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History of Women in the Pentecostal Movement  
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On the whole, the Holiness-Pentecostal movement in the United States has made a distinctive contribution to the historical evolution of religion in America by involving blacks, women, and the poor at all levels of ministry. There are well over 100 church bodies listed in the *Directory of African American Religious Bodies* which can be identified as Holiness or Pentecostal. These churches were led by black Christians around the turn of the century who “came out” of the black Baptist and Methodist churches, seeking “the deeper life of entire sanctification” and Spirit baptism; “Their initial concern was not so much to start a new denomination as to call the existing ones back to the wells of their spirituality.”<sup>1</sup> What the Holiness and Pentecostal churches have in common is an emphasis upon the experience of Spirit baptism. Although some of these churches have adopted the sexist and racist norms of white mainline Protestantism, others have produced compelling models of cooperation between male and female leaders.

Church historian Susie Stanley uses the term “stained-glass ceiling” to describe barriers to women’s leadership and advancement in Christian denominations with a long history of ordaining them. At the beginning of the present century, the ordination of women was accepted virtually throughout the Holiness movement. And when Pentecostalism emerged shortly thereafter, “it carried through this theme and was perhaps even more consistent in the practice of the ministry and ordination of women.”<sup>2</sup> Compared to mainline denominations which began ordaining women only in recent years, the Holiness movement has a “usable past.”<sup>3</sup> Women in five Wesleyan-Holiness denominations – Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), Church of the Nazarene, Free Methodist Church, Salvation Army, and the Wesleyan Church – currently constitute twenty-five percent of the clergy in their denominations, whereas women comprise seven percent of the clergy in thirty-nine other denominations that now ordain women.<sup>4</sup>

In 1978 Pearl Williams-Jones surveyed five major Pentecostal bodies and categorized them with respect to their treatment of women’s ministry and leadership.<sup>5</sup> The first category, consisting of churches who insist upon the

subordination of women in ministry roles, actually comprises the overwhelming majority of black Pentecostals: the Church of God in Christ, the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, and the Bible Way Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ, World Wide. The second category, churches which grant women positions of authority equal to men, includes the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World and the Mount Sinai Holy Church of America (which was founded by a woman, Bishop Ida Robinson).

In general, over the course of the twentieth century there has been a dramatic and substantial decline in women's ecclesial leadership in the Holiness and Pentecostal churches. Stanley cites statistics showing that the proportion of women clergy in the Church of the Nazarene fell precipitously from twenty percent in 1908 to one percent more recently, and, in the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), from thirty-two percent in 1925 to fifteen percent. As early as 1939, a Church of God publication set forth a radical theological and ethical commentary upon the decline of women preachers:

the prevalence of women preachers is a fair measure of the spirituality of a church, a country, or an age. As the church grows more apostolic and more deeply spiritual, women preachers and workers abound in that church; as it grows more worldly and cold, the ministry of women is despised and gradually ceases altogether. It is of the nature of paganism to hate foreign people and to despise women, but the spirit of the gospel is exactly opposite.<sup>6</sup>

In this view, the rejection of women's ministerial leadership represents a worldly loss of focus upon the egalitarian spirit of the Christian gospel. Not surprisingly, the re-establishment of barriers to church leadership by most of the Holiness-Pentecostal groups on the basis of sex in the early decades of this century coincide with their increased complicity with prevailing mainstream practices of racial separation and segregation.

The story of the 1906 Azusa Street Revival, which marks the beginning of Pentecostalism as an international movement, offers a model of cooperative ministry and empowerment among the sexes, where authority and recognition are granted to either sex based upon the exercise of spiritual gifts. The early Pentecostal movement was led by William J. Seymour, a man whose own life's story reflects practically all major facets of the denominational racism experienced by

black Christians in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Born in Louisiana in 1878, Seymour was raised as a Baptist, as a young man joined a local black congregation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, and next was drawn to the Evening Light Saints, a name widely used at the time for the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana).

After joining the Holiness movement, Seymour came under the influence of a black woman pastor in Houston, Texas, Lucy Farrow. He attended her church in 1903. Significantly, she was the first to expose Seymour to the practice of speaking in tongues:

He heard a woman pray aloud in a language, or what seemed to be a language, that no one there could understand. Seymour was touched to the core. As a man of prayer himself, he could sense that this woman had somehow attained a depth of spiritual intensity he had long sought by never found... These experiences changed Seymour's life. After the meeting he asked Lucy Farrow, the woman who had spoken in the strange tongue, more about her remarkable gift.<sup>8</sup>

Farrow introduced Seymour to the white Pentecostal pioneer, Charles Fox Parham, who ran a Bible School in Topeka for missionaries where she had worked as a "governess." When Seymour enrolled in Parham's classes in

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Houston, he was subjected to the indignity of having to sit in a hall where he could hear the classes through the doorway, in keeping with Southern "etiquette." Seymour accepted Parham's advocacy of tongue speaking, but rejected his racist prejudices and polemics.

Seymour's work with women ministers continued. He was invited by Neely Terry, a Holiness woman from Los Angeles, to pastor a Holiness congregation in California which had been founded by Julia W. Hutchins. Seymour traveled to Los Angeles bearing the message that speaking in tongues was the necessary evidence of the Pentecostal experience, but Hutchins rejected his preaching and locked him out. He found refuge in the home of Richard and Ruth Asberry on Bonnie Brae Street, where he conducted several weeks of prayer meetings. When on April 9, 1906 Seymour finally manifested the tongue-speaking experience he had promoted

in his preaching, a revival broke out and crowds began to gather at the Bonnie Brae Street residence and in the streets. He leased a vacant building at 312 Azusa Street in Los Angeles from the Stevens African Methodist Episcopal Church (where several persons worshipping with him had formerly been members), a two story wooden structure located in a poor black neighborhood in Los Angeles, near some stables and lumberyard. Within a few days more than a thousand persons were trying to enter the small mission building, and the Azusa Street Revival was underway. The core group consisted primarily of black female domestic workers, but over a period of three years, from 1906 to 1908, the Revival drew persons of every race, nationality, and culture. In Seymour's own words, "the work began among the colored people. God baptized several sanctified was women with the Holy Ghost, who have been much used of Him."<sup>9</sup>

On the surface, this account of the Azusa Street Revival presents an all too familiar image of a black man leading a congregation of black women that seems less than empowering from the vantage point of gender. The Revival resulted from the partnership of women and men unified by their desire to experience the spiritual empowerment of speaking in tongues. Seymour was largely mentored, guided, and offered a context for ministry by women. Women were involved in every aspect of his spiritual development: moreover, women were willing to follow his tongues doctrine and experience its full effects as a public witness. In this light, the locus of empowerment was not the cooperation of men and women with each other as an end in itself. Rather, the people were spiritually empowered by their ability to respond to charismatic leadership, a process facilitated by the willingness of one man to welcome the participation and preaching of women. And when the desired spiritual manifestations came forth among this humble gathering, the experience of corporate charismatic empowerment drew attention from all parts of the world.

Seymour eventually encountered some negative experiences with white women in the Revival who did not share his perspective on racial unity. When Parham visited Azusa Street at Seymour's invitation in October of 1906, he denounced the Revival as a "darky camp meeting."<sup>10</sup> The two white women who helped him to publish the periodical *Apostolic Faith*, with an international circulation of 50,000 subscribers, effectively destroyed Seymour's publication outreach ministry by taking both the periodical and mailing list to Portland, Oregon, where one of them founded another evangelistic organization. In his book *Fire From Heaven*, Harvey

Cox notes how Seymour's disillusionment with white Pentecostals affected his understanding of the gift of tongues:

Finding that some people could speak in tongues and continue to abhor their black fellow Christians convinced him that it was not tongue speaking but the dissolution of racial barriers that was the surest sign of the Spirit's pentecostal presence and the approaching New Jerusalem.<sup>11</sup>

Seymour saw the breaking of the color line as a much surer sign than tongue-speaking of God's blessing and of the Spirit's healing presence, signifying that the charismatic ideal of cooperation with the Spirit had become compromised in practice by the forces of racism. Once the whites defected, the Azusa Street Mission became almost entirely black.<sup>12</sup> The denominations which took the lead thereafter to spread the Pentecostal doctrine and practices, e.g., the Church of God in Christ and the Assemblies of God, were organized along racial lines and generally assigned subordinate roles to women.

White racism ultimately undermined and destroyed the vision of racial equality promoted by the early Pentecostals. Interracial cooperation could not be sustained within the charismatic leadership structures where cooperation between the sexes had been so conspicuous (at least temporarily). As a result, Seymour revised the doctrines, discipline, and constitution of his Apostolic Faith movement to recognize himself as "bishop" and guarantee that successor would always be "a man of color."<sup>13</sup> However, after Seymour's death in 1922, it was a woman of color who assumed the leadership of the Mission – his widow, Jennie Seymour. As is often the case after the death of charismatic leaders, the mission located at Azusa Street did not last very long thereafter. The building was demolished in 1931, and the land was lost in foreclosure in 1938, two years after Jennie Seymour's death.<sup>14</sup>

That a man led this movement is perhaps unremarkable; that he was so heavily influenced by women's spiritual leadership is hardly unprecedented. What is highly unusual here, however, is the immediate interracial and international impact produced by this tiny core group of black women and men. Together they exercised charismatic gifts in a manner which would alter the course of church history throughout the twentieth century. Today Pentecostalism has become the dominant

expression of Christian worship in many major urban centers, claiming some 410 million adherents worldwide.<sup>15</sup>

The largest denomination of the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), does not permit the ordination of women, but has the most powerful Women's Department of any black denomination.<sup>16</sup> Despite this restriction, women have exercised ministerial leadership in numerous ways, serving as an evangelists, worship leaders and religious activists, and sometimes having charge of churches in the absence of a male pastor. The distinctive leadership orientation of the COGIC women led to levels of female empowerment and male-female cooperation and that would prove vital to the success of the denomination throughout the twentieth century, in contrast to the Azusa Street Mission which failed after the death of Seymour. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes has offered this general observation regarding the importance of the establishment of structures of female "influence" as a determining factor in the survival of black religious movements:

Although many denominations were formed between 1895 and 1950, those that survived and flourished were those with strong Women's Departments. Structures of female influence enabled denominations with charismatic male founders to grow after those founders died; other denominational movements with high visibility but no structures of female influence almost disappeared.<sup>17</sup>

The Women's Department of the COGIC was formed shortly after the beginning of the Azusa Street Revival. Bishop Charles H. Mason, a former Baptist minister who with C.P. Jones founded the COGIC as a Holiness denomination, participated in the Revival and received the gift of speaking in tongues. As a result, a split occurred with Jones and the COGIC became Pentecostal under Mason's leadership in 1907. Around the same time, Mason recruited Lizzie Woods Roberson from a Baptist academy to organize the Women's Department as its "overseer." What is unusual about this development is that Mason was divorced, and thus did not have a wife to appoint to this position, as normally occurred in other black denominations where the women's organizations are led by the wives of ecclesial leaders:

This historical “accident” generated the model of a nearly autonomous women’s organization. Mason not only recruited Mother Robinson to head the women’s work but also on her advice appointed women’s overseers along the same jurisdictional and district lines as the male overseers who later became bishops. The title “overseer,” a literal translation of the Greek word usually translated as “bishop,” was used in the early days of the church for both men and women leaders in the church. Such usage implied that the founders of the COGIC and other denominations initially envisioned a church organized in parallel structures of both male and female overseers.<sup>18</sup>

The adoption of the terminology associated with episcopally governed churches reflected both the Baptist roots of their leadership and a Presbyterian tendency toward “more or less sharing power between the laity and the clergy.”<sup>19</sup> Gilkes has determined that these black church women transformed their autonomy into a form of power best described as “influence,” and “created a pluralist political structure in an episcopally governed church where pluralism was never intended.”<sup>20</sup> This autonomous, parallel structure more closely resembled the dual sex political systems characteristic of some West African societies than the patriarchal episcopal polities of European origin. The women employed distinctive leadership styles and methods that promoted broader-based participation:

The women’s methods of leadership have evolved in direct contrast to the authoritarian style demanded by the nature of episcopal polity: hierarchical, individualistic, and dominating. In comparison, women’s leadership tends to be consensus oriented, collective, and more inclusive, involving larger number of people in decision making.<sup>21</sup>

The emergence of the COGIC Women’s Department was timely in view of the plight of black women in church and society during the first decade of the twentieth century. First, the spiritual and professional focus of this organization of black women produced significant affirmations of black female personhood:

In the face of culture assaults that used the economic and sexual exploitation of black women as a rationale for their denigration, the Sanctified Church

elevated black women to the status of visible heroines- spiritual and professional role models for their churches.<sup>22</sup>

A second factor is the professionalization of Christian education (in contrast to the concurrent marginalization of Christian education by Baptist and Methodist denominations), which enabled women to use their roles as educators and the “educated” as a source of power and career opportunity. Thirdly, the Women’s Department presented “professional” role models for black working women, at a time when employment opportunities for black women were primarily restricted to domestic service at low wages; thus, “Higher education and work were identified as legitimate means of upward mobility for black women, and they were encouraged to achieve economic empowerment through white-collar employment.”<sup>23</sup> An important consequence of this emphasis upon higher education and professional employment was the financial empowerment of women, whose numerical dominance in the churches in turn created a situation that clearly contradicted the ethic of male domination and control.<sup>24</sup>

As a general rule, these churches rejected cultural norms and organizational models that imitated white patriarchy. For both the Holiness and the Pentecostal churches, holiness was the premier ethic and guide for liturgy, preaching, and polity:

church members could not advance ideologies of patriarchy that contradicted standards of holiness since “holiness” was the most important achieved status in these churches - and a status not humanly conferred. Biblical debate concerning women was confined to structural norms, not the nature, quality, or character of women per se.<sup>25</sup>

The positive affirmation of women’s nature, quality, and character sets these churches apart from other Protestant and Catholic traditions whose exclusion of women from leadership is grounded in the rejection of the full humanity of women. As a result, even where structural prohibitions have been in effect, women nevertheless found ways to exercise their gifts of ministry and leadership to the benefit of the entire church body. For example, women evangelists and revivalists founded churches, so they were included in church histories. In addition, male church leaders often reported in their spiritual biographies that they became



converted in response to the ministry of female preachers and revivalists. Thus, it was not gender but spiritual gifts which qualified individuals to be acknowledged and honored in Holiness and Pentecostal circles; “the person and congregational accounts passed down in written records and oral tradition placed a high value on the contribution of women and men to the most important goal of the church - salvation and holiness.”<sup>26</sup>

Following Gilkes’s analysis, the model of leadership developed by the COGIC Women’s Department is a dialectical one, based on a tradition of protest and cooperation.<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, this dialectics is driven by the women’s struggle against structures and patterns of subordination based on sex, and on the other, by their determination to maintain unity with black men in the face of racism and discrimination in the larger society, and in response to internal power struggles among male leaders within the denomination. Because cooperative and egalitarian norms govern this dialectical model, the structural exclusion of women from certain positions in the church is partially offset by the maintenance of various spaces and spheres for women to exercise their spiritual gifts and leadership.

Although the prevailing norms of racial and sexual exclusion eventually were brought to bear upon various Pentecostal denominational structures, these churches nevertheless provided important opportunities and role models for women’s spiritual and social empowerment. The shifting patterns of inclusion and exclusion in these churches have been governed by two primary factors, namely, the egalitarian doctrine of the Holy Spirit on the one hand, and the impact of racist, sexist, and elitist societal norms on the other. Pentecostal leaders of today, both male and female, can recover and reclaim the inclusive impetus of the early twentieth century, as the Spirit guides the church into the twenty-first century.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> William C. Turner, Jr., “Movements in the Spirit: A Review of African American Holiness/Pentecostal/Apostolics,” in Wardell Payne, ed., *Directory of African American Religious Bodies* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1991), 248.

<sup>2</sup> Donald W. Dayton, “Yet Another Layer of the Onion, Or Opening the Ecumenical Door to Let the Riffraff In”, *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (January 1988), 106.

<sup>3</sup> Susie Cunningham Stanley, quoted by Timothy C. Morgan, “The Stained-Glass Ceiling,” *Christianity Today* (May 16, 1994), 52.

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- <sup>4</sup> Stanley, *Feminist Pillar of Fire: The Life of Alma White* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1993), 2.
- <sup>5</sup> Pearl Williams-Jones, "A Minority Report: Black Pentecostal Women," *Spirit*, vol. I, No. 2, (1977): 31-44.
- <sup>6</sup> Charles E. Brown, "Women Preachers," *The Gospel Trumpet* (May 27, 1939), 5.
- <sup>7</sup> This account of Seymour's role in the Azusa Street Revival is adapted from several sources. See Joseph Colletti, "Selected Historical Pentecostal Sites in the Los Angeles Area," (Pasadena, California: David J. du Plessis Center for Christian Spirituality); Leonard Lovett, "Aspects of the Spiritual Legacy of the Church of God in Christ: Ecumenical Implications" in David T. Shannon and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds. *Black Witness to the Apostolic Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985, 1988); Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., "Azusa Street Revival" and "Bonnie Brae Street Cottage," and H. Vinson Synan, "William Joseph Seymour," in Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGe, eds., *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988); and James S. Tinney, "William J. Seymour: Father of Modern-Day Pentecostalism," in Randall K. Burkett and Richard Newman, eds., *Black Apostles* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1978).
- <sup>8</sup> Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 49.
- <sup>9</sup> William J. Seymour, quoted in Ian MacRobert, *The Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism in the USA* (London: MacMillan Press, 1988), 48.
- <sup>10</sup> Turner, 251.
- <sup>11</sup> Cox, 63.
- <sup>12</sup> Cox, 64.
- <sup>13</sup> Synan, 781.
- <sup>14</sup> Robeck, 35.
- <sup>15</sup> Cox, xv.
- <sup>16</sup> Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "'Together and in Harness': Women's Traditions in the Sanctified Church," in Micheline R. Malson, Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, Jean F. O'Barr and Mary Wyer, eds. *Black Women in America: Social Science Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 229. This article was originally published in *Signs*, vol. 10, no. 4, Summer 1985.
- <sup>17</sup> Gilkes, 237.
- <sup>18</sup> Gilkes, 237.
- <sup>19</sup> Gilkes, 229.
- <sup>20</sup> Gilkes, 240.
- <sup>21</sup> Gilkes, 240.
- <sup>22</sup> Gilkes, 225.
- <sup>23</sup> Gilkes, 225.
- <sup>24</sup> Gilkes, 235.
- <sup>25</sup> Gilkes, 231.
- <sup>26</sup> Gilkes, 231.
- <sup>27</sup> Gilkes, 242.