Rhetoric, Religion, and Authority: Pentecostal Holiness Women Preachers Speaking Truth

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Introduction

As a scholar of rhetoric and as a Pentecostal Christian, I notice that, although rhetoric and religion embody quite different theoretical perspectives, rhetoric, religion, and gender collide when we examine who is given the authority to speak and who is believed within the church.

It is truly remarkable that the women preachers in the International Pentecostal Holiness Church (IPHC) have been permitted to speak authoritatively in their role as truth-speakers from as early as the late nineteenth century through the present day. Even more remarkable is the fact that women preachers were able to claim and exercise the right to preach even before 1907 in what was known as Indian Territory (now known as Oklahoma). They did so by a claim to authority through their call to preach, through the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and through their charisma. These claims to authority were supported by those who came to hear them speak and left educated, converted, filled with the Spirit, forever changed. Additionally, the truth of their callings was verified and validated by those working alongside them who occupied positions of leadership as well as those in the pews of the church. These were people who shared a similar epistemology—that is, a similar way of knowing, understanding, and interacting with the world that was distinctly “Pentecostal,” not only as it was defined on Azusa Street between 1906 and 1908, but also as it was enthusiastically and charismatically practiced in the late 1800s. Therefore, power for women in the IPHC is individual, spiritual, and communal. Most importantly, it is still exercised by women in the IPHC today, though not without challenges at times.

Women preaching in Indian Territory

Sometime around 1920, Dan York completed memoirs for himself and his wife, Dollie. Both were born in the 1870s or 1880s. Dan writes that, when he was young, his father chose to “come west” from Tupelo, Mississippi, to Paul’s Valley in Indian Territory by “stage.” From there, they went to Purdy and lived in a “half dugout” between 1891 and 1892. When they could not find work, they decided to venture out to Texas, but were caught by a blizzard at Tar Springs, Oklahoma. Providentially, they found shelter with a man who had just built a small cabin, and, although it had only one room and no roof, they were grateful to be out of a storm which lasted ten days. Dan wrote that he and his family “had to hunt game for our eats.” When it came time to go, they floated their oxen and wagon across the nearby river on blocks of ice and went on their way. Indeed, through Dan’s young eyes, Oklahoma’s unsettled territory was daunting and often dangerous, but also open and untouched. A sense of adventure must have permeated the air.

In the second chapter of his book, Dan described the conversion he experienced before making the trip to Indian Territory in 1891. In 1889, Dan walked three miles to a Methodist church in his “homemade suit” and no shoes. There, he made his commitment to Christ at the altar, his uncle John York’s hand on his head. Shortly before the move to Indian Territory, he was told he “could not keep his religion out there.” Such a warning was understandable to those who were familiar with the place. As Naz-arene Pentecostal preacher and self-proclaimed historian C. B. Jernigan wrote in his history of the Holiness movement, around 1897 Indian Territory was “owned, but unallotted by the Indians,” leased mostly to “cattle men,” as well as owned by farmers living in its rich valleys. Residents lived in dugouts and log cabins, just as Dan described: “The inhabitants were Indians, cowboys, and many desperate characters who had gone there to escape the law in other states.” The soon-to-be-converts “spent their Sundays in drinking ‘chock,’ a native beer manufactured by the Choc-taw Indians, and in gambling and carousing in general.” It took a “preach or burn” spirit to reach these people and a “pioneer spirit” that had little to do with settling the land and everything to do with spreading charismatic Pentecostalism.

Dollie York was equal to the task. While in Texas, she and Dan faced threats of imprisonment and were even attacked by a dog at one meeting. Dan wrote that the people “whipped, sandbagged, poured slop water on us, egged, blew beer foam in our faces, threw snakes on us, and threw rocks and pieces of fence posts at me while I was preaching.” Wanderers to the core—as most early Pentecostal preachers were—they went back to Indian Territory in 1903. In 1907, two of their comrades received the baptism of the Holy Spirit in a service led by the man who would be bishop of the IPHC for decades, Rev. J. H. King. When their friends returned, Dan and Dollie began seeking the experience based on their testimonies.

Dollie and Dan cleared their land, built brush arbors, cleared briars and underbrush for camp meetings, dug wells, and set up tables and chairs. Dollie led music using her tambourine and often preached as well. Dan recalled one day when she preached and “65 fell at the altar, screaming and crying for God to have mercy on them.” Dan made no secret of the fact that he and Dollie shared the work and reward of their ministry for decades.

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He used the famous Proverbs 31 chapter to describe her, writing, “Thank God for a wife like this one. She has stood by me now for 58 years.” He recalled her prayers and her strength and gave her full credit for their shared successes as ministers throughout the telling of their shared story. Dollie’s authority to preach came through her baptism in the Holy Spirit and her charisma in the pulpit, but also through the vision she and her husband shared. The way they viewed the world and preached Pentecost lent her the type of authority held by those who viewed power in these terms, as Dan wrote from the Hill Top Church in Calvary, Oklahoma, on July 24, 1920:

“Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you.” Acts 1:8. What is this power for? To dance, shout and talk in tongues? No, it will do that, too, but say, that is the last part of it all. . . . [This power will] often lead you to some heart-prayer to God, it gives you unction from heaven and the throne; power to pray, to sing, testify, preach or exhort, and [to the] broken, censored soul, in the darkened, neglected home, or in the streets. There we find them by the thousands, friendless and forsaken, a cast-out in this world, and a cast-out at judgment, if we or someone else do not go.}

One of the most famous woman preachers in the International Pentecostal Holiness Church denomination was Agnes N. O. LaBerge. Born in 1870 in Wisconsin, Agnes begins her autobiography by describing herself as “evangelist” and “missionary.” As such, she became a wanderer, much like the Yanks, traveling from place to place to preach and convert. It is possible that part of the authority used by early Pentecostal preachers was derived from the fact that they were often strangers among the people they hoped to convert. Thus, past failings and weaknesses in their character were unknown to their audiences, giving the illusion of a purity no human can attain, or at least not for very long. In her story, Agnes mentions going to Minnesota for Bible school, to New York City for another Bible school, to New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maine, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri—the list goes on and on. At Bethel College in Topeka, Kansas, she prayed for about three weeks for the baptism of the Holy Spirit and received it on New Year’s Day, 1901. She soon traveled to Houston, Texas, and heard the soon-to-be-famous William Seymour preaching. She wrote that he was given money from the Hill Top Church in Calvin, Oklahoma, on July 24, 1920: missed her authority not only through her reputation as a successful evangelist, but also because of her education and the extensive quoting of Scripture in her autobiography. She sought to establish herself as one educated in the “right” doctrines and supporting Scriptures. She provided testimonies of those who had put doctrines, such as divine healing, into practice and benefited from doing so. In fact, her autobiography was primarily intended as an argument for doctrines. She managed to squeeze in some specifics of her life and travels in between, but spent pages and pages between those details seeking to provide evidence for her beliefs and records of her spiritual successes, usually supported by the number of converts, those divinely healed, and those claiming to have experienced sanctification for the first time.

As a preacher ordained by the IPHC in Oklahoma, the very first person of the twentieth century to experience both baptism and tongues at the same time, and as an indirect influence on William Seymour, Agnes N. O. LaBerge was an exemplar. Unfettered by social restrictions, by fears, by her husband, or by the daughter they had while in Perry, Oklahoma, Agnes eagerly followed her call wherever it would take her. Her husband preached also, but she maintained center stage in her story, establishing her credibility through her extensive knowledge of doctrine and Scripture and through her success at winning converts. Most histories of Pentecostalism, which include hundreds of denominations, begin with the story of her Holy Spirit baptism, crediting her with starting the fire Seymour would turn into a blaze.

We are of this place

Early Pentecostal preacher Dan York noted that, when he and his wife leased a farm in Wolf in the Indian Territory in 1904, they lived “among the Seminole Indians,” but that the Indians “would not meet us in the road; they did not want us in their country.” However, two of the IPHC preachers I studied did gain the authority to speak in Oklahoma through mention of their blood ties to the Native Americans living there. Perhaps enough time had passed between the nuna dat suhnyi (Trail of Tears), suffered by the Five Civilized Tribes between the 1830s and 1850s, and 1978 when Grace Hope Curtis published her autobiography and 1982, the year of the diamond jubilee celebrating seventy-five years of Oklahoma’s statehood, when my grandfather Robert L. Rex published his. Pride in Okla Humma, Choctaw for “Home of the Red Man,” rose like a soaring eagle that year, much as it did during the many 2007 centennial celebrations held throughout the state.

The relationship between Native Americans and whites cannot be reduced to a simple tale of hate and subjugation. C. B. Jernigan, in “Pioneering in Oklahoma,” describes a camp meeting held at the Ponca Indian Agency in 1910, where thirty were converted, “praying in the Ponca language and weeping with broken hearts over their sins.” At the close of the meeting, the evangelist, Rev. Martin, called the elders of the tribe together to ask if they wanted the Nazarene mission to continue among them. Jernigan wrote:
White Eagle, the last chief of his tribe, who was known among them as their silver-tongued orator, arose and spoke through an interpreter. He said, “When I was a baby they took me to a priest who sprinkled water on my head, and told my mother that I was a Christian, but it did not touch my heart. Same bad heart. The government takes our children and make them learn from book. Heap smart when they leave school, but still they have a bad heart. They go to the Methodist mission; learn to sing good; learn to smart man talk; still same bad Indian. They go to Nazarene meeting; get on their knees, cry, and pray to God till face shines; they go home, read a Bible, pray. No more eat Mescal bean; no more drink whisky. No more smoke pipe. No more steal. Come on Nazarenes.”

Pentecostalism changed Oklahomans in unusual ways. For example, my grandfather, a Pentecostal evangelist and later general director of evangelism as well as director of world missions for the IPHC, wrote that his great-grandmother was “a full blood Cherokee Indian born in 1812” who probably came over on the Trail of Tears and married a white man in 1841. While his family was never able to discover her name, they do know she was called “the little maiden with the withered hand.” Rex was in love with history, but even more so with the church, and he modeled the structure of his autobiography after that of longtime Bishop Joseph King. As an Oklahoman, Rex was fascinated by the historical contexts of his life and the bloodlines that led him there. His story ties him into Oklahoma’s history and its people, making his story of being a pioneer in the religious sense—that is, with history, but even more so with the church, and he modeled positions of leadership in the denomination later in life, his authority being established in the state he loved.

In contrast, his friend, evangelist Grace Hope Curtis, wrote her life’s story as a sort of conversation that mentions her Native American bloodlines. Born in Indian Territory in 1895, Grace’s great-grandmother was also all Cherokee. Grace says her parents thought of her as “the greatest little ‘papoose’ in the whole territory.” She grew up in the wide-open spaces of Oklahoma and wrote that she “seldom saw anyone outside of our family.” Yet, the gap between her and the state’s rightful inhabitants is clear by the second page of her story:

I remember one time an Indian woman rode up to our gate and got off her pony with a shovel in her hand. My father went out to see what she wanted and finally understood that she wanted to “borrow a little fire.” Father knew the fire would go out before she reached her teepee several miles away, so he gave her some matches after teaching her how to use them. The Indians called matches the “white man’s fire on the end of a stick.”

As a preacher, Grace considered herself a pioneer because so many people opposed women preaching. She says she preached in “schoolhouses, vacant store buildings, city halls and oftentimes out under the stars in open air meetings.” Her greatest difficulty was not in being attacked like the Yorks, but in being away from her children as she went all over the state preaching. She was reassured by a “dear old Indian preacher” who compared her to Hannah and her children to Samuel.

The lived experiences of these Oklahomans challenge any sort of stereotype of the relationship between Native Americans and whites. Grace felt comfortable and confident in her native state, describing its Native American inhabitants without a trace of racial prejudice and perhaps feeling a degree of identification with them because of her family history. Authority was assumed by claiming Native American bloodlines. It was validated by the work she did as well. In another intriguing tie to Native Americans, Grace describes a call by God to minister to an “Indian village” by Kaw City. The pastor there tried to talk her out of coming, fearing for her safety because the “Indians would get drunk” and had “run off” others who had tried to preach there. She went in the middle of an icy winter to preach in a schoolhouse in the woods. She wrote, “We would have to turn on the lights, build a fire in the big old wood stove, then in a matter of minutes the house would be full of Indians.” She saw them as a “neglected people” and described the joyful singing at the meeting. Only once did a drunken man come in, but she prayed, and he sat quietly through the service. Only one girl was converted, but Grace saw her as a seed, not as evidence of her failure there. She wrote, “When we ceased the meeting, everyone in the house—little, big, old and young, came up to shake my hand or hug my neck. I don’t think there was a dry eye in the building. It makes my tears flow after all these years to think of it.”

We are united

Authority is given not just by the baptism in the Holy Spirit, as all of the preachers experienced it, and not just through the charisma evidenced by the number of their converts and the influence on other believers such as Seymour, but also through the community of believers, including church leaders and congregations at the time. Of course, the best opportunity to experience being part of the community at large was during “camp meetin’ time.” No one describes the excitement of that better than Margaret Muse Oden, daughter of Dan Muse, a bishop for the IPHC in the mid-twentieth century. She wrote:

The annual conference session was always preceded by ten days of spiritual fellowship where people from all over the conference met, pitched a tent and, from sunrise until long after sunset, there was a service of some kind in progress. Perhaps this was good psychology—sing, pray, and preach for ten days and they were either so well filled with brotherly love or so completely exhausted that by the time conference convened, the discussions were apt to be less “heated,” the problems settled with less wrangling and obstinate opinions.

Camp meeting! From conference superintendent [bishop] on down . . . they were busy for days ahead of time. There were many “dignified” jobs, such as cutting weeds, hauling tents, driving stakes, anchoring poles for the main tent, securing kitchen management . . . These good people came to worship

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the Lord and did so sincerely as best they knew how. Tents lined up until it resembled a city brought to life at night. There were squalling babies, kind old grandpas and a host of representa- tives of the generation between. Straw carpeted the floor of each tent, clothes hung along the center pole, cots or old iron beds filled each side; for some, a makeshift stove for cooking meals; others patronized the dining hall; all made good business for the hamburger and soda pop stand.

It was an occasion for which we planned and counted the days, anxiously hurrying time along for the pleasant meeting of good friends and the privilege of serving God in fellowship.26

Indeed, self-centered bids for domination were shelved during this time of unity, harmony, and spiritual renewal. Authority between men and women was shared, and the leaders who emerged usually turned out to be the most humble.

Authority is built through recognition, as histories and stories indicate that the women preachers of the IPHC felt a part of the leadership of the church. Just as Campbell's history recorded the actions of the Yorks and Agnes Ozman LaBerge, so the Yorks’ story mentions leaders such as J. H. King and others, and LaBerge’s story mentions Seymour among the leaders of the time. Current histories of the Pentecostal movement all mention LaBerge, indicating how a woman influenced an entire religious movement innocently enough through seeking and receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is also typical to find the same story, but from different points of view, in other autobiographies and interviews with women preachers I conducted in 2004.

Most importantly, the experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit lent the most credibility, and, by extension, authority, to a Pentecostal preacher.

Another early Pentecostal preacher and preacher’s wife was Lucy Hargis. She “received the Holy Spirit baptism July 16, 1922, about midnight and when I came up speaking in tongues, the girls and manager where I worked were all there and they knew then I was one of them that we all had talked about.”33 She explained, “The religion was so new until the people climbed the seats to see the demonstration of the Holy Spirit and people speaking in tongues.”34 Her husband received his “Pentecost” later that same year. Working alongside each other as preachers in Oklahoma, stories of Lucy’s and her husband’s ministry also appear in Robert L. Rex’s autobiography. Clearly part of the community of believers in Oklahoma, the Hargises shared in the core experience that defined the denomination.

Lennie Rex, my grandmother and Robert L. Rex’s wife, wrote that it took her two years of praying before she was sanctified.35 After that, she was baptized in the Holy Spirit at a revival. Her mother later told her that “hundreds gathered [for] they had never saw [sic] anyone receive the Holy Spirit.” She reported, “[I]just as suddenly as the Lord sent His great power and slayed me under, soaked me through and through with His power, wonderful power, and the Lord spoke to me ‘Now you can speak.’”36 Finally, I interviewed the daughter of Ruth Moore, a woman preacher who worked alongside the others mentioned already. Wanda Baker said that two women converted under her mother’s ministry stayed up with her mother all night praying. At the beginning of a sunrise camp meeting service, her mother was “filled with the Holy Spirit.”37
Because of this shared experience, many men approved of women’s authority to minister. In fact, further validation of Ruth Moore’s ministry is seen by my grandfather’s support of her at a moment of crisis in one service. Her daughter recalled:

She never had a problem with recognition or with needing a role in the church. She did have some challenges because not everybody accepted women preachers. I remember a problem one time when they were building the church on Central and we were worshipping in a tent. They erected the tent right on the ground and it was a cold winter. The wind went through it although we had an old stove in the middle for heat. We had a revival with Brother Rex in the tent. Well, there was a Church of Christ group who decided to challenge the fact that mother was a preacher because they didn’t think she should be. They came and, of course, mother opened the service as the pastor of the church and they came right down on the front row and sat down. The good thing is that Brother Rex was right there ready for them and he just talked to them and took care of the situation. We felt like the Lord worked that out because she didn’t have a confrontation with them. Brother Rex knew just what to say.38

The convergence of rhetoric, religion, and women preachers of the IPHC in Oklahoma provides a solid challenge to long-held hierarchal beliefs and a way for those of us still living and working today to push the denomination forward.

Conclusion

The Azusa Street Centennial took place in April of 2006 in Los Angeles, California, and I had the privilege of attending. Thousands of Pentecostal Christian leaders and church members from all over the world came to worship God in vibrant evening services and to hear the newest scholarship concerning the revival begun by African American preacher William Seymour in a rundown building on Azusa Street in 1906. I attended a service led by well-known Pentecostal preacher Paula White, who preached in Aimee Semple McPherson’s Angelus Temple. I felt odd sitting in a building I had only seen in pictures, but I was also elated to see that an international focus was still a major theme of Pentecostalism today. The service began with a procession of people carrying flags from nations throughout the world, emphasizing that Pentecostals worldwide today number more than two hundred million, according to Vinson Synan, who was often quoted in the historical video we watched at the service.39

The worship service focused on the veneration of the Lord through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The experience of greater spiritual power gained through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which drew people to Azusa Street in the early 1900s, is still a vital part of Pentecostalism today. White spoke against racial and gender-based prejudices and challenged listeners with the question, “What were you born to do?” “To exist is a waste of days,” she said. “Some people say the most important dates are the day you were born and the day you die. But the most important dates are the day you were born and the day you figure out why.” Her inspiring sermon left me with a message I still hold dear: “Challenge it and it will change.”

For those women preachers struggling to establish authority within their denominations, I encourage you to continue to challenge the gender-based prejudice of those who would seek to limit the use of your gifts. Finding unity in a community of believers is empowering, and I am proud to be a part of the IPHC today, although support of women as preachers and leaders has not always been unequivocally given. Without challenging the paradigms erected by society and mimicked in the church, we can never make progress. Still, it is worth rethinking how women’s oppression has been challenged throughout history and learning how community and humility are effective instruments of change. Authority within the hearts of Christians must be Spirit-based, not defined by the social constructs in which we live. So, seek Christ and pray that you may successfully challenge the gender-based prejudices that limit the callings of women, and that you may bring about changes that create unity and nourishing types of authority that lead not to domination, but to growth.

Notes

2. York, Life Events, 2.
3. York, Life Events, 8.
7. York, Life Events, 8.
8. York, Life Events, 10.
15. York, Life Events, 6.
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