

# Structural Violence against Women in the Pentecostal Movement: Proposals for a South African Deconstruction Strategy

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## Abstract

The phenomenon of discrimination against women within Pentecostal churches in terms of ministry and leadership is investigated to propose a strategy for deconstructing such structural violence. The violence is described in terms of a case study, the history of a prominent South African Pentecostal denomination (Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa) that initially recognised the involvement of women in all forms of ministry; subsequently in the 1940s refusing their ministry as preachers and pastors, and eventually at the end of the 1970s offering them the same ministerial privileges as for males. Their recognition is, however, characterised by a practical non-application of a church order that in effect represents the commitment of violence against women. It is argued that the change in perspectives of women's ministry and leadership is hermeneutical in nature. To deconstruct it would need revisiting Pentecostalism's original hermeneutic as well as restoring its restorationist urge of egalitarianism and inclusiveness.

**Keywords:** women in ministry; structural discrimination; pacifism; nonpacifism; Pentecostal

## Introduction

The early Pentecostal movement did not have any professional pastorate with professional and paid ministers. People were evaluated to be qualified to minister when the Holy Spirit gifted them for ministry within the church, whether to teach or preach, pray for the sick or exorcise demons from the possessed, or encourage the sick and bereaved (Burger and Nel 2008, 59–60). In many cases, Pentecostal denominations then awarded certificates to those people whose ministry proved to be effective as an



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evangelist or missionary (Burger 1987, 181). Pentecostals allowed and encouraged anyone to participate in the worship and evangelistic services. So-called lay people preached or prayed, prophesied or interpreted the speaking in tongues, or led interested people to the Lord (Jacobsen 2003, 20). They did not plan or order their worship services and did not frown on anyone who interrupted the service when they felt led by the Spirit, to bring a “message from the Lord” (whether in the form of prophecy or interpretation of tongues) or present a testimony, sing a song, or pray for someone that the Spirit indicated had a specific need. Access to God was not controlled by a few professionals (Archer 1996, 67).

Many of the earliest Pentecostal converts were poor and illiterate blue-collar workers who did not engage in complicated philosophical and theological debates about the nature of Scriptures and ways and means to interpret it (Spittler 1985, 75). They perceived that they had heard the voice of the Spirit in a highly subjectivist sense and they repeated what they believed God wanted his people to hear. And God honoured their faith and encountered people through the words and actions of believers who participated in the service.

When these early Pentecostals read the Bible they also believed implicitly that God wanted to repeat in their times what he had done in biblical days. They expected similar revelations and miracles to happen to them. They perceived that the experiences of people related in the Bible were not only historical descriptions but an invitation to believers to appropriate them for themselves. And when they witnessed about their encounters with God they also applied language that they learnt from the Bible to describe their experiences (Asamoah Gyadu 2005, 237).

The leadership that developed in local assemblies was also viewed as decided by the Spirit who gifted whoever he wanted. The part the assembly and church played was only to recognise those gifted for leadership and elect them to positions of leadership (Robeck 1988, 35). In an ideal world, this would have meant that the leadership was a gift of the Spirit but in real Pentecostal politics it led to leadership struggles and schisms related to power struggles.

In early Pentecostalism, race and gender did not count in terms of ministry because the deciding factor was the gifts of the Spirit. Women featured strongly in the democratic worship service and they were also recognised as evangelists or preachers and efficient in praying for the sick or possessed. They not only participated in services but also in leadership and ministry. What was important was not age, gender or race but the anointing of the Spirit that was perceived in the results of the person’s ministry (Blumhofer 1985, 137). Barfoot and Sheppard (1980, 4) write that three factors in those early days were responsible for the equality of sexes in Pentecostal ministry: the importance of a “calling”; the confirmation of the call through the recognition of the ministry gifting by the community of faith; and the eschatological belief that they were

experiencing the “latter rain” in which sons and daughters alike would prophesy (as Menzies and Menzies 2000, 244 also describe).

The early Pentecostals reacted to what they perceived as the dead formalism and creedalism of the historical churches and developed an anti-church sentiment (McClung 2012, 4) that resulted in a dim view of all professional church leaders. Pentecostals, in their restorationist urge, organised themselves along what they perceived to be the New Testament concept of voluntary ministry, where the whole body of Christ is involved and engifted by the Spirit to minister. No titles were used and believers simply called each other “brother” and “sister.” And no worker received any remuneration (Burger 1987, 181); all were in part-time ministry. Women were found in all the categories of participants in the ministry of the early Pentecostal movement.

This is also the case in terms of the early African people who joined the Pentecostal movement in South Africa. In general, the African world view can be viewed as patriarchal with men exercising more power than women, although women also served in the important function as witch doctors and *sangomas* (Kanyoro 2002, 13). The African culture, however, often favours men in the leadership and women still tend to be dominated by male authority; most of the traditional practices within the African culture are agents of female oppression (Choabi 2015, 15). However, in the early Pentecostal churches women were found in important and essential ministries as a supplement to male leadership, and this is still the case today.

Many female preachers were successful in the early days (Lee and Gohr 2018). The only criterion for being a successful preacher was that people got saved and healed, and the same happened in the ministry of women preachers as well (Robeck 2006, 126). Pentecostals perceived from their practice that the Spirit did not distinguish between the genders in his empowerment for ministry in their churches (Marsden 1982, 83).

The situation of early women in ministry and leadership is illustrated by a case study from the Apostolic Faith Mission, South Africa’s largest classical Pentecostal denomination with 1.4 million members, as described next.

### **Women Leaders: A Case Study**

The Stuart family emigrated in 1897 from England to South Africa, on medical advice that Eva Stuart’s rheumatic condition would improve with the warmer South African climate (Nel 1996, 243–257; Stuart 1932, 1). Mr Stuart was appointed as principal of Krugersdorp Town School. Mrs Stuart’s medical condition did not improve and she was bedridden by 1904, when she heard of the healing ministry of an American missionary of the Zion Christian Church, Daniel Bryant. She invited him to her home where a few lady friends also attended the service held by Bryant. After a short while Eva Stuart (1932, 2) testified to the fact that she was healed after Bryant’s prayer. Out of her experience Eva established a small assembly at her home in Krugersdorp. She acted as convenor and leader of the services where Bryant probably again visited and preached.

Late in 1907 and 1908 Eva suffered new attacks of the rheumatism she had been healed of three years earlier. By this time, Bryant after four years' service in South Africa had been summoned by Dowie to return to America. He had established an assembly in Doornfontein (De Wet 1989, 34). In the meantime a new missionary team arrived, consisting of John G. Lake and Thomas Hezmalhalch. Although both of them had been elders in Dowie's Zionist Church, they left after rumours surfaced of financial mismanagement by Dowie (Lindsay 1986, 243). Both had attended the services held by William J. Seymour at Azusa Street in Los Angeles, where they were baptised in the Spirit with accompanying speaking in tongues (Robeck 1988, 31–36). The Azusa Street Revival was called the Apostolic Faith Gospel Mission and Seymour's periodical was also called *The Apostolic Faith* (Apostolic Faith Magazine 2012, 23–24), a name that Lake would eventually use to designate his mission.

Lake and Hezmalhalch were not sent by the Azusa Street assembly or any other organisation. They became convinced of their calling to bring the Pentecostal message to Africa's peoples, especially the blacks. They arrived in Johannesburg on 25 May 1908 and hired a hall in Doornfontein for their missionary activities (Burger and Nel 2008, 97). Several healings took place and when the hall became overcrowded, some members of the local Zionist assembly invited Lake and Hezmalhalch to minister in their church building in Bree Street, Johannesburg. Eva Stuart heard about these developments and she invited the missionaries to her home and Zionist assembly for a service. Eva was still in bed due to her illness but she heard after the delivery of the sermon how many were baptised in the Spirit (Stuart 1908, 2).

She herself was baptised with the Spirit a few days after this service, while still ill in bed. Shortly after this experience, Lake visited again and prayed for her. She was healed immediately from her rheumatism and had no further recurrence of the disease. By the end of the year she reported that 26 people in Krugersdorp had received the baptism of the Spirit and as many as 50 people attended the services. Early in 1909, shortly after the first Executive Council<sup>1</sup> was elected (on 27 May), the Krugersdorp Zionist assembly under leadership of Eva Stuart applied to become a member of the newly formed "Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa" (AFM of SA), along with the Benoni Zionist assembly (Burger and Nel 2008, 78–9).

Eva ministered to many sick people with success and people came from far to be ministered to by her (Nel 1990, 5–6). On 5 June 1916, she was ordained as an evangelist when the AFM had started organising its ministry, and she received the right to officially lead the assembly and administer the sacraments. She was regularly invited to address the annual conferences of the church and her theme was always concerned with divine healing (Purdy 2015, 33).

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1 All member churches of the AFM attended a yearly Workers' Council where the church managed its business. The Workers' Council elected an Executive Council as an interim management board.

In 1921 her husband retired and the family left for Umtentweni on the Natal South Coast. Before long Eva was again ordained as an evangelist by the Executive Council and she established an assembly in Natal. When she died on 1 January 1944, the AFM's monthly magazine wrote in a tribute that the work of the Lord had lost a faithful worker in her. She was remembered for believing in and practising divine healing, with many receiving healing through her ministry (Le Roux 1944, 12).

Eva Stuart was one of the outstanding women ministers in the early AFM. She lived and worked in an era when the white (as well as black) South African society was male-dominated. Eighty years later, when I researched this history, that was still the case, as illustrated by the following anecdote. In 1990, I persuaded the church board of the historic Krugersdorp assembly where I became the pastor in 1988 of the importance to publish a history of the assembly and when I reported back at the next meeting of the board that a woman was its first minister from 1904 to 1927, a respected member of the board in all earnestness suggested that I repress that part of the history for the sake of "orderliness!"

## **Changes in the South African View of Women's Ministry**

Since the 1940s, it has become more and more important for some Pentecostal churches, including the (white) AFM,<sup>2</sup> to be accepted by other established churches for various reasons. It had become clear to Pentecostals that Christ's second coming was not as imminent as expected (Holmes 2013, 265) and the eschatological urgency of the early Pentecostal movement was lost in its second and third generation; a phenomenon shared by other revival movements as well (Anderson 2013, 114). Another factor was a positive change in the socio-economic composition of many AFM members, accompanied by a levelling out of spiritual standards. Early members came from the lower classes but now that (mostly white) members were sharing in the prosperity of the South African economy, their values as well as their outlook on life and social involvement had changed and they were academically better qualified. In the post-war period there was a concerted effort to move away from the image of Pentecostals as poor and simple people (Burger and Nel 2008, 143). It became imperative for many AFM members to exchange their status as members of a sect. The largest Afrikaans church, the Dutch Reformed Church, investigated the possibility of recognising the AFM as a church in its own right, but in its 1945 report proposed that it would not be possible because AFM pastors were not properly trained and ordained and the church functioned without any creeds (Burger and Nel 2008, 135). The early AFM had been registered as an unlimited company; it now became important to be re-registered, as a church.

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2 Although the church was established as a multiracial denomination it did not take long after Lake left for America in February 1913 before the church developed along the lines of segregation that characterised the South African society (and still characterises it), with black assemblies established in black townships and white assemblies in white neighbourhoods (Burger and Nel 2008, 49).

In order to earn acceptance as a church, the AFM associated with evangelicals, and especially the fundamentalist part (Bebbington 1993, 183). Their view of Scripture did not allow women to partake in ordained ministry (1 Cor 14:34; 1 Tim 2:9–10; 5:14; 1 Pet 3:5) (Robeck 2006, 25).

In order to be acceptable, the AFM changed the order of its worship services, church architecture (Anderson 1979, 31) and views on involvement in military service and ecclesiastical offices, accommodating the established churches' ideas of what the marks of a real church were. In this way it earned the right to broadcast on state radio from 1960 and to get their pastors appointed as marriage officials. In the AFM, the pastorate was formalised and limited to males (Langerman 1983, 92).<sup>3</sup>

Their alliance with the evangelicals cost Pentecostals the most in terms of their acceptance of a new hermeneutical stance, namely a fundamentalist-dispensational hermeneutic characterised by literalism and inerrancy (Kärkkäinen 1998, 80) and dispensationalism (Hunt 2012, 63). Early Pentecostals had read the Bible prayerfully, expecting to hear the word of God for their situation and to experience themselves what biblical witnesses described of their encounters with God. Their new fundamentalist hermeneutic forced Pentecostals to view the Bible as the ultimate authority and final word that determines their teaching (Falwell 1986, 53).

Fundamentalists viewed the Bible as verbally inspired, literal, inerrant and authoritative with the supposition that the Bible, at least as far as the (non-existent) autographs were concerned, contains no contradictions (Kaiser and Silva 1994, 215). Reading the Bible in a fundamentalist way leaves little room for its historical situatedness and context-oriented meaning. Then biblical prescriptions about women in ministry are clear; Paul enjoins that as in all the churches of the saints, women should keep silent in churches (1 Cor 14:33–35, 38).

Early Pentecostals' experiential spirituality determined that their reading of the Bible should be less rational and literal, and that they leave room for the Spirit to interpret Scriptures to them in a personal and involved way. Their Bible reading practices required the immediacy of God. While they so held to a high view of Scriptures, to them the "spirit (Spirit) of the law" was more important (Cargal 1993, 163). They listened for the voice of the Spirit in their hearts (or minds) about the Scripture; at times it did not even coincide with the results provided by sound exegetical study of the text (Keener 2016, 32).

Since the 1970s, a new hermeneutic was propagated by some Pentecostals who qualified in graduate studies at universities (Lewis 2003, 10). Their training permitted them to rethink Pentecostal practice and teaching and resulted in groping back to significant elements of early Pentecostal hermeneutic. Today many Pentecostals share the new

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3. Decisions made by the white AFM were enforced in the other three racial churches of the AFM, with white superintendents serving as their moderators until the 1970s.

hermeneutic, although it might be that a majority of leaders and members are still aligned with fundamentalist thinking.

The new Pentecostal hermeneutic consensus starts with experientialist practices that characterise the Pentecostal movement (Cox 1995, 299–321), and combines with an original egalitarian impulse and inclusive ethos in contrast to the fundamentalist approach that is primarily rationalist and non-experiential, hierarchical and exclusive (Holmes 2013, 269).

The new hermeneutic views the Bible as a space where God encountered people, and that still happens in present-day encounters with and revelations of God. Extra-biblical revelations exist next to their listening to the message of the Bible that should in their opinion always be compared with the biblical witness to ascertain that they come from God's Spirit. The Bible contains the narratives of God's great deeds, in which God becomes recognisable to us, but its purpose is to lead to an encounter with God in the same terms (Ellington 1996, 17); leading to Spirit-experiences of extra-biblical revelations. Pentecostals are not merely interested in the original intention of the author or the meaning for the first listeners/readers, but they expect to experience the same transformation in an encounter with the Word of God. Scripture becomes a "Spirit-Word" when read with Spirit-centred hermeneutics (see Keener 2016), with a dynamic interaction between written text and the Holy Spirit (Kärkkäinen 1998, 82). While fundamentalists find in the Bible as mythic archetype the rejection of women in ministry, Pentecostals read the Bible as historical prototype, as a "site of contradiction and conflict," as happened when the AFM in 1971 reevaluated the theological basis of women in ministry, eventually leading to the acknowledgement of their calling and ministry; and in 1977 the formulation of a church order that allowed women with recognised ministries characterised by the anointing of the Spirit to be recommended and called in the same manner as prescribed for male pastors. In 1980, the first women were allowed into full-time ministry, although only in 1998 were they allowed to become presiding pastors of larger assemblies (Burger and Nel 2008, 354–355).

## **The Practice Today**

Today there are more than 200 women recognised by the AFM as ordained pastors in a church with 1 498 pastors in total ("Pastoral Letter: Second Quarter 2018." <http://afm-ags.org/category/publications/>; accessed 2018-07-07). However, in practice there are only 38 women serving in assemblies, and in only exceptional cases do women serve as presiding pastors. This state of affairs underlines that the practice of the non-acceptance of women in leadership roles for historical, cultural and hermeneutical reasons is perpetuated.

While Africa's world view supports patriarchy and paternalism, early Pentecostalism ignored conventions and recognised the Spirit's endowment of women with gifts of the Spirit. As reasoned above, a change in hermeneutical perspective led to the demise of its inclusive ethos that should now be regained. Jewett (1980, 14) asks very rightly: "If

women ... are no less capable than men of piety, zeal, learning and whatever else seems necessary for the [ministry], then why ... should the church not draw on the vast reserves which could pour into the priesthood if women were here, as in so many professions, put on the same footing with men?"

The last part of the article contains a strategy for deconstructing the structural violence against women pastors by excluding them in practice from the privileges their male counterparts enjoy, and reconstructing a policy that is friendly to the egalitarian urge of the early Pentecostal movement.

## **Pentecostal Hermeneutical Strategy**

Kenneth Archer's (2009, 213) proposal that a Pentecostal hermeneutical strategy consists of three elements to negotiate meaning—Scripture, Spirit and community—is useful for the discussion. The interrelationship between these elements is demonstrated when, in Acts 15, they play a determinative role in the early church's interpretive approach about the need for Gentile Christians to maintain the *Torah* (Thomas 1994, 43). The interpretive process moves from the believing community, who with the illumination of the Spirit reads the biblical text, reversing other exegetical processes that move from the text to the context. If the early church moved from Scripture to the contemporary situation, they probably would have made it compulsory for Gentile Christians to keep the *Torah*. There are enough texts in the Hebrew Bible that emphasise the absolute claim of obedience to the prescriptions of the Sinai covenant. However, in their deliberations the early community relied on the illumination of the Spirit to enable them to understand what they perceived to be God's will. It can be contended that the Spirit led the early church to act in a way that was inconsistent with the biblical text (Hebrew Bible) (Nel 2016, 141–59).

This becomes relevant for the contemporary church when it needs to decide about its ethical actions. A Pentecostal hermeneutical strategy requires Spirit-filled believers who understand the contemporary significance of the text, as a context-related word from the Lord. Any person can derive meaning from the Bible as a literary production, but to understand the will of God for a specific situation requires a direct encounter with the Spirit who initially inspired the Bible, to interpret and apply it to the new situation (Stronstad 1990, 12). That is why it is possible for Pentecostals who take the authority of the Bible seriously, according to Cox (1995, 131), to open a space for women to minister in contrast to most other denominations, because they believe what the Bible says is one thing, but when God speaks to one directly, that supersedes everything else. The Bible must first become an incarnated word (Becker 2004, 43) before it becomes the word of God that transforms believers' lives. While the original Spirit-inspired author should be distinguished from the current Spirit-illuminated interpreter who has less binding appropriation, illuminated meanings of biblical texts alone carry divine sanction and authority (Arrington 1994, 180–2). In the encounter between reader and text, the Spirit bridges the gap between past and present that might even lead to multiple meanings of biblical texts applied to different contexts (Nel 2019, 154). This is



necessary because contemporary believers experience situations that the original author did not experience. Some cultural factors such as patriarchy and androcentrism, that lead in the African church to suppression of women in ministry, may be reinforced by the biblical world view that favours the same sentiment (and may have determined Paul's injunctions about the submissiveness of the wife to her husband in line with Jewish interpretation of Genesis 1, 3, 6). What is needed is that Pentecostals ignore cultural acceptability in order to obey the Spirit's injunctions to recognise all ministries that are given as gifts to the church (Pinnock 1993, 236).

### **Risk of Subjectivism**

It is evident that such a way of reading and interpreting the Bible contains the risks that come with subjectivism. It is not difficult to provide many examples where people "heard the voice of the Spirit" in their Bible-reading practices that led to disastrous results because of the human tendency to hear what one wants to hear (see 2 Tim 4:3). Thomas (1994, 54) acknowledges the danger of the subjective element when one listens to the voice of the Spirit, but nevertheless emphasises the tangibility and necessity for the believing community to hear from God. Controls should be built into the paradigm that would help to limit the range of interpretations, but the Spirit's role may never be stifled. Meaning may not be limited to the intention of the original author (most scholars deny that such intention could in any case be negotiated) because understanding involves the creative capacity of the interpreter to open up new insights through the creative transcendence provided by the Spirit who teaches and leads into all truth (cf. John 15:26) (Stronstad 1990, 17). Pentecostal reading is not exclusively a reader-response method, because the reader does not determine the meaning on their own but depends on the Spirit's illumination of the text that forms the precondition for understanding the Bible; although it is admitted that it may be difficult in many cases to understand the "insights" generated by the Spirit (Keegan 1985, 155).

The strategy consists of acceptance of the authority of the Bible as well as of the significance of experience, with the two concepts in creative dialectical tension (Archer 2009, 63). Pentecostal hermeneutic moves from an encounter with God to the Bible, *eisegeting* Pentecostals' experience into the text before formulating their theology (Stronstad 1992, 16). They read the text and interpret it through the lens of their own situation, while listening to the "still voice of the Spirit" forming insights in their minds that contain the application of biblical truth to their context. That is why they can challenge patriarchalism and androcentrism despite the Bible's clear pronouncements.

### **Restorationist Urge**

What is needed to reconstruct the ministry of women is that the Pentecostal movement regains its restorationist urge (Albrecht and Howard 2014, 247–8; Archer 2009, 32). Initially Pentecostalism identified itself as a continuation of the early church, as a movement of the Spirit to re-establish the church in the eschatological era of the last days. The early church was marked by its countercultural egalitarianism, inclusive ethos

and democracy based on gifts of the Spirit resting on male and female, young and old, and Greek and Jew, and that was grounded in Jesus' example and teaching. The early Pentecostal movement also established such a "transgressive space" where countercultural norms and values were accepted (Juvan 2004, 87–9). It is argued that the contemporary movement should regain these values in order to restore the ministry of women illustrated by the Spirit's anointing of all believers, including all genders and races.

## **Women, Ministry and the Bible**

In conclusion, in moving from the Bible to experience, it becomes difficult to justify the notion of women in ministry theologically. However, as suggested, the direction of the movement should change from the context into the direction of the text but with the further condition that the Spirit illuminates the text to the faith community. Then it is suggested that the confusion and conflict related to the issue of women in the ministry and leadership will be resolved. It is important that experience should be critically analysed by way of reason and Pentecostal communal tradition in order to decide normativeness in God's plan of salvation for humankind (Holmes 2013, 179). Pentecostals experience the Spirit who empowers them to live out the implications of that experience, and to interpret the Bible through the lens of that revelation.

The same Paul who refers to a woman who is prominent among the apostles (Junia, Rom 16:7) seemingly prohibits that women may partake in ministry, at least in the worship service. It does not pose a challenge to Pentecostals because their proposed hermeneutical strategy allows them to derive their interpretation of Paul from their practice, that evidences clearly that women experience the anointing of the Spirit to minister and lead in the same way as men (and children, old people and people of all races). It is their experience that all believers receive some ability or giftedness to manifest the Spirit for the common good of all (1 Cor 12:7). For that reason, they support non-discrimination on the basis of gender and age on the egalitarian impulse that characterised the early Pentecostal movement as well as its predecessors, the holiness and divine healing movements, and the early church, and not on the basis of contemporary sentiments of human rights. And redemption in Christ set Christians free from the practice of using gender as the criteria for determining positions of leadership in the church because in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Gal 3:28) (see Roebuck 1995).

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