

Book Review

*Dismantling the Dualisms for American Pentecostal Women in Ministry:
A Feminist-Pneumatological Approach*

Lisa P. Stephenson

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Introduction

Stephenson calls Pentecostal leaders to reflect on their incomplete theological beliefs, male-entrenched ecclesiastical systems, and inadequate exegetical practices. Based on a Lucan-Exodus philosophy as well as Gospel accounts, she boldly advocates leaving the present patriarchal structures as well as functions and replacing them with transformed communities. Rather than being vertical governance hierarchies, these new horizontal creations will emphasize the discipleship of equals. In these new creations, titles will be replaced with family terms such as “brother” and “sister.” As an inclusive movement, Christian feminism reaches out to all the disposed children of God.

Since the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, God expects new understandings and practices among the people of God. The Scriptures recognize that “all people” are to be recipients of this expanded purpose, power, and grace. Therefore, Pentecost requires a new, expanded pneumatological theology that does not exclude a feminist perspective when bringing their praxis in concurrence with the early mandates of the Pentecostal blessings.

Stephenson calls for fairness and justice when implementing a first-century

Pentecostal message and life. The current division of God’s children is unscriptural (i.e., gender, ageism, ethnicity, and the disabled). Over the centuries, governance has been prejudiced by male scribes, who wrote using gender-biased terminology, supported a male-oriented system, wrote the documents that dictated practices, and maintained a two-gender system.

A description of the book is followed by its organization. Brief glimpses of the eight chapters follow, and the last section will provide suggestions.

Description of the Book

Stephenson is to be commended for her scholarship. The formal writing style and format is reminiscent of a doctoral dissertation, and in fact the book’s “initial impetus and form” began as Stephenson’s Ph.D. dissertation (ix). Realistically, her audience may be limited to theologians or seminarians, who tend to be the gatekeepers of the status quo. Regardless of the receptivity by denominational leaders, *Dismantling the Dualisms for American Pentecostal Women in Ministry* illustrates the maturation of scholarship in Pentecostalism. The Church of God has assisted in rearing a respected professional capable of writing as both an insider and as an objective outsider.

The eight chapters address the theological tenets that have sustained and justified the subjugation of women in Pentecostalism. The four larger Pentecostal denominations (Assemblies of God, Church of the Four Square, Church of God, and Church of God in Christ) provide examples of denominations in different stages of liberation from restrictive patriarchy. In addition to discussing each of their polity, Stephenson proposes and argues for liberation from a restrictive patriarchic system and to an adoption of a feminist and pneumatological perspective. She focuses on the issues relating to theological anthropology and ecclesiology. Sufficient attention to these approaches have been ignored or discarded by former scholars.

A gripping scene opens chapter 1 where men in the power structure continue to vote themselves in and to exclude women from ordination.

Chapter 2 reflects on two strong premises. A dualistic theological anthropology that places males over females in ministry currently persists in Pentecostal denominations. These false theological claims and practices must be “destroyed” in light of the gospel. The author reflects on examples of these practices in the ecclesial policies or practices of the four larger Pentecostal denominations.

Chapter 3 is a clever essay. Using scriptural support, Stephenson advocates that Pentecostals must stop “ignoring feminine theology and begin engaging it in critical and constructive ways” (p. 86). The author provides suggestions as to how this might be accomplished in chapters 6 and 7.

Chapter 4 highlights how Pentecostals have generally accepted the Lucan themes with regard to women in ministry. The author urges the adoption of the dominant “New Exodus paradigm” used in Luke-Acts. This

not only expands salvation beyond reductionist ideas but also recognizes the role of Spirit baptism. Her perspective expands beyond functions to addressing women’s theological identity.

In chapter 5 Stephenson emphasizes the need to include all members of the Trinity in Pentecostal theology and practices. Using the framework presented in the former chapter, the work of the Spirit is clarified as to how it relates to theological and Christological approaches. While most Pentecostals have emphasized an *imago Dei* or *imago Christi* in their belief systems, this has been accomplished to the detriment of including the presence and works of the Holy Spirit (*imago Spiritus*). This Spirit of Pentecost removes all hindrances to women in ministry. Obstructions must be boldly exposed as detriments to implementing the will of God.

Stephenson extends her quest for models beyond Pentecostal researchers in chapter 6. Three Christian feminist theologians, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Letty Russel, provide both ecclesiological models and innovative proposals. These perspectives may prove useful as believers re-conceptualize and work toward a Pentecostal ecclesiology and theology.

Chapter 7 provides expanded insights of the proposed spiritual community. Her logic relating to the *ekklesia* of women, as a defining body of the Spirit, is novel to Pentecostals. In this approach, churches must reorient themselves and become communities of equals. This requires an Isaianic New Exodus from patriarchy. Pentecostals, led by the Spirit, must move from being *at* church to being *the* Church universal. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit calls for these transformed communities and

requires a renewal that includes a feminist-pneumatological perspective.

Changes

The call to reconstruct denominational polity is a challenge as large as changing an earth form. (Perhaps Jesus' parable of the mustard seed is needed in order for this to come about.) The dualistic beliefs that have been propagated under the aura of a "male God's will" are deeply entrenched. Simply telling the powerbrokers they "should do what is right or raising one's tone" have not changed beliefs or hearts. Power is addictive.

Prophetic calls ring out throughout the Bible. Even when the prophets were ostracized and sentenced to the desert with little sustenance, the prophetic messages continued. They were given boldly and without repentance or consideration of the context. In fact, many of the prophetic diatribes were part of public forums. Here the common folk came to understand the message of God. Usually social pressure brought about change within a comfortable cultural sense of continuity. In the first century, continuity referred to the law and wisdom literature.

Change usually comes from the fringes. An example of this occurred in the early twentieth century. Pentecostals were considered part of the disposed and underclass. Pentecostals, presently accepted in the mainstream, are challenged to act on a prophetic message, which calls denominations to form transformed communities representative of the new creation of God.

While this book focuses on the discriminatory practices toward women in ministry, actually the underlying message relates to how individuals managing denominational systems maintain power

over those who have been shut out. Speaking for God or making decisions for God carries supernatural responsibilities and power over those entrusted to their care. History documents frequent misuse to the patriarchic system when making prejudicial or self-serving decisions.

Does this season of Pentecost continue to be an open or a restrictive model? Changing beliefs is the most difficult task. Certainly most mandates and edicts do not last since they are imposed from without. Pentecostal tradition advocates for the priesthood of all believers, yet maintains selected elevated positions of power that are filled primarily by males. Hence, practice and polity differ from scriptural mandates.

The Church needs another change model because sustained change occurs with autoplaticity, or changing beliefs from within. Pentecostals believe this is a work of the Holy Spirit, but the changing of beliefs and outward evidences requires actions. One of these is righting the wrongs perpetuated against women in ministry at all levels and with voice. This is the prophetic call given by Stephenson.

The contents of this seminal piece could be reformatted to reflect a more colloquial format. Several forms of dissemination could provide more accessibility by fair-minded congregations and other children of God as they come to understand the New Testament outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the following polity practices provided by a feminist-pneumatological approach. Once again, this would require communal caring and sharing as they expand the work of the Holy Spirit in the children of God.

Additional studies are suggested relating to the advancement of women in ministry in charismatic and non-denominational Pentecostal systems. Are these better able to demonstrate feminist-pneumatological

structures and functions? Are they free of dualistic structures and practices? What change models have been effective in those denominations that opened their systems to all of God's children during the past two hundred years? Merely telling the male hierarchy what they "ought" to do sounds reminiscent of a Mother Goose tale. Rather, the time has come to blend knowledge, habits of the Spirit, and habits of the mind as we develop a theology and practice that is compatible with the feminist-pneumatological anthropology. Will the academic community step up and assume a righteous search? Why should half of the human race be denied using their gifts of the Spirit?