

RESPONSE TO “EMPOWERING PENTECOSTAL WOMEN” BY
SHANE CLIFTON

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Firstly, I would like to thank the members of this theological Symposium for giving me the privilege of responding to Dr Clifton's paper. The contribution of Spirit empowered women at the formative stage of the Pentecostal movement and beyond is to be celebrated by us all. Indeed, our author's main thesis is that Pentecostal revival, grounded in the outpouring of the Spirit upon male and female, has both a concrete and metaphorical connection to the empowerment of women. The argument follows then that movements that restrict the ministry of women (whether intentionally or not) are possibly setting themselves up for stagnation and decline.

Referencing the disjunct that is often found between the Pentecostal ideal (which is very much in favour of the Spirit empowerment of women) and that of its practise (here, reference is made to the low ratio of Pentecostal women senior pastors in North America and Australia) our author delineates erroneous constructs of language and society- even biblical theology and church culture- to be the culprits in the low female representation in modern Pentecostal leadership. Hence the need for the prophetic injunction, a word in season, a clarion call from the Spirit to redress such a disjunct in our theology of Spirit empowerment and women and our practise of it in reality. Our author has done us a great service in this regard.

This injunction comes as Dr Clifton references a leading female Pentecostal researcher on the subject, Cheryl Catford:

1/ It comes firstly to redress the lack of strong theological basis for women in leadership in the redeemed community. Certainly, a weakness here was the skimming over of more difficult passages of Scripture pertaining to male headship. I felt our author needed to engage with such passages as 1 Cor. 11:3 and Eph.5:23, at least in a

preliminary way. As a woman called to Christian leadership, our author's interpretation of these verses would have proved beneficial at this point.

2/ It comes secondly to challenge the Pentecostal norm that leadership is male. Our author rightly challenges such assumptions, but what we must ask at this point is whether this is as much a problem of female misconceptions about leadership as it is male. More substantial research/data referencing the convictions of women on this subject may form a subject for future research. Not only must we collect data pertaining to the question of "How many?" in regard to women in Pentecostal leadership, but also to the "Why?" of the same. Male domination and religious traditionalism may not be the only causes of such a disparity (child rearing is a case in point- a leadership role in itself).

3/ Thirdly, it comes as the challenge of the need for male patronage. I cannot stress enough my solidarity with the author's call to allow male/female relationships in the church freedom enough to (in the form of mentoring and support from their male leaders) enable women's access to more senior leadership positions. But at this point we must look at the "Why?" part of our question: why as women must we have access to these positions? Our author does well in answering this by highlighting the strengths that we bring to the table, such as intersubjectivity and relationality and the benefits of such to the task of leadership in the life of the congregation.

Yet again, we need to check ourselves: Why do we desire the more senior positions? We do well to remember the injunction of our Lord in Mark 10:43:

Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

Please let us remember then that aspirations to senior leadership are simply aspirations to the senior servant's job. Therefore, service to the kingdom and the redeemed community is the more fundamental thing in the question of Spirit empowered women and leadership.

Will the glass ceiling on women's progress to senior leadership positions always lead to "the death of female ministry"? We need to

consider that in some cases it may redirect and even enliven it as women may seek leadership outside traditional forms (such as the political arena), bringing fresh currents of the Spirit with them. Can we find data that may point to how many women whose leadership gifts were initially stifled by legalism in the church sought to exercise them outside traditional forms and are bearing fruit as a result? If so, perhaps there are many more Spirit empowered women in leadership than we know. A suggestion is that our author consider expressions of Spirit empowered female leadership outside the traditional models in his research and thus widen his parameters on the subject. Ultimately, it is God who ordains, not man.

These same restrictions in my own Christian experience redirected the gift of God in my life to serve the movement in home education in our city, an absolutely essential dimension of Christian ministry. Therefore, our encouragement to women who are experiencing the glass ceiling of religious traditionalism may be that they find that liberty in the sending of God. The role of Spirit empowered women in the power sectors is a most wonderful subject indeed and one which may encourage us as we reflect on this subject. Please write this Shane.

As a remedy, Dr Clifton encourages us to:

1/ Return to a more careful biblical and theological analysis, particularly as a springboard for a critique of traditions that have propagated gender inequality within the Pentecostal movement. Indeed was it not Jesus who reinterpreted the Law through the Spirit and taught us how we ought to live in a way that pleases our heavenly Father? Did He not model gender inclusiveness in His ministry for we know that women helped fund his itinerate ministry.

Our author is right, a renewed renewal theology is what we need, so as to effect that freedom between the genders for which Christ died at the most foundational level: the life of the redeemed community. The testimony of the daughters of Zelophehad in Numbers 27: 1-11, who through provoking Moses to revise inequitable Israelite inheritance laws, literally helped changed the ordinance of a nation. And what did the Lord say of the audacious request of these women?

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "The daughters of Zelophehad speak what is right; you shall surely give them a possession of inheritance among their father's brothers, and cause the inheritance of their father to pass to them." Num.27:6-7

2/ Be pro-active by deliberately including women in institutional leadership, eldership, and executive boards. We need but reference Deborah, Huldah, Esther as those whose governmental anointing and prophetic word changed the course of nations.

3/ Resisting fundamentalist conceptions that restrict the liberty which the theology of Spirit baptism has brought to Pentecostal women. It is at this point that great care must be exercised. There are certain fundamental beliefs in the Pentecostal tradition which cannot be laid aside. Our God is a loving heavenly Father, doing away with fundamentalist conceptions does not allow us to tamper with such precious Trinitarian categories of Father, Son and Spirit, lest we commence to travel a path that is not His good intention for us.

I have fellowshipped in the same congregation for some 23 years now. Two years into that period, my founding pastor died due to illness, leaving his wife and five children behind. Insofar as their leadership of our church, both had worked as a team from its inception. Only both his wife and our elders would not allow that the leadership of the church be given to a woman. We simply did not believe that women could senior pastor churches. Later, she married my cousin, one of the elders, whilst he took up the baton for senior leadership. Fifteen years later, the elders (including my cousin) decided to hand it back to her. This time, they were willing to embrace that a woman could senior pastor a church (how much more its founding pastor!). Sadly, I recall telling my leader that I was embarrassed by her taking up the senior pastor's role because she was female- something I deeply regret to this day. How can we tell those who have birthed, nurtured and tended their areas of stewardship for years in loving commitment that they do not belong there because of their gender? No, this ought not be so friends.

Our conference theme: Pentecostalism, power and the exercise of authority must be centered correctly, and in lives conformed to the pattern of Christ's dying and rising. A vying for headship and power, by male or female, is repugnant to the values of the Kingdom. We would well to check our motives in this regard regularly.

Finally, I agree with our author. Christian leadership is blood bought, God ordained, Spirit empowered AND male and female. Amen