inferior and auxiliary, is false. The task of feminist theology is, thus, one of examining Christianity to see wherein this bias is reflected and reinforced, as well as seeking to bring to light the way in which *men's* experience—masquerading as *human* experience—has shaped Christianity. It is both deconstructive and reconstructive, critical and hopeful (Ruether 2002).

In many ways, the plural “theologies” is a more appropriate means to refer to the variety of feminists and their various ideas. Whereas the label “feminist theology” is questionable as a general designation because of its historical association with Caucasian, middle-class, Western women who have been concerned primarily with gender analysis (*vis-à-vis* race and class), that of “feminist theologies”—even if not ideal—attempts to push past the notion of one, singular form of feminism toward the various lenses of analysis, identity, and experience that are represented in the discipline. In this essay, the plural indicates this multitude of diversity which Pentecostal women bring to the task.

The answer to the question, to what extent feminist theology has been embraced by Pentecostals, largely depends on how one defines “feminist theology.” Because some persons shy away from explicitly describing their work as such for various reasons—even though their scholarship is clearly aligned with feminists’ general conviction—looking for this self-designated label is not the best way to demarcate the field. To date, the conversation within Pentecostal scholarship is frequently framed in terms of “women and ministry” rather than “Pentecostalism and feminism.” For example, there are three recent edited volumes on women and Pentecostalism (Alexander and Yong 2009; Clifton and Grey 2009; English de Alminana and Olena 2017) that are comprised of multiple essays identifiable with Pentecostal feminist theologies, yet only two chapters in these three books bear the label “feminist.” More helpful is Anne Carr’s (1988) nuanced definition of a threefold task of feminist theology to delineate the initial contours of Pentecostal feminist theologies in this essay. Although her framework is dated, it provides a net wide enough to retrieve the diverse instantiations of Pentecostal feminist theologies and to understand the various objectives they embody even if they are not explicitly employing the term “feminist.”

According to Carr (1988), the first task of feminist theology is to engage in a *critique* of the past. The objects of this critique are those patriarchal attitudes found in the biblical texts and church traditions that denigrate women. The second task is to *recover* the lost history of women in the larger Christian tradition. Women who have exercised significant leadership within Christianity are brought to the fore to serve as encouragement and role models for persons today. The third task of feminist theology is to *revision* Christian categories in ways that give serious attention to the equality and experience of women. Theological loci are reformulated so that implicit biases of men’s perspectives and experiences that have been reified in Christian doctrine are exposed, and the insights of women’s experiences are allowed to shape the central themes of the Christian tradition (7–9). Characteristic of feminist theology is that this label is inclusive of a number of disciplines that are traditionally viewed separately (e.g. biblical, historical, and theological). Therefore, though this essay is primarily concerned with revisioning Pentecostal theology,

it would be shortsighted not to include briefly the ways in which Pentecostal scholars have engaged Scripture and history, all of which constitute the realm of Pentecostal feminist theologies.

Criticism and retrieval of the past: biblical and historical contributions

While the field of Pentecostal hermeneutics has experienced an explosion of growth (see Chapters 12 and 13), the intersection of Pentecostal hermeneutics and feminist hermeneutics has only just begun. The problem that feminists find with the biblical texts is that women are largely invisible and portrayed as inferior, as well as the fact that sexism has tainted the process of transmission and interpretation of these texts (Slee 2003, 15–18). In order not to succumb to the patriarchal and androcentric nature of the biblical texts or their interpreters, it becomes necessary to develop ways of reading scripture that are liberating and empowering for women. This is all the more essential within a tradition in which the biblical texts are given a central and authoritative role within the ecclesial community. A successful Pentecostal feminist approach, therefore, must find a way to balance the tradition's commitment to the biblical texts alongside the feminist's hermeneutic of suspicion. Currently, there are two clusters of Pentecostal feminist hermeneutics emerging that seek to engage in such a task, though their contexts are vastly different.

The first constellation of hermeneutics originates in Africa where scholars attempt to address the ways in which the biblical texts have been used to enforce African patriarchal attitudes and thus justify the oppression and abuse of Pentecostal women in these communities. The hermeneutical approaches of Madipoane Masenya (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2009), Sarojini Nadar (2003, 2004, 2009), and Rosinah Mmannana Gabaitse (2012, 2015) have several features in common. First, they are all aware of the centrality of the biblical texts in African Pentecostal faith communities and seek to respect this position rather than to undermine it. Second, as women of color, they are as attentive to systems of racism and classism inherent in the texts and interpretations of the texts as they are of sexism, and seek to challenge these false ideologies when found (see Chapter 39). Third, they are concerned with the employment and effects of their hermeneutical methods for women in local African Pentecostal faith communities, such that what they seek to produce is not just a theoretical but an activist hermeneutic. The differences among the three women emerge in their various social contexts from which and to which they read the texts—South Africa for Masenya, the Indian community in South Africa for Nadar, and Botswana for Gabaitse. In addition, though there are similarities in their methodologies, each woman labels her particular hermeneutical approach differently—Masenya calls hers a “*bosadi* (womanhood)” hermeneutic, Nadar opts for “womanist,” and Gabaitse refers to hers as an “African Pentecostal feminist” hermeneutic.

The second constellation of Pentecostal feminist hermeneutics originated in North America. In this context, Cheryl Bridges Johns (1993) was one of the first Pentecostal scholars who pursued a feminist theology. In a more recent work (2014), she acknowledges the benefits of the typical feminist hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance in moving beyond a patriarchal reading of biblical texts, but also notes that this trajectory is incomplete and still treats the text as an object. Johns, thus, proposes a “Spirit-filled feminist” approach that recognizes the Bible as a living subject whose existence is grounded in the economic life of God. The texts, by virtue of the Spirit's work through them, serve as a sanctified vessel and become an avenue for sacred space wherein God's Spirit comes to dwell. Consequently, Johns's approach calls for the reader to move through the hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance, and to

continue on through the hermeneutics of grieving, brooding, and transforming. Convinced by the merits of this method, Abigail Greves (2016) deploys Johns's Spirit-filled feminist hermeneutic in a treatment of Judges 11. Engaging in a different approach, Pamela Holmes (2010) calls for and attempts an integration of feminist insights within Pentecostal hermeneutics. Her hermeneutic utilizes some of the principles from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Phyllis Trible as she proposes a "quadrilectical model" of interpretation—community, Bible, experience, and Spirit. This model involves the *community* having its consciousness raised with respect to domineering interpretations of the Bible, the *biblical texts* acting as a meta-narrative that promotes abundant life for all, the *experience* of the Pentecostal community attempting to live out the implications of its Christian commitment, and the *Spirit* bringing aspects of the biblical texts to life and empowering the living out of it.

Some of the same problems that plague the biblical texts with respect to women are also characteristic of the historical accounts of Christianity. That is, despite the significance women have played in the growth and maintenance of the faith, too frequently their contributions have been marginalized or overlooked. This is no less true of women in the history of Pentecostalism than it is of women in the history of Christianity at large. In order to right this wrong, Pentecostal feminist theologies are making significant contributions to filling in the gaps of recognizing women's roles within the tradition by correcting historical, biblical, and theological perspectives (Alexander and Yong 2009), recovering the lost history of the various women who played a vital role in the Azusa Street revival bringing it to fruition and ensuring its lasting impact (Alexander 2005), identifying female Pentecostal ministers who not only pastored churches but began their own denominations with international constituencies (Alexander 2008), or showing how women have utilized the role of "motherhood" in order to ascertain a measure of spiritual and temporal power within its patriarchal system (Butler 2007). In addition, some Pentecostal feminist scholars have begun to draw a distinction between "women's history" and "gender history," preferring the latter for their own historiographical works (Payne 2015; Ambrose 2017). The significance between the two is that whereas with women's history the main objective is to add women back into the narrative accounts of Pentecostalism, with gender history the mission of "recovery" is further nuanced. Gender history is concerned with the relationships of power between Pentecostal men and women in ministry, how women were able to succeed in roles deemed "inappropriate" for them, and why these same women were sometimes unable or unwilling to transcend traditional gendered functions (Ambrose and Payne 2014).

Revising doctrine: theological contributions

Turning to what Carr (1988) identifies as the third task of feminist theology, Pentecostal feminist theologies have begun to make contributions to the revising of doctrine, though only recently. This developmental delay is reflective of the trajectory of Pentecostal scholarship on the whole, as the fields of biblical and historical scholarship burgeoned before the theological. It should come as no surprise that the current focus of doctrinal work among Pentecostal feminist theologians is on pneumatology (see Chapter 19). Ironically, however, this approach stands in contradistinction to the rest of feminist systematic theology, where reflections on the Spirit are few and far between, with the exception of feminist spirituality (Stephenson 2020). Thus, Pentecostal feminist theologians writing in this area are breaking ground not just among Pentecostals but among feminists in general.

As early as 1993, Cheryl Bridges Johns was connecting pneumatology with women's liberation from oppression. Johns (155–56) claimed that the Spirit is the actualizer of

the liberating presence of God—as attested to in the Bible and in the early Pentecostal communities—and that the Spirit “provides the necessary context for the conscientization of women as to their eschatological-ontological vocation as subjects of history.” While the fall of humankind brought male domination, the redemptive mission of Christ sets women free from this subjugation (see Chapter 20). But, because the kingdom of God is not yet fully manifest, it is only by the power of the Spirit that one can live from the perspective of God’s future now. Consequently, Johns claims that only a charismatic community of the Spirit can provide a place where women can be liberated fully, and Pentecostal communities can constitute such a place. In a later essay, however, Johns (2009) acknowledges that if Pentecostal women are ever fully to experience liberation, pneumatology needs to be coupled with theological anthropology. Subsequently, she proposes reconstructing personhood from the perspective of a trinitarian understanding of the *imago Dei*, which would ground women’s ontological identity in the triune life (see Chapter 17). Johns notes that in reflecting on the *imago Dei* in light of the Trinity, the image of God is defined by relationality. Since a traditional characteristic of women is that they define themselves in relation to others, a trinitarian relational understanding of God affirms that women’s own constitution as such is truly an image of God. Moreover, within the Trinity, each one of the divine persons exists in co-inherence and unity with the other two without dissolving the other’s distinctiveness as persons (see Chapter 17). Whereas women have tended to suspend their personhood for the sake of relationships, the trinitarian *imago Dei* critiques this loss of personhood and suggests the importance of women developing and retaining their own identity.

Andrea Hollingsworth (2007) echoes Johns’s connection between the Spirit and liberation but takes a different approach. Hollingsworth brings Pentecostal women’s spirituality—especially as experienced in Latin America—into dialogue with feminist theology and proposes “divine voice” as a metaphor for the Spirit. Here, Hollingsworth’s pneumatology resonates with feminists’ affirmation of body and matter. Positing the Spirit as divine voice means that this voice requires lungs, vocal chords, and lips in order to be heard. It cannot exist as an immaterial entity but requires embodiment. And, as Pentecostal spirituality attests, this embodiment takes form among women as the divine voice enables them to find their own voices. Moreover, conceiving of the Spirit as divine voice affirms feminists’ values of relationality and diversity. With respect to the former, in order for one to speak, others must give ear. The vocal exchange is dependent upon those speaking *and* those listening. In this sense, the divine voice is not identified with one or the other interlocutor, but is mediated in and through the interlocutory process itself. With respect to the latter, the Spirit as divine voice also affirms diversity, as the sound of the Spirit does not just emerge from one mouth or language, but from many. The Spirit’s voice is polyvocal. Building upon Hollingsworth’s work, Janice Rees (2013) notes that while it is the work of the Spirit that enables the emergence of women’s subjectivity (i.e. her own voice), paradoxically it is also the work of the Spirit that leads women into a transgression of subjectivity as the Spirit incorporates us into the divine life.

In my own work, I have opted for utilizing pneumatology as a methodological lens through which to view other theological loci rather than to focus on pneumatology as the subject of study. While this approach still centers on the Spirit—and even connects it to liberation themes—it does so in a way that incorporates other doctrines beyond pneumatology. With this methodology I align myself with other Pentecostals who opt for a third article theology (see Chapters 14 and 19), but specifically bring this lens to bear on feminist concerns. Besides this approach opening up new ways to conceive of familiar topics, it also provides a further way for feminists at large to deconstruct a patriarchal framework within Christian theology.

That is, while feminists have long recognized the problematic nature of the subordination of the Spirit to the Father and Son as a theological *topic*—especially when the Spirit is referred to as a “she”—they have not yet acknowledged the problematic nature of the subordination of the Spirit to the Father and Son as a methodological *approach* (Stephenson 2020). Consequently, feminists may unwittingly be perpetuating a patriarchal framework—even as they attempt to undermine it—when they continue to subscribe to the patriarchal agenda of methodological preference for Father and Son in their own theologies. In order for feminists to remove the vestiges of patriarchy completely from pneumatology, they must not only change the subject of the conversation, but the framework as well. Moreover, if, as some have suggested, the neglect of the Spirit and the marginalization of women have a symbolic affinity that goes hand in hand, then what better way to heighten and reaffirm the Spirit’s subjectivity—and, in turn, women’s subjectivity—than to privilege the Spirit as the hermeneutical lens through which to read all other doctrines.

Two theological loci that I have also reworked from a feminist-pneumatological approach are theological anthropology (Stephenson 2012, 89–135, 2013) and ecclesiology (Stephenson 2012, 139–90). With respect to theological anthropology, one way feminists deal with ontology is to affirm women’s equal being and worth through the theological symbols of the *imago Dei* and *imago Christi*. However, this approach overlooks pneumatology as it is largely absent in terms of both its presence in the two given theological symbols—*imago Dei* and *imago Christi*—and its presence as a third symbol in its own right—*imago Spiritus*. Consequently, I propose a reading of the two traditional theological symbols through a pneumatological lens, as well as a pneumatological approach wherein the Spirit comprises its own theological symbol, *imago Spiritus*, to complement the first two.

Concerning the *imago Dei*, Genesis 1:26–27 serves as the foundational text in which the narrative declares both male and female are made in the image of God. In order to understand how the Spirit helps to constitute the *imago Dei*, one must first look at Genesis 1:2. Here, even at the beginning of creation, the *ruach Elohim* is hovering over the face of the deep like a mother bird hovering over her egg. Thus, presupposed in the act of creation is not just the word of God that brings forth life but the Spirit that readies the chaos for the word. The word is spoken in the Spirit, similar to the way in which breath brings forth words. Creation begins with the Spirit and, accordingly, the *imago Dei* begins with the Spirit.

Concerning the *imago Christi*, Galatians 3:26–28 serves as the foundational text in which the baptized believers become Christomorphic, and Christ’s identity replaces former divisions and inequalities. This transformation is not to suggest that one exists in sexual similarity to Jesus, but that one lives a life that is consistent with Jesus’ compassionate and liberating life in the world. In order to understand how the Spirit helps to constitute the *imago Christi*, one must recognize that this Christomorphic identity is not possible without the presence of the Spirit. That is, throughout the New Testament, the Spirit plays an integral role in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. From beginning to end, Christ’s mission is integrally intertwined with the Spirit’s. Therefore, if the Spirit is essential to the life of Christ, the Spirit is also essential to forming persons into the *imago Christi*. It is only possible to image Christ through the power and presence of the Spirit.

Concerning the *imago Spiritus*, Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:4–5, 2:1–41 serve as foundational texts in which Spirit baptism functions analogously to the way water baptism functions in Galatians. First, both symbols utilize the metaphorical imagery of “putting on” (Greek, *enduō*). In Galatians (3:27), it is a putting on of Christ, in Luke-Acts it is a putting on of the Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8). Second, both symbols herald and effect the emergence of the new creation. In Galatians, this arrival is understood by means of an Adam Christology, and

in Luke-Acts, this is understood by means of the restoration of Israel. Third, both symbols necessitate certain ethical imperatives that require that this new identity be lived out within the community. Former identities are rendered meaningless, and a new form of praxis is expected (Gal. 3:28; Acts 8:4–39, 10, 11). As a result, Luke-Acts offers this third symbol of *imago Spiritus*, which privileges the Spirit in its anthropological proposals and can thus serve as a further way of asserting women's equal being and worth that stands alongside that of the *imago Dei* and the *imago Christi*.

With respect to ecclesiology, feminists have critiqued the hierarchical forms of the church and proposed new ways that challenge the patriarchal structures. More specifically, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Letty Russell have proposed that we envision the church as a discipleship of equals, an exodus community of liberation from patriarchy, and a household of freedom, respectively. Each ecclesial metaphor posits the church as a place where the vestiges of patriarchy have been excised. However, within these ecclesial models, pneumatology plays a secondary role to the more predominant theme of Christology. I reweave these feminist ecclesiologies so that pneumatology comes to the fore.

Concerning Schüssler Fiorenza's (1984, 1994) metaphor of the church as a discipleship of equals, she offers a renewed vision for the church that it is characterized by the practice of radical democracy. Her claims are grounded in her understanding of the identity and praxis of the Jesus movement and the early Christian missionary movement. Water baptism is the rite of initiation; new creation centers on the believer being "in Christ" (Gal. 3:26–28), and the members of the community are disciples of Christ. In order to complement this ecclesial model with a pneumatological dimension, one need only give more attention to the narratives of Luke-Acts in order to see that Spirit baptism becomes the rite of initiation; new creation centers on the believer being "in the Spirit" (Acts 2:17–21), and the members are disciples of the Spirit inasmuch as they are of Christ. The Christological way of life presented in the Gospels is continued and fulfilled in the book of Acts in a pneumatological way: Christ has ascended and the Spirit has descended.

Concerning Ruether's (1985) metaphor of the church as an exodus community of liberation from patriarchy, she claims the Exodus event as the foundational story of the biblical religion and understands it to provide a primary identity for the people of God. The Exodus event does not sacralize the social status quo, but reveals a God who sides with those who have been oppressed and liberates them. Moreover, it is continually reenacted when Israel and the church resist the bondages of oppression—including that of sexism and patriarchy—and journey toward liberation. In order to make this motif more pneumatological, it becomes necessary to connect the Exodus event with that of the *new exodus* that emerges in Isaiah 40–55 and is then employed in Luke-Acts (Stephenson 2012, 99–114). Subsequently, this shift recognizes the significant pneumatological component that arises explicitly in the latter wherein the Spirit is essential to the Isaianic new exodus community. It is unfathomable to posit the reality of this community without recognizing that it is the Spirit who constitutes it. Characterizing the church as a *new exodus* community signifies that the Spirit is the means by which the community journeys from oppression to liberation.

Russell (1987, 1993) claims that God desires a world that is free from internal and external oppression. She calls this world a "household of freedom" and maintains that the church should be a sign of this type of household (*vis-à-vis* a patriarchal household of bondage). As such, the church must become a "church in the round," thereby employing a leadership and ministry that is characterized by its use of power for the empowering of others toward self-actualization and authority for the authorizing of others as partners. However, whereas Russell points to the Exodus and to Jesus Christ as the paradigm shattering events

that demonstrate what God desires this household of freedom to look like, she fails to note how the outpouring of the Spirit is crucial for realization of this household in that it is the Spirit that enables the perpetuation of the new exodus community that fulfills the mission of Christ. Central to Pentecostal theology, Pentecost is the third paradigm shattering event that both calls and enables the church to be a household of freedom. Developing this paradigm further constitutes the future task of Pentecostal theology.

Conclusion

For all that Pentecostal feminist theologies have accomplished, they have only begun to scratch the surface and a lot more work is to be done. At minimum, the future of Pentecostal theology must include the following two areas of growth. First, the experiences of women represented in Pentecostal feminist theologies, mostly constructed by Caucasian, North American scholars, remains very narrow. Pentecostal feminist theologies do not even come close to reflecting the global and diverse scale that feminist theologies at large can boast. And given the worldwide scope of Pentecostalism today, especially as it has developed in the majority world, in order to claim that feminist theologies accurately represent the vast instantiations of Pentecostalism, there must be more women contributing to the conversation. If women's experience plays a crucial role in the construction of feminist theology, then having Pentecostal feminist theologies constructed by a limited, homogenous group of people is problematic (Pierce 2013). Those in privileged positions must use their power and resources to help other Pentecostal women find their voice, even as we are still trying to find our own. And, while we are in the process of doing that, Pentecostal feminist scholars would do well to heed Holmes's warning (2013) against universalizing Pentecostal women's experience and employing "strategic essentialism" when writing.

Finally, the breadth of topics concerning Pentecostal feminist theologies is still very narrow. For too long, female scholars have been preoccupied with the issue of women in ministry in Pentecostalism, and these concerns have largely dominated the conversation and set the theological parameters. While it is still a very important topic that should not be abandoned, it is not the only concern. It is time for Pentecostal feminist scholars to turn their attention elsewhere and to consider the ways in which patriarchy has shaped other doctrinal convictions that comprise the Pentecostal tradition and its theology. What might Pentecostal feminist theologies contribute to many of the topics covered in this volume? What does a feminist lens contribute to Pentecostal distinctives like Spirit baptism, the full gospel motif, or sanctification, let alone the traditional doctrines? It is time for Pentecostals to take up the other challenges that feminist theologies have raised with respect to these issues and to engage in the critical and constructive work necessary to broaden the conversations that shape Pentecostal theology.

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