Most Pentecostal movements today are welcoming women leaders and preachers in their embrace of egalitarian theology (even if not always in practical application). The pursuit of women’s equality is typically an objective of those who lean left on the values spectrum. Pentecostals tend to be socially conservative. Why, then, would Pentecostals embrace egalitarian theology?

Taking the intersection of the Pentecostal movement and women’s movements in North America as a case, this essay traces how egalitarian theology developed into a clearly organized set of ideas and practices. We shall see how, over the past few hundred years, social changes produced by women’s movements have propelled the acceptance of women church leaders and changed the landscape of Western church leadership. While egalitarian theology is not a product of secular feminism, feminism created an environment where egalitarian theological reflection could take root and flourish. This has not happened in a linear fashion, however. Pentecostals, for example, found themselves entwined with feminism in its earliest days, but this has been a push-pull relationship over time.

The Early Church

denominational policies around the ordination of women. This theological reflection came as women across all spheres of life began to reconsider their social roles.

Egalitarian Theology and Early Feminism

Traditionally, scholars divide the feminist movement into three waves (and sometimes add a current fourth wave). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the first wave of feminism (1848–1920) made significant strides in women’s suffrage, education, property rights, and the abolition of slavery. In the swirl of first-wave feminism ideas, women began to theologize about their experiences and their calling. Many of these early egalitarian theologians were also social reformers.

We can trace the development of a clearly articulated and recorded theology of women ministers from Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874). Palmer was an American female Methodist theologian and preacher who developed a theology of the “priesthood” or “prophethood of all believers.” This recognized that men and women alike ministered through the power of the Holy Spirit as demonstrated through the practice of spiritual gifts in healing, prophesy, word of knowledge, preaching, and teaching. The Holy Spirit’s gifting validated a woman’s leadership in Christian ministry. She wrote The Promise of the Father (1859), a defense of women’s preaching.

These ideas did not end with Palmer, however. Catherine Booth (1829–1890) continued to develop this theology. Booth grew up in a Victorian English home that embraced the ideology of the Cult of Domesticity. However, because of her childhood illness, Booth developed a keen interest in theology and preaching. After marrying, she wrote Female Ministry, theologically defending Palmer’s preaching ministry. Booth began to preach and founded the Salvation Army in partnership with her husband, William Booth.

Another key egalitarian theologian was Katharine Bushnell (1855–1946), a Methodist missionary and feminist social activist. Bushnell had a high respect for the Bible as inspired and inerrable but argued that translators had misrepresented the Bible because of their patriarchal lens. She taught that female emancipation was at the heart of the gospel message. Bushnell wrote God’s Word to Women (1916), a carefully researched Bible study advocating the liberation of women. She believed feminism and Christianity were so deeply intertwined that translators had misrepresented the Bible.

In these scattered egalitarian theological seeds of the Methodist holiness movement, God began to stir hearts and minds in a new Christian revival, Pentecostalism. The organizational structures that emerged from the Pentecostal revivals of the early twentieth century became some of the fastest-growing egalitarian movements today. Pentecostals focused on the experiential nature of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This brand-new movement had the frontier culture of pioneers, initially without strong organizational structures or well-defined theologies. In contrast to the mainline denominational restrictions which limited women leading and teaching, women were preaching at the forefront of the early Pentecostal movements.

The Pentecostal movement and the first-wave feminist movement emerged in the same era. Both were breaks from the status quo (whether in society or in the church) where women pioneered new public identities. The Pentecostal movement in these early days was largely considered to be fringe, fanatical, and doctrinally flawed. Some overlap existed between feminism and Pentecostalism. Christabel Pankhurst was a first-wave feminist who practiced civil disobedience and spent time in jail before becoming a Pentecostal pioneer in 1922, preaching both about the Holy Spirit and women’s suffrage.

Women were active in official ministry leadership roles in the Azusa Street Mission, a flashpoint for the Pentecostal revival. In 1907, the General Assembly of the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) officially recognized the leadership role of women in the early church. In 1908, they recognized women deaconesses, and in 1909, licensed women to preach. The Assemblies of God denomination also began developing an egalitarian theology in this era. Beginning in 2010, its General Presbytery published a position paper affirming women’s role as preachers.

The theology that developed in the Assemblies of God was not directly a response to women’s rights but was framed in a hermeneutic of trust in the Bible as inerrant. Jesse Hoover delineates three key facets of the theology underpinning the Assemblies of God’s position toward women in ministry in this era: that the Holy Spirit’s calling was the most important validation of any minister; that the Holy Spirit’s giftedness was proof of this calling; and that the biblical theology of Joel 2, as fulfilled in Acts 2, affirmed that “your daughters will prophesy.” Pentecostals embraced Phoebe Palmer’s “priesthood of all believers” theology. These revivalists believed that the last days, the Spirit would pour out on all flesh, men and women, and the proof of this was in Spirit-giftedness. They did not wait for someone to ordain them into ministry. Instead, “Recognition usually followed, rather than preceded, active ministry.” This was extraordinary in an era when women could not even open a bank account on their own, or vote.

While the Church of God used the established Pentecostal theology to support women preaching, it barred women from full ordination until 2000. The Assemblies of God, however, continued developing their theology over its early decades. The denomination began with a limit placed on women’s church leadership roles based on 1 Tim 2:11–15. This changed in 1920, and women began to be ordained as assistant pastors. This policy shift was undergirded by a new interpretation of Psalm 68:11, a recognition that women bear equal responsibility for preaching the gospel, and an argument that 1 Cor 14:34–35 was addressing a particular problem rather than establishing a blanket prohibition on women preaching. J. N. Hoover argued in 1932 that the Apostle Paul commending Phoebe was an affirmation of women leading in the early church, not just preaching. This theology influenced the Assemblies of God’s 1935 decision to fully ordain women as both evangelists (prophetic ministry) and pastors (priestly ministry).

In the United States, women like Maria Woodworth-Etter (1844–1924) and Aimee Semple McPherson (1890–1944) pastored large churches and were influential preachers and ministers. They maintained their feminine identity in an era when female leadership was socially unacceptable. Semple McPherson founded the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, a Pentecostal denomination that today boasts over 90,000 churches around the world.
globe. Sarah Jane Lancaster (1858–1934), a Methodist lay minister, began the Pentecostal movement in Australia. She planted a church and founded the Australian Assemblies of God. By 1930, twenty of the thirty-seven Pentecostal churches planted in Australia were pastored by women.27 In 1914, a full one-third of the American Assemblies of God ministers, and two-thirds of its missionaries, were women.28 Egalitarian theology was not just a set of ideas but was being lived out in the church.

This early synergy would not last, however. As Pentecostalism became more mainstream through the charismatic movement in the decades to come, second-wave feminism did not find the same footing within this Christian community.

The Pentecostal Movement and Second-Wave Feminism

Second-wave feminism, emerging in the middle of the twentieth century and propelled by Betty Friedan, focused on women’s liberation from the home and on women’s equality.29 By this time, Pentecostals had found greater mainstream acceptance in Christian society. Ministers like Pastor Kathryn Kuhlman helped transition the Pentecostal movement into respectable Christianity through a “charismatic renewal” which crossed denominational boundaries. Kuhlman pastored a church, preached on radio and television, led a large organization, and had a powerful healing ministry. Despite this prominence, Kuhlman distanced herself from feminist ideology and did not offer a theological defense for her ministry.30 Christians isolated themselves from cultural shifts that moved women out of the home and into the workforce, subscribing to a “theology of submission.” Women were expected to submit to their husbands, who submit to the church, which submits to Christ. Pentecostals were frequently wary of the word “feminist,” an attitude that continues today.31

As a result of this evangelical rejection of second-wave feminism, women became increasingly uncommon as leaders within Pentecostal churches, even while continuing to preach and prophesy.32 In the early church, when Christianity gained acceptance in wider society, women lost ground in Christianity as Christians adopted society’s patriarchal values. Likewise, as Pentecostalism became part of accepted mainstream evangelical Christianity, Pentecostal women lost status in the home and lost ministry leadership opportunities.

Pentecostal denominations have not formally differentiated between gender roles in ministry.33 However, as Pentecostal denominations institutionalized and formalized doctrine and structures, becoming more mainstream and enculturated, they became less focused on pneumatic manifestations. Because manifestations of Spirit-giftedness were the ultimate validation of a woman’s ministry, women’s equality in leadership was not sustained. As the Assemblies of God in America sought wider acceptance within the evangelical community in the 1960s, it retreated from its earlier practice of empowering women. More pointedly, it distanced itself from the secular feminist movement, which was perceived as an assault on family values.34

In tune with American culture, younger generations of Pentecostals have become increasingly mainstream evangelical in expression, less interested in the manifestation of the pneumatic gifts, and less accepting of female leadership.35 “The very success of the Assemblies has paradoxically made it more difficult for charisma to flow—particularly should the Spirit choose to rest on women.”36 As the movement grew, so did the expectation that women should submit to men. Women were widely accepted as preachers, teachers, and prophets as they were gifted by the Spirit, but expected to submit to male headship both at home and in church governance.37 Another way to understand this, according to Charles Barfoot and Gerald Sheppard, is that as the Pentecostal movement institutionalized, the function of leaders shifted from being prophetic (pastoring and preaching) to priestly, with a focus on leadership and administration. In this transition, female leadership involvement diminished.38 As a result of these cultural dynamics, female ordination diminished in the Assemblies of God.

During second-wave feminism, Pentecostals were not the only movements taking a fresh look at women’s leadership. In 1948, the World Council of Churches set up an ecumenical commission to study the life and work of women in churches. Of the sixteen denominations that participated in the study, only a few of the mainline denominations were ordaining women: namely, the American Baptists, Evangelicals, Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches, and African Methodists. The Presbyterians, Lutherans, Reformed Church of America, and Protestant Episcopalians were not. In most of these denominations, however, the reasons for excluding women from denominational and church leadership had less to do with clearly defined theology and more to do with tradition around women’s roles.39 The mainline denominations focused less on developing an egalitarian theology based on inerrancy, and more on issues of women’s rights.

The World Council of Churches revisited the question in 1963 with a new ecumenical study. The council realized that a church’s theology of women in leadership was the most significant factor impacting whether a woman led in her church, and that it was rapidly becoming a divisive issue. They concluded:

The range of the discussion and the urgency of the problem is something new in Christian history; it has been occasioned by social and cultural movements, although the solution of the problem requires theological decision. Social and cultural movements have their proper place as a challenge to translate Christian doctrine into possible new forms of life and church order. It is true that the danger must be avoided of accommodating Christian truth to the current ideology, but we must also say that God may use secular movements for showing his will to us.40

The study leaders concluded that codifying ideas into a well-formed theology was important for Spirit-led, well-reasoned reflection and practice around women in ministry. They believed that the fact that this reflection was prompted by the social movement of feminism was not necessarily a signal of cultural syncretism, but perhaps of God’s sovereign winds of change blowing across society. They began this reflection with two key points: God has called all believers, both men and women, to bear witness to Jesus, and God created both male and female alike in his image. Scripture seeming to limit female leadership should be interpreted through the original historic-cultural context.41 As a result of this egalitarian theological work, thinking in mainline denominations began to shift.
Egalitarian Theology and Third-Wave Feminism

Third-wave feminism began in the 1990s, with a generation that grew up in the shadow of second-wave feminism. Women’s equality had been normalized. Third-wave feminism had a greater focus on femininity, personal empowerment, diversity, and social justice issues. In sync with third-wave feminism, the Assemblies of God released its first position paper defending women in ministry, with a clearly articulated egalitarian theology based on biblical inerrancy. This document addressed translation errors that formerly rendered Phoebe’s role as that of “servant” instead of “minister” (Rom 16:1) and presented the female apostle Junia as the male Junias (Rom 16:7). The document blamed these errors on patriarchal bias on the part of translators who could not conceive of women holding these leadership roles.

Today, many Pentecostals are refocused on empowering female leadership in an effort to remain culturally relevant. In 2000, the Church of God International Assemblies agreed to ordain women as “ministers” as a practical concession for women in ministry contexts that require full ordination, such as military chaplaincy. This was not a theologically driven shift but was a response to the societal changes that came in the wake of second-wave feminism. The openness for women to undertake chaplaincy was not a military initiative. Rather, it was the Church of God’s willingness to fully endorse women in ministry.

An uneasy duality has emerged. Feminism is still a dirty word in many Christian circles, and leaders who self-identify as feminists can find themselves marginalized in Pentecostal circles. Women in church seem to associate feminism with disloyalty or neglect of family, abortion rights, and hatred or resentment of men. However, due to sixty years of changing Western culture, gender equality is an underlying expectation in marriages and in churches, despite giving lip service to the idea of wives submitting to husbands. Cheryl Catford claims that this duality is a result of Pentecostalism’s lack of a clear egalitarian hermeneutic. This makes it vulnerable to the theology of complementarian Christianity. Frederick Ware disagrees, arguing that Pentecostal egalitarian theology has been clear and well-established through the work of early theologians like Phoebe Palmer. He terms this duality “ecclesial pragmatism,” wherein church policy decisions are influenced by social and practical pressures rather than by theological considerations. He criticizes this methodology, insisting that Pentecostals and Charismatics should ordain and empower women, not because of adopting feminism-driven social change, but because Pentecostal ecclesial praxis should be in alignment with its already well-developed egalitarian theology.

We have seen a resurgence in female leadership in the Western Church, despite resistance from younger leaders influenced by neo-Reformed celebrity pastors like Mark Driscoll and John Piper. In 1987, just 13.8 percent of credentialed ministers in the US Assemblies of God were women. This increased to 17.4 percent in 2003. In 2002, the numbers of female credentialed ministers in the Australian Assemblies of God (renamed Australian Christian Churches) were just 16.8 percent. By 2007, that number had risen to 26.4 percent.

Female church leaders today find themselves caught between the traditional negative attitudes (within Christian culture) toward second-wave feminism, the power structures of their movements, and the expectations for personal empowerment held by young Christian women who grew up in the age of third-wave feminism. Bobbie Houston, founding co-pastor of Hillsong Church, straddled this tension. While she referred to feminism as “misguided,” encouraging women to prioritize their husbands and children, she also held the second most powerful role within Hillsong’s organization for decades and advocated for global female empowerment. Miller notes this paradox:

The dissonance between the message of empowerment preached by female leaders and the restrictions that others, and they, place on their power seems striking to an outsider. That female Pentecostal leaders do not see a paradox in the fact that they may pastor a church and act as role models for other women while submitting to their husbands’ authority, makes this phenomenon even more fascinating. Broad social changes to women’s roles within the family and wider society have not transformed their roles within their churches.

Pentecostal movements continue to wrestle with this dissonance, as do other denominations. Pentecostals trend toward political conservatism, although they do not go as far right as many Baptists do. Methodists and Presbyterians tend to be more politically moderate. Episcopalians tend to be more politically liberal than many other denominations. To what extent do these cultural trends impact women’s leadership in local churches? Probably significantly, but within Pentecostalism, egalitarian theology straddles an awkward tension between its political affiliations with the waves of feminist movements and its own theological history with respect to women in church leadership.

In the past forty years, many well-respected theologians have continued to write and reflect about a theology of mutuality, bringing fresh insights into reading Scripture and into writing church history. Some bring an overtly feminist theological perspective into this discussion, looking to dismantle patriarchy and gain power for women. Others focus on mutuality, which looks to both empower women into full partnership with men, and to secure the mutual flourishing of both sexes. In the 1980s and 90s, work by theologians like Catherine Clark Kroeger and Stanley Grenz built on this. In the past twenty years, Gordon Fee, Lucy Peppiatt, Kevin Giles, Scot McKnight, and Craig Keener are just a few of the important voices writing about a theology of mutuality, amidst a large body of expanding egalitarian theological work. Organizations like CBE International and other denominational efforts are bringing these ideas into wider conversations.

Conclusion

Egalitarian theology empowers women into their God-given ministry giftedness. It places men and women in mutual partnership in the home and in the church. Egalitarian movements have intersected with feminism at various points. As Christianity contextualized itself within the feminist movements’ influence in Western culture, egalitarian theology emerged, affirming what God was doing through female ministry. In Pentecostalism, this meant that as God poured out
his Spirit on men and women, an egalitarian preaching and prophetic ministry flourished. Women were on the front lines of leading this revival. However, as Pentecostalism became mainstream in the mid-twentieth century, this female participation waned. This regression has been reversing more recently in the wake of the influence—on Western society—of three waves of feminism. What has emerged today is an egalitarian missiological approach that empowers women into their God-gifted leadership calling and sets men and women leaders in partnership with each other. In addition, the past forty years have produced a large body of formal theological reflection on a theology of mutuality, in other words, egalitarian theology.

Notes

27. Hutchinson, “The Contribution of Women to Pentecostalism,” loc. 4929. See also Jim Reiter, “Remembering Sarah Jane Lancaster without Forgetting Winifred Kiek: Just Who Was the First Female Minister in Australia?,” *Priscilla Papers* 36/3 (Summer 2022) 3–8.
44. Roebuck, “I Have Done the Best I Could,” 399.

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