

# Divine gender as a challenge to classical Pentecostals

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This article examines the traditional exclusive use of male language to describe God in classical Pentecostalism. This practice reinforces patriarchal structures and power dynamics, hinders women's full participation in the church and limits believers' understanding of God's nature and attributes by excluding feminine qualities. Gender-based language for God dilutes or obscures the unique characteristics of the Divine. Worldwide, classical Pentecostals who use male pronouns for God view the Bible as the absolute authority for believers and their faith. To discuss the challenge and offer suggestions for overcoming it, it is necessary to first examine the hermeneutical presupposition that underlies it: the belief that the Bible literally represents God's word or revelation. Addressing the divine gender challenge by defining God as genderless necessitates a reevaluation of hermeneutics, particularly as most of the Bible depicts God as male. However, by affirming divine transcendence and relationality, classical Pentecostals can challenge the traditional notion of divine maleness. This alternative hermeneutical perspective will allow Pentecostals to remain faithful to their biblical and historical foundations while presenting a more inclusive understanding of God that resonates with contemporary concerns.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The study utilises comparative literature research from the limited resources written by Pentecostals on the subject, alongside the extensive literature from other theological traditions. It analyses and compares religious texts and theological concepts across various historical, cultural and religious contexts. The research employs historical-critical, linguistic-literary and thematic analysis, as well as a study of intertextuality, examining the relationships between biblical texts.

**Keywords:** classical Pentecostals; divine maleness; gender; Pentecostal hermeneutics; language; divine relational nature; *imago Dei*; equality.

## Introduction

### Social value

Traditionally, Christian believers, like Jews, conceived of the triune God as a male God, consisting of a male Father and a male Son (Fortman 1999:2). The God of Israel is often represented as embodying strength, power and authority, qualities traditionally associated with masculinity. For that reason, they referred to God as 'he'. Because they read the Bible literally, which primarily refers to God as male, believers assumed God's maleness was an essential part of the divine being. In contrast, several religious and spiritual traditions have conceptualised God as female or with incorporated feminine aspects, among them Christian feminist theologies and progressive groups (e.g. Howard, Oswald & Kirkman 2020; Rea 2016; Schnabel et al. 2022; Whitehead 2012, among others).<sup>1</sup> The study's social value lies in its emphasis on women's leadership potential and those who believe that the traditional notion of divine maleness is discriminatory.

### Scientific value

Although the challenge of divine maleness has received ample attention among mainline and established churches, those from more conservative backgrounds, such as Pentecostals who employ literalist-biblicist hermeneutics, have largely disregarded it for various reasons. While some traditions have responded by altering their liturgy and teachings to include a gender-free concept of God, most classical Pentecostals do not consider it as a challenge worth addressing.<sup>2</sup>

1. It is also true of the Sophia tradition; Wiccans and Neopagans; Hinduism with goddesses such as Durga, Kali, Lakshmi and Saraswati; the *Shekhinah* in Judaism and some African indigenous religions and various indigenous American traditions and spiritualities.

2. 'Classical Pentecostals' refer to denominations that emerged from the early 20th century Pentecostal revival movements. They emphasise salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and advocate for a direct, personal experience with God through the baptism in the Holy Spirit, which is typically evidenced by speaking in tongues (glossolalia), the charismata, premillennial eschatology and sanctification. Their worship style is expressive and spontaneous. They include the Assemblies of God, Church of God, Pentecostal Holiness Church and Foursquare Church. In South Africa, the main denominations are the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa,

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Consequently, the scientific value of this article lies in its aim to draw attention to the negative subjective experiences of some individuals within the classical Pentecostal tradition (Dube 2014; Raley 2024:71–73).

## Aim and objectives

The aim of this study was to examine, challenge and address the Pentecostal perspective of God as male.

The objectives included describing how Pentecostals have historically viewed women and their roles in the church, addressing the challenge of language barriers that genderise God by exploring Pentecostals' hermeneutics, which consider the cultural and historical contexts of specific biblical passages to affirm biblical revelation, and developing strategies to address these challenges.

## Findings

The research demonstrates the use of inclusive language that does not threaten Pentecostal hermeneutical sentiments of the Bible as the Word of God.

The traditional Christian triune God consists of a male Father and Son (Fortman 1999:3). Divine maleness implies God's strength, power and authority. Therefore, believers referred to God as 'he'. The question is asked whether God's maleness is an essential part of the divine being, as the notion is rooted in biblical language and historical theological constructs that flowed from it.

This practice poses significant challenges and opportunities for classical Pentecostals who support the idea of God's maleness but seek to articulate a balanced and inclusive understanding of God. It is challenging because it reinforces patriarchal structures and power dynamics, potentially hindering women's full participation and leadership, and it excludes individuals who may have had negative experiences with their fathers. Conversely, gender-neutral language can dilute or obscure unique divine characteristics, limiting believers' understanding of God's essence and attributes to exclude any feminine qualities, including divine compassion, nurturing and receptivity (Gabaitse 2015:3). As global society becomes increasingly diverse, Christians cannot afford to be culturally insensitive to their handed-down customs. Therefore, it has become imperative for Pentecostals to address whether traditional ways of addressing God have become unusable in current theological endeavours (Creemers 2015; Daswani 2015). This argument necessitates a reconsideration of Pentecostals' traditional views on women in the church.

## The way Pentecostals considered women in the past

It is necessary to begin the research by describing how Pentecostals traditionally viewed women and how their

(footnote 2 continues...)

Full Gospel Church and Pentecostal Protestant church. They differ from charismatics who adopt Pentecostal practices within non-Pentecostal denominations and Third Wave evangelicals who embrace spiritual gifts without emphasising tongues as the initial evidence of Spirit baptism.

perspectives evolved. Despite viewing God traditionally as male, from the start, early Pentecostals experienced that the Spirit anointed women along with men and endowed them with different ministries. The illustrious history of Spirit-led women as preachers and church leaders from the traditions from which Pentecostals grew includes Maria Woodworth Etter (1844–1924), Lucy Farrow (1851–1911), Florence Crawford (1872–1936), Aimee Semple McPherson (1890–1944), Ida B. Robinson (1891–1946) and Blanche Britton (1901–1989). Women also played a significant role in many early Pentecostal churches and even led some of them. Among them were Florence Crawford who founded the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) in Portland, Oregon in 1907; Aimee Semple McPherson, an American evangelist who established the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, known for her use of the media to spread her message (King 2013) and Maria Woodworth-Etter, an American faith healer who played a key role in the establishment of the early Pentecostal movement (Langford 2017; Warner 2005; Woodworth-Etter 1997).

This was also the case in South Africa, where, for instance, Eva Stuart led the Krugersdorp assembly of the young AFM of South Africa. She established it in 1904 as a Zionist group in cooperation with John Alexander Dowie and Daniel Bryant, and they assembled at her house for services. Her husband was Sam Stuart, a school principal in Krugersdorp; they had emigrated from England in 1897 (Burger & Nel 2008). A young man, a member of the Krugersdorp Zionist group, attended one of the earliest services in the Tabernacle where John G. Lake and Thomas Hezmalhalch, commissioned by the Azusa Street Mission to proclaim the Pentecostal message in South Africa, ministered. The young man experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit and reported back to the Zionists of Krugersdorp. News of similar experiences in America and India had reached the group, piquing their interest. The Stuarts then also attended Lake's services in June 1908, and Eva was healed after Lake prayed with her (Burger & Nel 2008). Stuart's group became a part of the AFM in 1909 and she led it until 1921, when she established an assembly in Umtentweni, KZN where she ministered until her death in 1944 (Nel 2019a:15). In 1927/8, the AFM of South Africa experienced a schism led by another female leader, Martha Fraser of Benoni (Kgatle 2016:51).

Traditionally, Pentecostals' hermeneutics left room for a theology open to the ongoing work of the Spirit. They viewed Scriptures as the highest authority, representing God's word. However, that did not exclude receiving fresh insights that they believed came from the Spirit and that deepened their understanding of God. Hence, they accepted that women ministered in their churches.

The author of 1 Corinthians 2:9–10 remarks that God has prepared for those who love him what none has seen, heard or conceived. Hence, Pentecostals believe that God continues to reveal new insights to contemporary readers through the Spirit, who searches even the depths of God. While anyone

with sufficient rational faculties and skills can glean truth from the Bible, real insights that transform the lives of present-day readers come from faith and the Spirit (Arrington 1988:18). Arrington emphasises that Pentecostals' hermeneutical and eschatological openness should always include a willingness to reconsider how humans think about God in light of divine mystery and revelation.

However, during the 1940s and 1950s of the previous century, Pentecostals became dissatisfied with society's perception of them as sectarians. To be more acceptable to mainstream churches, they changed their liturgy to reflect more orderly services like the Evangelicals and also accepted their conservative hermeneutics (Nel 2019b). The new hermeneutics interpreted the Bible literally, seeing it as God's own words, excluding any criticism of biblical perspectives. As a result, they also accepted the patriarchalism that underlies much of biblical narratives and the accompanying Hebrew view of women's role of submission in society and marriage. Hence, they excluded women from leading or teaching in the church, and it took decades before they again allowed women to return to pastoral leadership roles. Their nonacceptance of the role of women as church leaders was supported by the Pauline view that women should remain silent in the church and be subject to their husbands.<sup>3</sup>

Today, only a few Pentecostal scholars are engaging the theological language and imagery used in the Bible to describe God from the angle of feminist theology, biblical studies and spirituality (cf., e.g., Gregory 2024; Holmes 2013; Hollingsworth 2007; Stephenson 2011b, 2013a, 2013b, 2024; Raley 2024; Van Horne 2024). But they are the exception. While the Bible often uses male pronouns and titles, such as 'Father', to describe God, some scholars are beginning to explore a more nuanced understanding of divine imagery. Most hold to a high view of Scripture although some publications illustrate the alternative Pentecostal hermeneutic developed by scholars since the 1980s (Clark 2001:43; Elbert 2004; Keener 2016; Kgatle & Mofokeng 2019; McLean 1984:35; Oliverio 2020). Their commitment to personal experiences and encounters with God feeds into their interest. Scholars include Stephenson (2011a) who argues that Pentecostals' spirituality and their openness to the Holy Spirit leave ample room for alternative non-hierarchical understandings of the divine essence, Johns (2010) who discusses how Pentecostal spirituality can resist limiting patriarchal structures, Alexander (2011) who examines African American Pentecostal women's leadership, Jacqueline Grey (2010) who argues for a more inclusive theological framework within Pentecostal readings of Scripture and Simon Chan (2019) who defends traditional Trinitarian language while also acknowledging the Spirit's inclusivity in Pentecostals' divine encounters.

The most significant reason Pentecostals should reconsider their God-talk is pastoral. Early Pentecostals realised that the Spirit's anointing and gifting did not regard gender (Jl 2:28–29).

3. In Ephesians 5:22–24, Paul advises wives to submit (other witnesses: ὑποτασσέσθωσαν [third person imperative] or ὑποτάσσεσθε [second person imperative]); Pauline style is often cryptic and argues for the shorter reading) to their husbands as to the Lord since the husband is the wife's head as Christ is the church's head (cf. also 1 Cor 11:5; 13:33b–36; for a thorough analysis, refer Cowles 2022).

Their ethos and experience-oriented approach emphasised that the Spirit would manifest through both genders, challenging traditional views of God. However, later, when they denied women leadership positions, they marginalised them and, by limiting the divine essence to maleness, overlooked the pain of those who experienced abuse from fathers (Hackett 2017; Miller 2016; Odey & Onah 2020). Some Pentecostal churches still do not allow women to preach or administer the sacraments.<sup>4</sup> It is argued that Pentecostals need to regain a pastoral sensitivity to the issue that will lead to reconsideration of how to describe God's relational attributes (Van Wyk 2018). Their language needs to resonate with the diversity of church members without dishonouring the biblical text.

In this section, the question was answered: How do Pentecostals view the role of women in the church, and why has it changed over time? The next task is to investigate how Pentecostals can address the challenges of God-talk, given the way the Bible refers nearly exclusively to God in male terms. In the conclusion, some suggestions will be offered to address the issue of God's maleness.

### Addressing the challenge of Pentecostals' language barriers

It has been argued that Pentecostals need to be conscientised about the challenges presented by their gendering of God in order to develop and focus on complementary modes of God-talk that underscore the whole character of God. It may include considering the use of neutral terminology when referring to the Divinity. They may also reconsider thinking about God's existence as three entities more logically and rationally, namely reflecting the best use of 'persons', given the reality of God. They should consider whether they are not dishonouring and limiting the divine by literally defining the divine essence only in human terms, forgetting that God's existence as holy, glorious and eternal is inaccessible to any human understanding.

It does not imply that it is impossible to speak about God. However, the divine essence falls outside the human frame of reference because the Creator exists apart from creation, and believers can at most speak hesitantly, stuttering when referring to the divine essence. In contrast, discussing the divine energies is more accessible because it consists of the divine revelation to humankind, as expressed, among others, in the Bible.

However, language used to serve the interests of a specific gender group at the cost of others, as women might experience in the light of Pentecostal God-talk, requires a radical change in existing language practices. Therefore, it is submitted that Pentecostals will benefit by referring to 'Mother-Father' instead of 'Father God' (a practice found in some traditions related to the Nag Hammadi documents, like the Gospel of Thomas or the Apocryphon of John [Robinson 1975]). At the same time, they should emphasise the feminine side of the Spirit as the manifestation of divine love.

4. One such South African classical Pentecostal church is the Pinkster Protestantse Kerk (Pentecostal Protestant Church; Jacobs 2008:31).

## God and gender

Rappaport and Corbally (2019) argue that monotheism, with its belief in one supreme God, may have derived from human polygynous ancestry, where a husband had more than one wife or female mate at a time, to facilitate the species' obsequious attention to dominant males in the ancient harem-holding past. The three major monotheistic traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, focused on a male figure that resembled the alpha male leading a social group. Especially in parts of the Old Testament, they argue, God is portrayed as the 'alpha male', a big, scary figure. However, other narratives led to how the New Testament would eventually view God, as a remarkably humanoid God with features that emphasise divine nourishing and protective character (Barash 2025). The argument premises that humans created in the *imago Dei* (Gn 1:27) developed God as *imago homo*.

In contrast, Pentecostals view the transcendent-immanent God not as the highest-ranking male but interpret Divinity in terms of their creation in the image of God, implying that God embodies attributes associated with them that portray both masculinity and femininity. Therefore, while masculine language may traditionally dominate, it does not restrict God's identity to male characteristics alone. Although it is not clear what it all entails that humans are created in *imago Dei*, Coleman (2023:677) is correct in stating that while earlier theologians sought to describe God's image in humanity by examining aspects of the human structure, disposition, capacities and qualities, a biblical anthropology can only state with confidence that humans created in the image of God are the crown of creation and stand in a relationship with God.

Pentecostals accept that God is Spirit, implying that God transcends human categories of gender. The Hebrew *ruach* resembles a feminine word (Van Oort 2016:10). While God is most often described in masculine terms in the Bible, this does not mean that God is male in a physical or biological sense. Instead, it reflects the perspective of the predominantly male authors of the Bible, who interpreted God using masculine imagery. This male imagery serves merely as a means of communicating aspects of God's character. Probably because of the patriarchal character of the culture of the day, Israelites referred to God using male human categories, implying that their view of God is of a person in relationship with human beings. God is not a natural body such as the sun, moon or planet. However, what we must keep in mind is that human language is limited when it attempts to describe a reality beyond the human frame of reference and can never faithfully reflect the divine essence.

That some early Christians thought of God as non-gendered can be deduced from Gnostic documents that state that Jesus is the Father, Mother and Son (Meyer & Robinson 2009: 104–105) and the early church's infatuation with the mother of Jesus as the *Theotokos*, a core belief in the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox traditions. For instance, the *Secret Book of John* recounts a voice from the exalted heavenly realm proclaiming the incarnation of the Child of humanity, which the first ruler, Yaldabaoth, claimed

came from his mother. However, it was the voice of the 'holy perfect Mother-Father, the complete Forethought, the image of the invisible one, being the Father of the All, through whom everything came into being' (Meyer & Robinson 2009:118). *Three Forms of First Thought* pictures God as an androgynous mother-father since God mates with the divine self. Through them alone, the All stands firm by giving birth to a shining light (Meyer & Robinson 2009:730).

Other aspects or agencies of God, such as wisdom and word, can also be viewed in terms of feminine characteristics, employing anthropomorphic language. Bor (2024:462) asserts that historically, archaeological and anthropological evidence indicates that God-talk was initially predominantly feminine, changing with monotheistic religions' utilisation of masculine language. It represented a major factor in the social and cultural exclusion of women. However, the feminine divine image persists in theistic traditions. What is vital is that anthropomorphic depictions of God view God as an immaterial being, interpreted metaphorically, analogically or symbolically (Martin 2019). Qualities such as divine beauty and mercy find their fullest expression in women and the feminine manifestation of existence, as medieval Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Julian of Norwich illustrated in their experiences of the divine (Bor 2024:482–485). Attempts to describe God by abstract and nonpersonal philosophical speculation should be refuted for more appropriate, complementary divine names.

Elaine Pagels (1989:82) responds to the question of why the early church rejected most of the Gnostic teachings by explaining that Irenaeus (first half of the second century CE) explains that it was mainly (foolish) women attracted to these groups. The Gnostic teacher, Marcus, seduced them by using aphrodisiacs to deceive, victimise and defile them and then encouraged them to prophesy, practices strictly forbidden in the orthodox Church (Pagels 1989:83). Irenaeus especially resented the heretical practice of women who acted as priests, handing out the eucharistic elements, teaching, engaging in argument, enacting exorcisms, undertaking cures and baptising. The same antagonism towards women is found in Tertullian (second part of the second century CE), who refers to a woman leading a North African congregation: she did not consider the 'precepts of ecclesiastical discipline concerning women' that specify that no woman might speak, teach, baptise, offer the eucharist or claim any share in masculine functions' (Pagels 1989:84).

Documentary resources do not reveal any evidence of women in prophetic, priestly or episcopal roles in conventional churches from around 200 CE. In contrast, some Christian Gnostic groups kept on considering women equal to men and revered them as prophets, teachers, travelling evangelists, healers, priests and even bishops. This is not true of all groups; the Marcionites, Montanists and Carpocratians, for instance, retained a masculine image of God. In contrast, the first-century church was more open towards women, as illustrated, for instance, in Luke's

references to Simeon (2:25–35) and Anna (2:36–40), who both prophesied about the baby Jesus.

When Jesus spoke with women and included them among his companions, such as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, Susanna, Martha, Mary of Bethany and others who supported him financially, he violated Jewish conventions and challenged traditional patriarchal roles. After his death, women were among those who held leadership positions. Women acted as prophets, teachers and evangelists, such as the daughters of Philip, Priscilla, Phoebe, Lydia, Chloe, Nympha, Dorcas and Junia (Pagels 1989:84). That Junia (or Junias) mentioned is especially interesting; most scholars accept that she was a female since Paul in Romans 16:7 calls her an outstanding apostle along with Andronicus.<sup>5</sup>

However, Paul had an ambivalent attitude towards women in ministry, probably because his traditional Jewish faith compelled him to view God in a divinely ordained hierarchy of patriarchal social subordination. Hence, he uses Genesis 2–3 to assert man's authority over woman: only man is made in the image and glory of God; woman is deduced from the glory of man (1 Cor 11:7). While he acknowledged women as equals and recognised their ministry (Rm 12:7) in deference to traditional Jewish Christian believers, he did not advocate social equality between the genders, as illustrated by his remark in 1 Corinthians 14:34–37 that women should keep silent during worship services: it is shameful for a woman to speak in church (Pagels 1989:84–85).

The church has viewed the pseudo-Pauline letter of Timothy as authoritative since approximately 200 CE. They exaggerate Paul's antifeminist segments, where women are instructed to receive instruction quietly in submissiveness and not aspire to teach or exercise authority over men (Tm 1 2:12). Other pseudo-Pauline letters such as Colossians (3:18–4:1) and Ephesians (5:22–6:9) also regulate that women should be subject to their husbands in everything.

The influence of Jewish Christians prevailed when, by mid-first-century CE, Christians adopted the synagogue custom of segregating women from the main community of men. By the end of the second century, the church explicitly condemned women's participation in any worship practices, branding groups where women served as heretical (Pagels 1989:84–5). Christians' target might not necessarily have been the woman as such but the issue of sexuality, portrayed in the Gnostic *Dialogue of the Savior* where Mary Magdalene rejects the 'works of femaleness', apparently referring to intercourse and procreation; only those who renounce sexual activity can

<sup>5</sup>Junia is a common Latin female name but rare in Greek (with three known instances in Greek literature outside Rm 16:7 [Moo 1996:922]). The masculine Junias (contraction for Junianas) is even more rare, with one instance in extant Greek literature. There are husband–wife teams mentioned in Paul's salutation (Prisca and Aquila in v. 3, Philologus and Julia in v. 15); hence, Junia may be the wife or Andronicus. The text may mean that Junia and Andronicus were well known to the apostolic circle or were distinguished as apostles, with the latter probably being correct ('apostle' is used in a wide sense, as 1 Cor 15:7 attests). In the early church, the apostles were missionaries in the modern sense sent out by churches (Ac 13:2, 3; 2 Cor 8:23; Phlp 2:25; Hunter 1915:1781).

ever achieve human equality and spiritual greatness (Pagels 1989:90). This may be a part of the church's motivation for establishing celibate monasticism.

Pentecostals followed the same route as the early church, initially acknowledging some women's anointing to minister. Still, since the second and third generations, as explained, they have accepted some Evangelicals' fundamentalist hermeneutics in a bid to be accepted as more than a sect. As a result, they also forbid women to teach and preach, illustrating the widespread view of God in exclusively male terms as prescribing church practice of male dominance (Thomas 1994:51–52).

### Divine relational nature

Pentecostals' confession of the divine Trinity implies that the divine essence is relational rather than strictly gendered. In relational terms, fatherhood relates to divine love, forgiveness, care, intimacy and provision, qualities that transcend traditional gendered associations. Jesus on the cross portrays divine justice, grace, mercy and love, while the Spirit is the divine presence that cares, nurtures and empowers. When Pentecostals witness to their firsthand encounters with the divine presence, they portray God as strong, nurturing, just and compassionate, expressions that also transcend traditional gender categories.

### Divine imagery in the Bible

God, as Creator of the universe, exists outside creation and humans' frame of reference. When using imagery to explain God, humans can do no more than reflect their experiences in their language. Pentecostals prioritise the authority of Scripture and tend to interpret the Bible literally; however, this does not mean that they can view biblical imagery about God as anything other than a mix of metaphors intended to describe how ancient people encountered God. It cannot serve as infallible descriptions of the divine essence that exists outside their frame of reference. When referring to God as Father or Lord, biblical authors intended to convey divine authority, provision and relationship without necessarily linking it to divine gender. For that reason, they depicted God at times with feminine metaphors, for instance, as a woman in labour (Is 42:14) or a mother hen gathering her chicks (Mt 23:37). God's relational nature demonstrates a holistic view of God's revelation.

Lastly, Jesus' maleness as a historical reality cannot serve as a cultural particularity that prescribes God's nature as male. He revealed the divine fullness while transcending gender, relating to people through his human experience. According to Kim (2020:32), Jesus' masculinity served primarily as a resistance to Roman masculine imperial ideology, the core of which was to master or control others with penetrative, aggressive and dominant power and practice. While Roman masculine imperial ideology was a socio-political power that feminised the powerless, inferior and subordinated, Jesus, supposed to be feminised as a colonised subject, instead

displayed his perfect masculinity that resisted the empire's feminising power (Kim 2020:33).

### The Spirit and inclusive imagery

Pentecostals view the Holy Spirit as central to their experience and as the source of their empowerment. It is a condition for a worship service to be Pentecostal that the Spirit should manifest during worship and preaching, also through *charismata*. Although the Hebrew term for 'spirit' is feminine, it does not imply that the Spirit is gendered.<sup>6</sup> God is neither male nor female, yet Israelites experienced God's revelation in a gendered form, allowing them to relate to the unapproachable God of holiness (which implies the separateness of God from the work of God; O'Neal 2024). As the Spirit is often described in non-gendered language, Pentecostals acknowledge the Spirit as a non-gendered aspect of the Trinity (Davis 2016:255). Many aspects of the Spirit's work relate to feminine care, such as nurturing and comforting believers. Pentecostals can easily engage with such attributes traditionally associated with femininity.

One implication of viewing God as non-gendered is that believers begin to use inclusive language in worship, thinking in these terms when referring to the 'Creator', 'Redeemer' and 'Sustainer'. The divine work cannot be restricted to strictly male or female connotations. It is not necessary to compromise the traditional language of Scripture. It is possible to honour God's nature without the requirement to ascribe gender to God. It is not about changing doctrine; instead, it is about expanding our understanding of God's relationship to humanity.

### Eschatological perspectives

Pentecostals believe in the church as Jesus' alternative community, a sign of the new world inaugurated by Christ's return (Cartledge 2022:204). The new society or kingdom of God includes a future where all distinctions of gender, race and class will be reconciled in Christ (Gl 3:28). This eschatological expectation provides Pentecostals with a model for the church, striving to exist in unity and equality (also among genders) inherent to the arrival of God's kingdom despite the church's diversities. Pentecostals should move beyond strict male-dominated imagery to realise this ideal.

In this section, Pentecostals' language of a gendered God was challenged, visiting the relational nature of God implied in humans' being created in the image of God, the different imagery biblical authors used to relate to God, the Spirit as a sign of inclusive imagery and the eschatological expectations of the kingdom characterised by equality between all people. Next, some strategies are suggested to address believers' gendered God.

6. It is not possible to deduct much from the noun gender as the gender of a word in Greek (and Hebrew) has nothing to do with gender identity. While 'spirit' is feminine in Hebrew (רוּחַ, *rūah*), it is neuter in Greek (πνεῦμα, *pneûma*) and masculine in Latin (*spiritus*). The neutral Greek πνεῦμα is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew רוּחַ. See Van Oor (2016) for discussion.

## Strategies to address Pentecostals' gendered God

The question is asked: How can classical Pentecostals address this issue constructively? Some possible ways in which they may address the issue of God's maleness are discussed. It includes seeing God beyond gender, engaging the Spirit in inclusive divine imagery (as developed earlier), considering some implications of the divine relational nature, addressing biblical contexts responsibly, participating in ecumenical discussion about God-talk and engaging in a Spirit-led praxis.

### Naming God

It is submitted that trinitarian God-talk should be supplemented by alternative ways of referring to God, rejecting the exclusive designation of God as a person. The term 'Trinity' serves to cover the church's embarrassment of saying something sensible about the Creator that exists outside their frame of reference, requiring constant revision of God-talk to do justice to the greatness and incomprehensibility of God. 'We cannot grasp the essential being of God, precisely because God is different from human beings,' states Van de Beek (2022:4) in his discussion of apophatic theology. The only reason humans can say anything about God is because they derive from nature the existence of a divine power that creates and sustains the universe, and God revealed the divine self, first to Israel and then in Christ. The revelation is of a gender-free God through different agencies; gender does not necessarily come into play except in the case of Jesus, born as a male.

All other God-talk must then be subjected to the same agenda of socio-political scrutiny of all ideologies (Meylahn 2021:3). Especially the Old Testament lends itself to defending nationalism, xenophobia, racism and the marginalisation of women and the 'other'. Biblical authors cloaked their narratives about Israel's history in service to their own political and social interests, particularly royal and nationalist ideologies. For that reason, one finds gruesome descriptions of how Israel should treat (and eventually might have treated) their enemies and non-Israelite foreigners (at least as far as one can trust the biblical 'historians' explanations). The same is true of women's social roles in ancient Israel, which required submissiveness to male authority, whether that of the father, brothers or husband.<sup>7</sup>

A crucial aspect of God-talk consists of naming God. To do so represents a creative and constructive task. It leaves ample room for considering God-talk in terms of local contexts and dialects, for instance, in considering ancestor terminology, which is vital in Asia, Africa, Latin America and other cultures. It can be regarded as a means of finding more theologically suitable ways of referring to God in the local cultural idiom. African Independent Churches (AICs), with their highly contextualised spirituality and faith expressions,

7. For example, Nehemiah 13:23–31 (Ezr 9:1–4) explains how Nehemiah observed that some Jews had married 'foreigners', contending with them and forcing them to declare under oath that they would never give their daughters to foreigners' sons or take foreigners' daughters for their sons or themselves. He even chased the son of the high priest Eliashib away because he was married to a Horonite. He boasted that he cleansed Israel from everything foreign in its midst.

have also been proposing and implementing alternative liturgical and music styles in worship services and even redesigning the traditional worship service, referring to God in enculturated terms. For instance, they assign divine attributes to local idioms, proverbs or metaphors, invoking God as the 'Great Ancestor', 'Rain Giver' or 'Lion of the Tribe', depending on the cultural context. In using contextualised values and customs, they show that worship is the primary purpose of gathering the faithful. In the process, they have developed highly successful contextual ways of worshipping God, as demonstrated by the popularity of the AICs in Africa.

It is submitted that Pentecostals must also reconsider their God-talk to reflect theological and cultural concerns, such as traditional views of inequality between people, in order not to alienate a new generation of gender-sensitive people. They should reconsider their use of God-talk in terms of their spirituality and experiences of encountering God.

### **Discounting God's relational nature**

In emphasising the experiential and relational aspects of faith, Pentecostal theology may not focus exclusively on divine maleness. Still, it should subject it to God's holistic, loving and nurturing relationship with humanity, which transcends gendered categories. The idea of the Trinity explains that God is a communal and relational being.

### **Biblical language's contexts**

Responsible hermeneutics requires that classical Pentecostals discount the cultural and historical contexts of biblical authors that influence them to use masculine language for God. To call God 'Father' reflects their patriarchal cultural setting; being a father symbolises the family's hierarchical authority. Instead, the notion of God as a male should convey relational and functional roles. An authentic Pentecostal hermeneutic, rooted in a Spirit-led interpretation of the Bible, views God's essence (in contrast to divine energies) as beyond human comprehension and not confined to gendered terms.

### **Spirit-led praxis**

When emphasising the work of the Holy Spirit as essential for the body of Christ to function on earth, Pentecostals can highlight their practice of illustrating how the Spirit's anointing rests on and empowers both men and women, reflecting God's impartiality (Ac 2:17-18). Hence, in their worship practices, prayers must emphasise that God is both transcendent and relational rather than focusing on divine genderedness. Their preaching and teaching should also reflect their sensitivity to inclusivity among people.

Pentecostals' traditional references to God in male terms, as 'Father', neglect to leave room for individuals who have struggled with negative experiences related to earthly fatherhood or patriarchy. Addressing this issue will sensitise them to the healing processes required by such people.

### **Ecumenical participation**

Some Christian traditions and scholars have addressed questions about God's gender more effectively. Dialogue with such partners may benefit Pentecostals and their dialogue partners. With their distinctive experiential and Spirit-led theology, Pentecostals can respond to these churches' concerns and learn from them. Dialogue partners can include feminist and liberation theologians, as well as churches that respond to issues of gender equality. The criterion remains that the understanding of God's nature should remain faithful to Scripture while simultaneously addressing contemporary concerns about inclusivity and equality.

## **Conclusion**

It has been argued that classical Pentecostals should address the traditional notion of God's 'maleness' by emphasising that God's transcendence stretches beyond gender and that the relational aspects of the divine nature require a more comprehensive and holistic view of God. By recognising both masculine and feminine biblical metaphors for God, they recognise the Bible's authority and simultaneously remain open to fresh insights inspired by the Spirit to reflect the distinct ethos of their movement. Their emphasis on personal experience, relational theology and eschatological hope for a world characterised by harmony among people will honour tradition and inclusivity by fostering a community where all believers, without exception, can experience the fullness of God's love and relational presence.

They can realise it by using inclusive language that acknowledges both male and female aspects of God's essence and the equality of genders before God, reinterpreting traditional language to be more inclusive and representative of the divine nature and humanity, as well as promoting female leadership and ensuring their full participation.

It is acknowledged that any challenge to the gendered language of Pentecostals will be met with resistance and that this is a complex issue without easy answers. However, Pentecostals' history demonstrates their willingness and capacity to adapt and grow in their understanding of God, as revealed by the Spirit in their encounters with the divine.

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### **Author's contribution**

M.N. is the sole author of this research article.

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An application for full ethical approval was made to the Theology Research Ethics Committee (TREC) and ethics

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## Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

## Disclaimer

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