



## BEYOND MALE AND FEMALE: THE HOLY SPIRIT AND GENDER PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIAN PENTECOSTALISM

**Daniel, Joel Bulus**

Faculty of Arts, Department of Christian Religious Studies | Religious Ethics  
07067822264joe@gmail.com | <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8041-4164>

**Joel Nandom Gushi**

Faculty of Arts, Department of Christian Religious Studies | Religious Ethics  
[nandomjgushi@gmail.com](mailto:nandomjgushi@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*Gender equality remains a pressing issue both within and beyond the Church, with global attention sharpened by initiatives such as the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) and the resulting Beijing Platform for Action, to which Nigeria is a signatory. Pentecostalism, now claiming close to one billion adherents worldwide, is the fastest-growing Christian movement, yet its gender dynamics remain under-researched. This article addresses that gap by examining Nigerian Pentecostalism through the lens of gender and pneumatology, focusing on three influential denominations: The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Living Faith Church Worldwide (Winners Chapel), and Christ Embassy. The central argument is that Pentecostal belief and practice, rooted in theology and pneumatology, denounce rigid gender bifurcation by affirming Spirit-led empowerment for all believers. Yet, institutional practices within these churches often reinscribe binary roles, restricting women's access to pastoral leadership and theological authority. For example, RCCG permits women to lead prayer but rarely elevates them to senior pastoral office; Winners Chapel affirms women's spiritual gifts but limits ordination almost exclusively to men; and Christ Embassy encourages charismatic participation by women in worship yet maintains clear distinctions in ministry roles. These tensions reveal how pneumatology proclaims inclusivity while ecclesial structures perpetuate exclusion. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Sarah Coakley's Trinitarian theology, and Lisa Stephenson's concept of imago Spiritus, the study reimagines gender as a Spirit-led performance rather than a biologically fixed reality. Through theological reflection, discourse analysis, and contextual examination of Nigerian Pentecostal practices, the paper calls for a Spirit-driven ethic of inclusion that confronts gender marginalization and affirms the full humanity of all believers.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Fluidity, Pentecostalism, Pneumatology, RCCG, Winners Chapel, Christ Embassy

## Introduction

Religion has become a vital and enduring component of human life, and it remains a powerful force in the biosphere today (Grim, 2014). This reflects the thought of a German philosopher, Karl Max (1843: xi), when he states that “religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.” With numerous religious civilizations worldwide and practiced by many people in particular traditional paradigms, religion sets customs, liberates, and regulates the lives of people, enabling them to become better persons within society if they conform to societal rules and roles (Durkheim, 1954; Geertz, 1966). It is simply impossible for people to be moral without religion or a belief in God (Zuckerman, 2008). “If God does not exist, everything is permitted” (Dostoevsky, 1880/1990). Echoing this refrain, conservatives like to claim that “declining moral standards” are at least partly attributable to the rise of secularism and the decline of organized religion (see Zuckerman, 2008). The notion that religion is a precondition for morality is widespread and deeply ingrained. More than half of Americans share Laura Schlessinger’s belief that morality is impossible without belief in God (Pew Research Center, 2007), and in many countries, this attitude is far more prevalent. In a series of compelling recent studies, Gervais and colleagues (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011; see also Gervais, 2011, 2013a, 2014a; Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012b, 2013) have demonstrated strong *implicit* associations of atheists with immorality.

Some scholars believe that religion can discriminate and divide, giving power to some people over others. Others argue that these claims are not well supported, since religion often grows through personal choice and devotion. Around the world, people have different views on discrimination, and religious communities are part of these conversations. The movement for gender equality, led mostly by women, is gaining importance. International frameworks, such as

the UNDP (2012) and the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), set goals for achieving gender equality. However, these do not address the strict gender roles found in some Christian groups; equality is not the main focus of this paper.

Many believe that the divine rewards devoted followers, regardless of gender. Messner (2002) notes that religion frequently upholds traditional gender roles, influencing the daily experiences of men and women (Leamaster & Subramaniam, 2015). Society influences how people act based on their biological sex (Berkowitz, 2006), but gender itself is not fixed. Instead, institutions like religion reinforce gendered behaviors. Religious groups provide spaces where these roles are performed (Sallee & Harris, 2011). In Nigeria, Christianity, particularly Pentecostalism, is experiencing rapid growth. Examining gender issues within Nigerian Pentecostal churches can show how these patterns fit into global discussions about religion and gender.

Pentecostalism has grown exponentially in Nigeria, influencing not only religious life but also politics, education, and cultural norms. Its emphasis on spiritual gifts, divine healing, and the active presence of the Holy Spirit has made it a vibrant and experiential form of Christianity. However, despite its theological emphasis on transformation and empowerment, Nigerian Pentecostalism often upholds rigid gender norms too, reinforcing traditional roles and resisting conversations around gender identity and sexuality (Kalu, 2008). Although Pentecostal theology teaches spiritual equality and empowerment, many Nigerian churches still enforce strict gender roles. Women are often left out of senior leadership, and conversations about gender fluidity are discouraged. This contradiction raises important questions about the relationship between Pentecostal beliefs and gender ethics. This paper uses ideas from Judith Butler, Sarah Coakley, and Lisa Stephenson to ask: How are gender roles created and performed in Nigerian Pentecostal

churches? Do Pentecostal practices support or challenge traditional gender norms? How can Butler's theory help us understand gender in these settings? What tensions exist between Pentecostal beliefs and fixed gender categories? Can concepts like *imago Spiritus* and Trinitarian relationality offer new ways to think about gender? What would a Spirit-led ethic of inclusion mean for church leadership and community life? This essay examines how Nigerian Pentecostalism can reevaluate gender as a Spirit-led practice, drawing on theology, gender theory, and local context to explore new pathways for inclusion.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the theological weight on transformation, empowerment, and spiritual equality within Pentecostalism, Nigerian Pentecostal churches continue to reinforce rigid gender binaries and traditional roles. Women are often excluded from senior leadership, and discussions around gender identity and sexuality are met with resistance or silence. This contradiction between the liberating potential of Pentecostal pneumatology and the conservative enforcement of gender norms raises critical questions: How can a theology centered on the dynamic movement of the Holy Spirit coexist with fixed, culturally imposed gender roles? Why does a religious tradition that proclaims spiritual freedom and equality fail to engage constructively with gender fluidity and performance? This paper addresses the gap between Pentecostal theological possibilities and institutional practices in Nigeria. It seeks to explore how gender is performed within Nigerian Pentecostal spaces and whether the theology of the Holy Spirit can offer a framework for reimagining identity beyond binary constructs. By engaging Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and theological concepts such as *imago Spiritus*, the study challenges Nigerian Pentecostalism to reflect more deeply on its pneumatological commitments and their implications for gender ethics.

## Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how gender roles and identities are constructed and performed within Nigerian Pentecostal churches.
2. To analyze the theological tension between Pentecostal pneumatology and the enforcement of binary gender norms.
3. To explore the relevance of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in interpreting Pentecostal spiritual practices in Nigeria.
4. To evaluate the potential of theological frameworks such as *imago Spiritus* and Trinitarian relationality for reimagining gender fluidity within Nigerian Pentecostalism.
5. To propose a Spirit-led ethic of inclusion that affirms diverse gender expressions in Pentecostal belief and practice.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Pentecostal pneumatology, with theological considerations of *imago Spiritus* and Trinitarian relationality.

***Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity*** argues that gender is not a static identity but a series of recurring performances shaped by cultural norms. Butler theorizes that gender is not a fixed identity, but an act, a set of gestures that produce the illusion of a coherent self (*Gender Trouble*, 1990). This theory challenges binary and essentialist identifications of gender, making it a powerful lens for examining how religious rituals and discourses construct gender roles. In Nigerian Pentecostalism, gender protagonists like preaching authority, dress codes, and leadership are socially constructed and ritually strengthened. This theory helps analyze how Pentecostal spaces both enforce and potentially interrupt gender norms through spiritual practices.

**Pentecostal Pneumatology** is the theological study of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostalism emphasizes the Spirit's power to transform, empower, and transcend human limitations, including those related to gender. Scholars such as Amos Yong (2005) argue that the Spirit affirms all people, suggesting a theological openness to gender fluidity. The Spirit's activity is manifested through glossolalia, healing, and prophecy, and offers a theological space where traditional boundaries, including gender, can be disrupted. Yong insists that inclusive pneumatology deduces that the Spirit affirms all flesh, inviting a reimagining of identity beyond rigid categories.

**Lisa Stephenson's** *Concept of Imago Spiritus* (2011) proposes a theological metaphor for identity shaped by the Spirit, rather than biology. This meant that humans reflect the Spirit's relational and dynamic nature, allowing for a theological anthropology that embraces gender fluidity, multiplicity, and transformation. This challenges the traditional *imago Dei* framework that often reinforces binary gender roles with static notions of identity and opens space for Spirit-led expressions of self that defy binary constraints.

**Sarah Coakley's** *Trinitarian Relationality* (2013) views the Trinity as a dynamic, relational model of divine life. This relational theology supports inclusive community and mutual indwelling, offering a theological vision that affirms difference without hierarchy. The doctrine of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - embodies diversity in unity and mutual indwelling, also referred to as *perichoresis*. This model presents a theological vision of community that affirms difference without resorting to hierarchy. Applying Trinitarian relationality to gender invites churches to embrace inclusive practices that reflect divine communion rather than rigid roles.

### **Integration and Application**

By integrating Butler's performativity with Pentecostal pneumatology, the study critiques how Nigerian Pentecostal churches both construct and constrain gender. The framework also provides

theological resources for imagining Spirit-led inclusion, where gender is seen as a dynamic, relational, and sacred expression.

### **Methodology**

This paper is a theoretical exploration that uses theological analysis and discourse analysis of secondary literature and publicly available sources (sermons, church publications, denominational statements, and documented church histories). No original fieldwork was conducted; insights are derived from textual materials and recorded media produced by Nigerian Pentecostal churches and scholars. The analytical strategies used are theological hermeneutics, interpreting biblical texts such as Acts 2:17 and Galatians 3:28, along with Nigerian Pentecostal doctrinal claims, to examine how pneumatology frames gender meaning and authority. This is followed by critical discourse analysis, which analyzes language, metaphors, and narratives in sermons, church publications, and media to identify how “Spirit-led” performance constructs, polices, or expands gender roles. Finally, conceptual synthesis integrates gender performance theory (e.g., Butler) with Pentecostal pneumatology to map points of disruption and reinscription of gender norms. Data sources and collection include secondary scholarship such as peer-reviewed articles, books, and theses on Nigerian Pentecostalism, gender, and African Christianity; publicly available ecclesial texts such as denominational constitutions, doctrinal statements, ministry manuals, magazines, and conference communiqués; recorded sermons and media from official church YouTube channels, radio/TV broadcasts, websites, and transcribed sermon excerpts; and documented histories such as church histories, biographies or autobiographies of founders, and archival newsletters accessible online. The sampling criteria used in this research are purposive selection, where the researcher mapped out major Nigerian Pentecostal denominations such as RCCG, Winners Chapel, Christ Embassy, Deeper Life, and representative ministries with national reach. The inclusion criteria

focus on materials that explicitly address gender roles, leadership, embodiment in worship, marriage or sexual ethics, or “Spirit-led” authority, with texts dated primarily from the 1990s to the present to capture contemporary Pentecostal discourse. Procedures used to make this research relevant include text collection, where the researchers compiled publicly available documents and recordings and verified provenance from official church sources; coding, which thematically categorized materials under headings such as “Spirit as gender authorization,” “femininity/masculinity in worship,” “submission/headship,” “prophetic authority,” and “modesty/embodiment”; and interpretation, which cross-read theological claims with discourse patterns to identify where pneumatology destabilizes or reinforces gender performance and synthesized findings against the theoretical frame. The research focuses on prominent Nigerian Pentecostal movements and does not claim exhaustive coverage of all Pentecostal expressions or regions. Its scope is limited by reliance on publicly available materials, which may privilege official narratives over dissenting or local practices, and the absence of ethnographic data restricts claims about lived experience. Within research ethics, this paper uses publicly disseminated texts and media, with no human subject involvement.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study offers a critical intervention at the intersection of theology, gender theory, and African Pentecostalism. Throughout the course of the study, we realized what this will mean for the spiritually marginalized, so the study is significant. Its significance lies in several key areas, like: (1) theological innovation. This is because the study challenges rigid theological constructs and opens space for more inclusive interpretations of gender within Christian doctrine. (2) The study gives cultural relevance by interrogating how religious discourse reinforces or resists binary gender ideologies, thereby contributing to broader conversations on gender justice in Africa. (3) It

contributes to academia because it bridges gaps between feminist theory, queer theology, and African religious studies, offering a fresh lens through which scholars can analyze spiritual embodiment and identity formation. (4) It provides practical implications that equip pastors, theologians, and church communities with tools to foster Spirit-led inclusivity and affirm diverse gender expressions, and finally, (5) It encourages empowerment and advocacy by amplifying marginalized voices within Pentecostal spaces, advocating for a theology that reflects the liberating work of the Holy Spirit and affirms the full humanity of all believers.

## **Literature Review**

There are key scholarly charities across theology, gender theory, and African Pentecostalism that provide the foundation for a critical engagement with gender performativity in Nigerian religious contexts. This contribution lends flesh to the paper, providing an organic depth to this work.

### **i. *Gender Performativity and Pentecostal Rituals***

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity posits that gender is not an innate identity but a repeated set of acts shaped by cultural norms (Butler, 1990). In Pentecostal contexts, gender roles are often enacted through ritualized behaviors, such as preaching styles, dress codes, and spiritual authority that reinforce normative masculinity and femininity. Nigerian Pentecostalism, with its vibrant worship culture and emphasis on spiritual gifts, provides fertile ground for examining how gender is performed and contested. However, Butler's framework has faced significant critique. Scholars like Nussbaum (1999) argue that it overemphasizes discourse at the expense of material realities, such as bodily suffering and socio-economic constraints. Additionally, postcolonial feminists like Mohanty (2003) and hooks (2000) highlight its Western bias, noting that Butler's theory may not fully capture the communal and embodied nature of gender in African religious

contexts. This study aims to address these gaps by examining how Nigerian Pentecostal practices provide a more relational and embodied approach to gender performance.

ii. ***Pentecostal Pneumatology and Gender Empowerment***

Pentecostal theology places the Holy Spirit at the center of spiritual life, emphasizing empowerment, transformation, and direct divine encounter. Scholars such as Yong (2005) argue that the Spirit transcends human limitations, including gender binaries, and affirms all believers regardless of biological sex. In Nigerian Pentecostalism, Spirit baptism and charismatic gifts often serve as legitimizing forces for women's leadership and public ministry. Yet, critiques of Pentecostal pneumatology caution against its experiential excesses. Some theologians argue that Pentecostalism prioritizes emotional experience over biblical exegesis, leading to theological inconsistency (Cartledge, 2010). Others suggest that its populist appeal may dilute doctrinal depth and ecclesial accountability. This study will examine how Nigerian Pentecostals navigate the tension between Spirit-led empowerment and scriptural fidelity in shaping their understanding of gender roles (Tilghman, 2020).

iii. ***Lisa Stephenson's Imago Spiritus and Theological Identity***

Lisa Stephenson introduces the concept of *imago Spiritus*—a theological metaphor for identity shaped by the Holy Spirit rather than biological determinism (Stephenson, 2011). This pneumatological anthropology challenges traditional *imago Dei* frameworks that often reinforce binary gender roles and patriarchal hierarchies. Stephenson's work opens space for imagining Spirit-led identities that are fluid, inclusive, and relational. However, her framework has been critiqued for its theological ambiguity and limited institutional impact. While compelling in theory, *Imago Spiritus* has yet to have a significant influence on Pentecostal church structures or leadership norms. Moreover, some scholars question whether her feminist commitments can be

fully reconciled with Pentecostal emphases on spiritual authority and tradition. This study will assess whether *Imago Spiritus* resonates with Nigerian Pentecostal believers and leaders, and whether it can serve as a viable theological tool for gender inclusivity (Appiah-Kubi & Ofori-Birikorang, 2021).

iv. ***Sarah Coakley's Trinitarian Relationality and Ecclesial Inclusion***

Sarah Coakley proposes a Trinitarian model of relationality that emphasizes mutual indwelling, desire, and contemplative openness (Coakley, 2013). Her *théologie totale* integrates theology, prayer, and gender theory, offering a vision of divine life that affirms difference without hierarchy. In Pentecostal communities, this relational theology could support inclusive spiritual leadership and communal intimacy. Nonetheless, Coakley's approach has drawn critique for its methodological complexity and mystical overtones. Some theologians argue that her emphasis on erotic contemplation may alienate more conservative audiences, while others note a lack of ecclesiological clarity in her framework. This study will explore how Coakley's relational theology can be grounded in Nigerian Pentecostal praxis to support Spirit-led, gender-inclusive leadership.

### **Pentecostalism And Gender in Nigeria**

For Yong (2005), Pentecostalism is a Christian movement that emphasizes the direct experience of the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts (such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing), and personal transformation. It originated in the early 20th century and has experienced rapid growth, particularly in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Pentecostalism is known for its Charismatic worship and emotional expression, belief in Spirit baptism as a distinct experience, and emphasis on holiness, evangelism, and divine healing.

## Gender Theory

The pneumatological descriptions in John 3:8 “The wind blows wherever it pleases” offer a theological metaphor for the Holy Spirit’s limitless movement, which challenges human classification and regulation. Within Pentecostal doctrine, this Spirit-led vigor suggests that individuals who are filled and guided by the Holy Spirit are not confined by socially constructed norms, including those related to gender identity (Yong, 2005). The Spirit’s activity transcends cultural expectations of what is “normal,” opening space for expressions of identity that resist binary classification.

This study does not primarily argue for egalitarianism within Pentecostalism, though the pursuit of gender equality remains a vital concern. Rather, it contends that Pentecostal pneumatological eschatology inherently destabilizes the gender binary itself. Efforts to merely equalize roles within a bifurcated system risk preserving the very structures that enable exclusion and power imbalance (Rees, 2013). By contrast, Pentecostalism’s emphasis on the Spirit’s universal availability and embodiment affirms that the Spirit is active in all bodies, regardless of gender, and without concern for normative boundaries (Van Horne, 2024). This theological orientation challenges rigid gender constructs and invites a reimagining of identity as fluid, relational, and Spirit-shaped.

Feminist Pentecostal scholars, such as Stone (2024), Riches (2024), and Gabaitse (2020), from different perspectives, question the dominance of masculinity, Pentecostal women's complaints about rigidity in gender, and feminist somatic pneumatology, which asserts that women embody worship. These views argue that embodied spiritual experiences, such as ecstatic worship, prophecy, and glossolalia, can serve as sites of resistance against patriarchal systems and gender essentialism (Stephenson, 2011; Van Horne, 2024). Therefore, this section engages both gender

theory and Pentecostal theology to explore how Spirit-led embodiment can mitigate gendered divisions and foster inclusive spiritual communities.

### *Cultural and Religious Context*

Nigeria's cultural landscape is deeply rooted in male-controlled traditions (Interview with Pastor Richard, 2025: RCCG). Pastor Richard continues, this patriarchal cultural architecture is applied in a context where gender roles are clearly defined, demarcated, and armor-plated through family structures, religious teachings, and societal expectations. In many communities, men are seen as leaders and providers, while women are expected to be submissive, nurturing, and focused on domestic responsibilities (Okeke, 2015). These roles are often sanctified through religious doctrine, particularly within Pentecostal churches. Pentecostalism as a system got its roots from what was referred to as independent Churches or a Nigerian cliché "One Man's Church."

The origin of independent Christianity in Nigeria dates back to the late 19th century. The impetus for their emergence was provided by the Prebendary of St. Paul's and honorary secretary of the Church Missionary Society, Rev. Henry Venn (1841-1872) (an Interview with Pastor Olumiyiwa, 2025: Winners Chapel). Venn was a believer in the abilities of Africans to provide leadership in the church. To achieve this objective, Venn began to establish machinery that would foster the emergence of African leadership in mission churches, thereby raising indigenous leadership to succeed them. As a notable example of this policy, Venn established and had an African concentrated bishop in 1864 (Kalu, 1998).

This was the first African bishop in the Anglican Church, the Right Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther. Unfortunately, Venn's dreams did not materialize. Venn's successors at the CMS headquarters in London thought differently about Africans. They began to unwind Venn's indigenization policy. A leadership crisis ensued, giving birth to the first set of African or

Ethiopian churches. They were, in a sense, secessionists. They were referred to as Ethiopian because they took their inspiration from the oldest church in Africa, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. He stated his views in letters to missionaries titled the “native pastorate policy.” He had stated in this document that missionaries should, as quickly as possible, raise indigenous churches – churches that were self-governing, self-financing, and self-extending. Missionaries should endeavour.

The next group of churches emerged about 1916, unconnected with the first, but arose as a result of a religious revival very similar to the evangelical revivals in Europe and America in the 18th century. It began in the Niger Delta with the activities of Garrick Sokari Braide, an Anglican lay reader, and almost simultaneously, similar movements broke out in Yorubaland in Ijebu-Ode and Lagos. These were the Aladura movements. Aladura means “Prayer mongers”. They emphasised prayer and the performance of miracles. Their leaders tended to display a charisma not seen in traditional churches. They adopted the African religious spirituality and charisma without the traditional cultic paraphernalia. They were puritanical; they preached the importance of prayer, fasting, and renunciation of all forms of idolatry (Ojo, 1998). The Aladura churches grew in the early 20th century, primarily along ethnic lines, particularly among the Yoruba, but soon waned as they could not attract adherents outside this ethnic group. The Igbo counterparts of the Yoruba Aladura are the Sabbatharians. They share similar characteristics, except that the Sabbatharians attempt to revive the Old Testament cults and observe worship on Saturday. In the 1930s, some Aladura Churches in Yorubaland began to form alliances with Pentecostal groups in Europe and America, seeking to establish legitimacy. The Precious Stone Society in Ijebu-Ode and Lagos is one such church, having affiliated with the Apostolic Church in 1930. Similarly, an

Umuahia tongue-speaking group, the Church of Jesus Christ, invited the Assemblies of God into Nigeria in 1939 (Kalu, 1998).

This development marked the beginning of modern Pentecostalism in Nigeria, which emerged in the 1970s among students in the country's few tertiary institutions and secondary schools. At the tertiary level, the Universities of Ibadan and Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) became the hotbeds of Pentecostalism (Ruth, 1998). Many of these students had already adopted Pentecostalism before attending the university. Later, in the 1980s, these youths became avid readers of charismatic literature from Europe and America as the works of Kenneth Hagin, Oral Roberts, Robert Tilton, Kenneth Copeland, and others became easily available. This new religious ferment graduated into the establishment of evangelistic ministry, the most well-known being William Kumuyi's Deeper Life Christian Ministry, which began in 1973 (Hackett, 1998). This was helpful to the growth of Christianity because these youths, being young, strong, agile, and zealous, could be found everywhere in the country preaching the Pentecostal gospel. Ojo (1998) has noted that: "In no period since the nursing enterprise of the 19th century in Nigeria had the youths been so active or so prominent in evangelism as in the 1970s. By the 1980s, the charismatic movements had assumed a high social profile owing partly to the attention given to them by the media, and partly to the multitudes of new churches and 'ministries' that were emerging and erecting signboards all over the major cities in the country."

Pentecostalism in Nigeria emerged in the early 20th century and gained significant momentum in the 1980s and 1990s. Churches such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Living Faith Church (also known as Winners Chapel), and Christ Embassy have become household names, attracting millions of followers and shaping public discourse. These churches often promote conservative views on gender and sexuality, emphasizing male leadership and

female submission as biblical mandates. Despite this conservatism, Pentecostal theology, especially its pneumatology, bargains for a more radical potential. The Holy Spirit is portrayed as a transformative force that empowers believers regardless of gender, age, or social status. This theological emphasis on spiritual equality challenges the rigid gender norms often upheld in practice (Droogers, 2001)

***Pneumatology and the Possibility of Gender Fluidity***

Pneumatology, the study of the Holy Spirit, is central to Pentecostal theology. The Spirit is believed to be active, personal, and transformative, guiding believers into truth, empowering them for ministry, and sanctifying their lives. Key biblical texts such as Acts 2 and Galatians 3:28 emphasize the Spirit's role in breaking down social barriers: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." –Gal. 3:28, KJV.

In Nigerian Pentecostal practice, however, this theological promise is often curtailed by institutional norms. Women are frequently excluded from senior leadership roles, and sermons reinforce traditional gender expectations. Yet, the lived experiences of Spirit-filled worship, where believers speak in tongues, prophesy, and experience divine encounters, suggest a more fluid understanding of identity. The Spirit does not discriminate based on gender; rather, it empowers all who are open to its movement (Kalu, 2008).

This pneumatological openness provides a theological basis for reimagining gender as a dynamic, Spirit-led performance. The Spirit's movement enables believers to transcend societal expectations and embody new forms of identity rooted in divine empowerment.

### **Judith Butler's Performance Theory and Pentecostal Practice**

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity challenges the notion of gender as a fixed biological reality. According to Butler, gender is constituted through repeated acts, gestures, and performances that align with societal expectations (Butler, 1990). These performances create the illusion of a stable identity, but in reality, they are fluid and contingent upon the context. Applying Butler's theory to Nigerian Pentecostalism reveals how gender roles are enacted within religious spaces through dress codes, preaching styles, worship behavior, and leadership structures. For example, women in Nigerian Pentecostal churches are often expected to dress modestly, refrain from leadership positions, and prioritize family life. Men, on the other hand, are encouraged to lead, preach, and assert spiritual authority. These roles are not biologically determined but socially performed and reinforced through religious rituals. Butler's framework enables us to view these performances as open to disruption, particularly through the unpredictable movement of the Holy Spirit. When believers are "slain in the Spirit," speak in tongues, or prophesy, they momentarily transcend social expectations, embodying a Spirit-led identity that defies gender norms.

### ***Imago Spiritus and Trinitarian Theology***

Lisa Stephenson's concept of *imago Spiritus* presents a theological alternative to the traditional *imago Dei* (the image of God). While *imago Dei* has often been interpreted in gendered terms as male and female reflecting divine order, *imago Spiritus* emphasizes the Spirit's role in shaping identity. Stephenson argues that believers are formed in the image of the Spirit, which is dynamic, relational, and non-binary (Stephenson, 2011). This perspective aligns with Sarah Coakley's Trinitarian theology, which views the Godhead as a relational process rather than a static hierarchy. Coakley emphasizes the role of contemplative prayer and divine desire in spiritual formation, suggesting that identity is shaped through relational engagement with the divine (Coakley, 2013).

In the Nigerian context, *Imago Spiritus* invites Pentecostal believers to see their identity as Spirit-shaped rather than culturally imposed. The Spirit's movement allows for fluidity, transformation, and resistance to rigid gender roles. Together, these theological frameworks provide a robust foundation for reimagining gender in Nigerian Pentecostalism.

### **Theological Illustrations and Discursive Analysis of Selected Churches**

Several Nigerian Pentecostal churches illustrate the tension between pneumatological fluidity and gender normativity. Three major Pentecostal churches are spotted:

#### *i. Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG)*

The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) is a Pentecostal denomination founded in Lagos in 1952 by Reverend Josiah Olufemi Akindayomi. Originally established as a small house fellowship known as *The Glory of God Fellowship* at Willoughby Street, Ebute-Metta, the group began with only nine members before expanding into a formal congregation (Redeemed Christian Church of God, 2025). As membership grew, the fellowship relocated from its initial meeting place to land acquired at what is now the church's national headquarters, 1–5 Redemption Way, Ebute-Metta, Lagos (formerly 1A Cemetery Street). Akindayomi led the church until his death in 1981 at the age of 71. Following his passing, leadership succession was clarified through a sealed pronouncement he had left behind, which named Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye as his successor. Bp-Relate (2016), asserts that, “Amidst controversy, Pastor Adeboye’s appointment was formalized by the reading of Pa Akindayomi’s sealed pronouncement after his burial (Bp-Relate, 2016b).” Adeboye’s appointment as General Overseer was formalized after Akindayomi’s burial, marking the beginning of a new era of rapid expansion for RCCG (The King’s Parish, 2025; RCCG-THOP, 2025).

In the redeemed Church of God, women are permitted to lead prayer meetings and teach, but rarely occupy senior pastoral roles. In North America, there are parish women pastors who manage churches and other parts of the church. In Nigeria, some women pastors function in sections but do not manage a parish (Kehinde, 2023). The RCCG in the public domain and in practice has emphasized male headship in leadership, reinforcing boundaries in gendered roles, with a peculiar difference from North America.

*Theological illustration:* Pneumatology validates women's Spirit-empowered speech acts, yet ecclesiology re-inscribes male headship, producing a negotiated space where charisma is expansive but offices remain bounded.

*ii. Winners Chapel (Living Faith Church Worldwide)*

Living Faith Church Worldwide, also known as Winners Chapel, traces its origins to 1981 when Bishop David Olaniyi Oyedepo, the founder, received what is referred to as "the Mandate." The first planted congregation was inaugurated in Kaduna on 11 December 1983, serving as the initial national headquarters of the movement. Since then, the church has experienced remarkable expansion. For instance, on 24 September 1989, the Lagos branch was established with approximately 300 worshippers in attendance. A major milestone occurred on 29 August 1998, when the groundbreaking service was held at Canaan Land, Ota, Ogun State, for the construction of the 50,000-seat Faith Tabernacle. This auditorium was dedicated on 18 September 1999 and Canaan Land has since become the church's national headquarters (The Mandate, 2012).

Regarding women in ministry, Living Faith Church Worldwide outlines its position in *The Mandate*, the official operational manual of the church. Article 7.8, titled "Women in Ministry," affirms in its preamble (Article 7.8.1) that, according to scripture, there is no gender discrimination in divine calling or election. It cites Joel 2:28, which declares that God pours out

His Spirit upon all flesh, male and female alike, and Galatians 3:28, which emphasizes that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, for all are one. The manual notes that throughout history women have played significant roles in the ministry of the gospel, and many flourishing churches today are founded and led by women (The Mandate, 2012, p. 221).

The Mandate further references biblical examples of women in ministry: Miriam the prophetess (Exodus 15:20), Deborah the prophetess and judge (Judges 4–5), Huldah the prophetess (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22), and Anna the prophetess (Luke 2:36–38). In the New Testament, it highlights Euodia and Syntyche, co-workers in evangelism (Philippians 4:2), Phoebe the minister (Romans 16:1), Priscilla, a fellow worker in Christ Jesus (Romans 16:3), Junia the apostle (Romans 16:7), and Tryphena and Tryphosa, laborers with the apostles (Romans 16:12). Finally, *The Mandate* asserts that scripture records women in God-given positions of power and influence, with divine approval to speak to His people just as men do. This theological conviction underlies the church's policy of ordaining women pastors, with no restrictions placed on the roles they may serve once ordained (The Mandate, 2012, p. 222).

The discriminatory aspect of the Church Operational Manuel is where it states thus: However, no married woman shall be ordained as pastor without the consent of her husband. Deployment of such women shall have family considerations. This implies that a woman may be deployed to serve as a Resident pastor in any locations where her family resides. No woman shall be deployed as Missionary to any foreign nation except where there are no family constraints (p. 22). Living Faith Church Worldwide provides equal access to ministerial training for both men and women through its Word of Faith Bible Institute (WOFBI). The institute offers a structured three-tier program consisting of the Basic Certificate Course (BCC), the Leadership Certificate Course (LCC), and the Leadership Diploma Course (LDC) (*The Mandate*, 2012, p. 345). In

principle, Article 7.8.2 of *The Mandate* affirms that “the same criteria for male pastors apply to women” (p. 222).

However, the findings of this study reveal a significant gap between policy and practice. Despite the provisions of Article 7.8 on “Women in Ministry” and the church’s vast global presence, comprising more than 20,000 congregations across Nigeria and thousands more across six continents, there is no record of any ordained female pastor, whether full-time or part-time. The only exception is Pastor Faith Abiola Oyedepo, wife of the founder, who holds ordained pastoral status. Bishop David Oyedepo, the President of Living Faith Church, has stated that the ministry now encompasses over six million members in 147 nations worldwide (Vanguard, 2014). In the Winners Chapel, sermons and teaching series emphasize male leadership and female submission, reinforcing traditional family structures. This Church frames covenantal order and headship as biblically mandated norms (Okereke and Okoroafor, 2023).

*Theological illustration:* Worship culture valorizes Spirit-led boldness for all, but women’s authority is channeled toward prayer and testimony rather than senior governance, reinforcing normativity through theological rhetoric of order.

### *iii. Christ Embassy*

The Christ Embassy, also known as Believers’ LoveWorld Incorporated (BLW), is a Bible-based Christian ministry headquartered in Lagos, Nigeria. Founded in 1990 by Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, it has grown into a global megachurch and Christian denomination with congregations in numerous countries and millions of members worldwide. The origins of the ministry trace back to Oyakhilome’s student days at Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Edo State, where he established the Believers’ LoveWorld Fellowship, initially called *Youths for Christ (YFC)* (Bp-Relate, 2016b).

YFC quickly became one of the largest campus fellowships in Ekpoma, laying the foundation for the establishment of Believers' LoveWorld Incorporated in 1989. The church arm of the ministry was named Christ Embassy, with its headquarters in Lagos. Pastor Chris married Anita Oyakhilome on 2 February 1991, marking a new phase in the ministry's development. By 2002, BLW had emerged as one of the most prominent Christian ministries on television across Nigeria and the African continent, particularly through its flagship program *Atmosphere for Miracles*, which attracted vast audiences and reinforced the church's reputation as a leading Pentecostal movement (Bp-Relate, 2016b).

Media outputs and doctrinal emphases on identity in Christ cultivate charismatic environments with robust participation from women in prophecy, tongues, worship leading, and auxiliary teaching. Yet ministry role differentiation persists through pastoral authorization and organizational policy (Falaye, 2015).

*Theological illustration:* Pneumatology widens expressive gender performance (men displaying vulnerability, women exhorting), yet pastoral office remains tightly regulated, revealing a boundary between charismatic inclusivity and institutional role allocation.

### **Cross-movement Observation**

- a. ***Spirit-led fluidity:*** Across churches, sermons and worship broadcasts show women prophesying, leading prayer, and exercising charismatic gifts; men display emotional vulnerability and embodied intensity in Spirit-centered rites.
- b. ***Normative reinscription:*** Official statements, leadership manuals, and teaching series consistently reinscribe gender-differentiated governance through appeals to creation order, headship, submission, modesty, and stewardship.

- c. ***Interpretive synthesis:*** The Holy Spirit functions as a theological catalyst for expanding expressive roles and legitimating non-normative gender performances in worship, while ecclesial discourse and policy act as regulatory frames that re-stabilize gender hierarchy at the level of office and governance.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

The primary challenge in reimagining gender within Nigerian Pentecostalism is resistance from church leadership and congregants. Many fear that embracing gender fluidity will lead to moral decline, Western liberalism, and theological compromise. There is also a lack of theological education on gender and sexuality, leading to misunderstandings and fear.

However, the opportunity lies in Pentecostalism's core emphasis on the Spirit. If the Spirit truly empowers all believers, then gender should not be a barrier to ministry or identity. By engaging with performance theory and pneumatology, Nigerian Pentecostals can develop a more inclusive theology that honors both tradition and transformation. Youth engagement, theological dialogue, and Spirit-led discernment can pave the way for reform.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, therefore, Pentecostals are averse to discussions on gender and sex that do not quickly conclude by denouncing the "abnormal." Yet, Pentecostal practice and belief already accept fluidity. Maïté Maskens (2015, 332) explains, "On the one hand, the religious discourse on masculinity [in Pentecostalism] comes to strengthen, to support, to consolidate, to biblically legitimize male domination, the ascendancy of men over women, patriarchy, the primary power of men in and outside the assembly. On the other hand, the Pentecostal work on masculinity also breaks with the dominant cultural model of masculinity, the local "hegemonic" masculinities."

What is ignored when Pentecostals reify gender is that it confines the Holy Spirit; certainly, the Spirit's movement is not considered acquiescent or subservient to human bodily procedure. Consequently, to uphold gender paradigms, compelling bodies into specific "accepted" groupings constrains the free-flowing movement of the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit, men should feel the freedom to dance, and women should be free to preach and instruct. Moreover, in that same Spirit-led space, women and men should fluidly move and act however the Holy Spirit leads without having to stop to consider whether their biological sex organ allows such things. In the same thought, Nigerian Pentecostalism, with its vibrant pneumatology and emphasis on spiritual empowerment, holds the theological resources to transcend binary gender constructs. By embracing the fluid movement of the Holy Spirit, believers can reimagine identity as a Spirit-led performance rather than a fixed biological reality. Judith Butler's performance theory, Lisa Stephenson's *imago Spiritus*, and Sarah Coakley's Trinitarian theology offer valuable tools for this reimagining. As Galatians 3:28 reminds us, in Christ, there is no male or female; all are one in God. The challenge now is for Nigerian Pentecostalism to live into this Spirit-filled promise.

### **Recommendation**

Gender variability presents a multifaceted challenge for many religious societies, including Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, where traditional gender roles and biblical interpretations often shape doctrine and practice. While the topic is still emerging in Nigerian Pentecostal discourse, here are some thoughtful, context-sensitive recommendations that could help the community engage with it constructively: Gender fluidity presents a complex challenge for many religious communities, including Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, where traditional gender roles and biblical interpretations often shape doctrine and practice. While the topic is still emerging in

Nigerian Pentecostal discourse, here are some thoughtful, context-sensitive recommendations that could help the community engage with it constructively:

- i. This paper provides theoretical grounding for rethinking gender from a spiritual framework, away from the social construct in Pentecostal pneumatology and theology, and should be applied without understanding the Scriptures.
- ii. The need to deepen theological reflection on gender variability to encourage open theological inquiry into gender identity and expression, rooted in biblical texts but informed by contemporary understandings of human dignity. Explore how concepts like “new creation in Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:17) might speak to identity beyond rigid binaries.
- iii. This paper encourages the need to educate Leaders and Congregants to offer workshops and seminars that explain gender fluidity in accessible, respectful terms. Include perspectives from psychology, sociology, and theology to foster a holistic understanding.
- iv. The need to foster compassionate dialogue for the purpose of creating safe spaces for conversation where people can share experiences without fear of condemnation. This can emphasize listening over lecturing, especially when engaging with youth who may be exploring their identity in denial of their true nature.
- v. This paper reaffirms core Christian values where love, grace, and the imago Dei (image of God) are the point of relativity in every person. And advises believers to avoid reducing individuals to labels; instead, affirm their worth and spiritual journey.
- vi. We recommend that the Pentecostal community in Nigeria clarify the Church's position with pastoral sensitivity to avoid the possibility of gender murmuring and complaints.

- For instance, if the church holds a traditional view on gender, articulate it clearly but with humility and pastoral care, taking note of gender preference where sexual harassment is prevalent. Pastors in this worship environment must avoid inflammatory rhetoric; instead, model Christ-like engagement with those who differ.
- vii. This paper encourages global Pentecostal engagement. The need to Learn from global Pentecostal movements in studying how other Pentecostal communities worldwide are navigating gender diversity. This must be engaged with deep spiritual discernment and direction. Some neo-Pentecostal movements in Nigeria have begun embracing gender balance in leadership, which could serve as a bridge for broader conversations.
- viii. The paper advocates for the Pentecostal community to trust, respect, and honour spirit-filled leadership as it is globally. It is a beautiful thing to honour women's leadership as a precedent. Recognize the contributions of female leaders like Archbishop Margaret Idahosa, whose rise in the Church of God Mission International challenged patriarchal norms. Use such examples to reflect on how gender roles have already evolved within Nigerian Pentecostalism.

This paper does not in any way advocate for compromising doctrines; it is rather about engaging the world with wisdom, grace, and truth.

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