




God-talk rhetoric and the abuse of Women in Neo-Pentecostalism: developing the Pentecostal theology of hearing from God

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Abstract

One of the tenets of neo-Pentecostalism is the claim of "hearing from God", particularly by neo-Pentecostal pastors and prophets in Africa. It is for this reason that even during the sermon presentation in Neo-Pentecostalism there is an element of "thus says the Lord". This notion is theorised here as a God-talk rhetoric to apply to neo-Pentecostalism. The intersectionality of God-talk rhetoric and abuse of women within neo-Pentecostalism has been explored in previous studies. The contribution here is the development of the Pentecostal theology of hearing from God in addressing these abuses. The background to this study will be given by exploring the notion of "hearing from God" in the context of the broader Pentecostal movement. The article will also introduce God-talk rhetoric as a theoretical framework for this study. The cases where pastors used this framework to abuse women will also be highlighted using the case study method. The research question is how do Pentecostals understand the notion of hearing from God given the abuses? What is the Pentecostal theology of hearing from God that can help address women's abuse and other abuses? The article attempts to answer these questions to develop a Pentecostal theology of hearing from God.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, God-talk, the abuse of women, Hearing from God, Pentecostal theology.

Introduction

The abuse of women is not only a concern for society but also a challenge within the church setting particularly the neo-Pentecostal churches. The recent rape cases faced by some neo-Pentecostal pastors in South Africa have also attracted the attention of theologians and other scholars (Banda, 2020, Kgatle & Frahm-Arp, 2021). The intersectionality of God-talk rhetoric and women's abuses within the context of neo-Pentecostalism has been explored in previous studies (Agazue, 2016a, 2016b, Kobo 2016, Kgatle & Frahm-Arp, 2021, Shingange, 2023a, 2023b). These works have looked at the aspect of hearing from God as a motivation for the abuses of women by some neo-Pentecostal pastors. Gabaitse (2015) for example looked at how the biblical texts which are authoritative in Pentecostalism have been used in the manipulation of some women in neo-Pentecostal churches. In such rhetoric, women are not only abused but also marginalised when it comes to taking up positions within the leadership of some neo-Pentecostal churches and other sub-traditions (Kgatle, 2019). While the marginalisation of women in church leadership, gender inequalities, gender disparities, and so forth are important areas for research, this study is focused on the abuse of women particularly rape and other sexual assaults.



This article makes a new contribution to the existing literature on the intersectionality of God-talk rhetoric and the abuse of women through the development of the Pentecostal theology of hearing from God. The article seeks to highlight the prevalence of the abuse of women and the rationale behind such abuses to propose a relevant Pentecostal theology for the same. This will be achieved by looking at the background of the idea of hearing from God within the Pentecostal movement. The article will introduce God-talk rhetoric as the theoretical framework for the study. In addition, the article uses a case study method to identify the neo-Pentecostal pastors who have used God-talk rhetoric in the abuse of women. The article aims to develop a Pentecostal theology of hearing from God. What are the main tenets of this theology and how does it contribute to the broader pneumatological Pentecostal theology? This research question will be answered in a way of wrapping up. The next section discusses the notion of hearing from God within the Pentecostal tradition. This article reviewed literature as a method for the data collection on important themes such as Pentecostalism and the notion of hearing from God, God talk rhetoric, and cases of abuse. The article employed adequate knowledge, interpretation, and application of the relevant literature and understanding of current literature in the field. These themes analysed to develop a Pentecostal theology of hearing from God.

Pentecostalism and the notion of hearing from God

Pentecostals believe in the notion of hearing from God through the Spirit. This is informed by their hermeneutics of experience whose foundation is the direct relationship with God through the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Pentecostals believe that through the Holy Spirit, they can speak directly to God and He can respond to them. Even the spirituality of prayer is practiced with the belief that God can speak to the believer (Bergunder 2008:132). This is the same reason that Pentecostals would emphasise the baptism in the Holy Spirit for every believer. Gabaitse (2015:1) says that the Holy Spirit in Pentecostalism is the power and source through which Pentecostals can communicate with their God. This communication includes audibly hearing the voice of God the same way that the old prophets such as Moses heard the voice of God. However, the difference between the Old Testament prophets and contemporary believers within Pentecostalism is that they hear God through the Holy Spirit. Amongst Pentecostals, this is possible since the ascension of Christ marked the coming down of the Holy Spirit as captured in the Pentecost narrative in Acts 1 and 2. Even post the early church of the Apostles, the Pentecostal believers in the 21st century believe that they too are eligible to receive the Holy Spirit through which they can hear the voice of God (Yong 2017). In addition, it is through the interaction with the Holy Spirit that Pentecostals can hear God through visions, dreams, and prophecy (Anderson, 1991, Constantineanu & Scobie, 2018 cf Harris, 2023).

The notion of hearing from God among Pentecostals is also informed by their belief in the bible as the word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit (Nel 2018). Pentecostals view the bible as an authoritative text, but they also view it as the book through which God communicates with them. Consequently, they believe that God can speak to them through the biblical text. Gabaitse (2015:9) explains:

Pentecostals believe that the Holy Spirit is at the center of biblical interpretation. According to Pentecostal theology, the Bible is not of itself the Word of God, it only becomes the Word of God through the continued inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This means that biblical texts and the Holy Spirit are essential authoritative aspects of and are equally placed at the center of Pentecostal hermeneutics.

One of the functions of the Holy Spirit in the Biblical text is to help the believer to hear God through the text which makes Pentecostal hermeneutics is very unique compared to other



Christian traditions who follow the traditional hermeneutical methods. Furthermore, the biblical texts are read not only for the knowledge base of the believer but also for the text to have an impact upon the believer. It means that the bible is approached to hear God for the real-life situations in the life of the believer. Pentecostals in Africa believe that the bible (the word of God) carries the power to be able to change someone's life. This is an important aspect of hearing from God in the Pentecostal tradition.

Rather than exposing themselves to the rigorous and scientific study of the biblical text, some Pentecostals would prefer to hear from God through the same Holy Spirit (Yong, 2011, Gabaitse, 2015:6). In other words, the very same notion of hearing from God becomes a factor in less engagement of the biblical text for some Pentecostals in Africa. Instead of doing a proper study of the biblical texts, some Pentecostals opt for reading the bible to receive a revelation from God which is another way of hearing from God (Davies, 2009, Nel 2021). Nel (2023, 182) points out that "the dynamic nature of their bible reading practices tends to find meaning and value in the biblical text through the Spirit's work rather than based on what happened". Therefore, the Holy Spirit is central to hermeneutics within the Pentecostal tradition in helping the believer understand the bible (Nel, 2018, 2021). Pentecostals have also a tendency to select biblical texts that refer to the Holy Spirit as they believe that such can lead them to hear from God (Yong, 2011). Thus, a selective reading of the biblical texts is common among Pentecostals. It is for the same reason that proof-texting and eisegesis are very common among some Pentecostal believers.

However, the challenge is that among some neo-Pentecostal pastors, the notion of hearing from God through biblical texts has produced some form of abuse of women. The examples of these abuses will be discussed later in the article. It is even worse when the biblical text is used to justify the wrongdoing of some of the pastors within the neo-Pentecostal churches (Banda 2020a). When a few biblical texts are used by some neo-Pentecostal pastors in the perpetration of the abuse of women, this becomes very problematic. There is also a manipulation of the biblical texts to use the same for the oppression and marginalisation of women in Africa. In this way, the biblical texts are used negatively by oppressing other people. This is not different from those who used biblical texts to oppress black people (Kobo 2019:1). While calls for revisiting the interpretation of scriptures among Pentecostals to deal with abuses are valid. This article is calling for the development of the Pentecostal theology of hearing from God as a new contribution to the research interest. However, before there could be such a development, there is a need to look at the God-talk rhetoric as a theoretical framework.

"God-talk" rhetoric as a theoretical framework

God-talk is a rhetoric of God speaking to human beings in the form of pastors and prophets (Shingange 2023a). Therefore, God-talk becomes the platform through which the notion of hearing from God in Pentecostalism becomes actioned. In God-talk rhetoric, God can say anything to an individual, particularly a pastor. Even the former Chief Justice, Mogoeng Mogoeng once said that God told him that he would one day become the president of South Africa without contestation (Enca 2023). While many perceived this as a very strange utterance, some believers agreed that indeed he could be the president as long as he had heard from God. It is also believed that God can speak through others. Hence, prophecy is also perceived as conveying the message that God has spoken to the prophet. Therefore, the task of the prophet is to convey the message which is perceived to be coming directly from God. It must be reiterated that in Pentecostalism the work of the Holy Spirit is involved in conveying that message to the prophet. This is also stated in 2 Peter 1:21 "For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." The challenge is that some of the pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches claim to have heard from God while in essence, they are manipulating the people of God. Because once someone says that they have heard from God it would be difficult to argue



against them. Thus, a God-talk rhetoric is somehow used as an authentication of what the pastor or the prophet is saying to the believer.

God-talk is used to demonstrate the proximity of the pastor or prophet to God. In other words, in the God-talk rhetoric, pastors claim to be much closer to God than their members. Put differently, it is the members of neo-Pentecostal churches who perceive their Pentecostal pastors as people who hear from God and, are much closer to Him. In this way, the pastor or prophet in some of the neo-Pentecostal churches, perceives themselves as a medium that connects God and the followers of these churches (Banda, 2020b). Therefore, God-talk is perceived as a rhetoric that bridges a gap between the believers in neo-Pentecostal churches and the pastors. This creates some form of dependency on the person of the prophet rather than dependency on the person of Christ (Banda, 2018). It is for this reason that believers end up being receptive to what the prophet teaches or instructs them to do because they are perceived as mediators of God's revelation in God-talk rhetoric. In one way or another even when the prophet instructs their congregants to do wrong things, the followers in neo-Pentecostal churches still oblige because of the very dependency on them (Banda, 2021).

God-talk rhetoric presents some form of power dynamics where the powerful prophets claim to be hearing from God while others should just become listeners. There is also a power dynamic where male pastors claim to hear from God and engage in the abuse of female congregants. Shingange (2023b:3) explains that "God-talk is merely an expression of the needs and privileges of the elites in power, usually constituted by adult, urban, heterosexual Christian male pastors." In neo-Pentecostal churches, the pastor or the prophet is the elite who is connected to God while others should just hear from them. Again, prophecy is that vehicle that demonstrates that the prophet hears from God while others are only recipients of such prophecy. This is the reason why the congregants would accede to controversial prophecies without questioning them because they believe they are from God. It will be demonstrated in this article how some of the pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches have used the God-talk rhetoric against marginalised women. Shingange (2023b:4) continues to say that the oppressor used "God-talk to emphasise the binaries of man and woman, boys, and girls, and males and females its disapproval of all other sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions".

God-talk is practiced in Pentecostal liturgy, particularly in the presentation of sermons and prophecy. It is in these liturgical practices within Pentecostal spirituality that messages from God are conveyed to the audience. According to Shingange (2023a:1), God-talk is "also common locally and abroad in religious and Christian spaces where Christian leaders often use religious cues in their language, sermons, announcements, and altar calls to force and reinforce certain religious beliefs." In the presentation of the sermon, the neo-Pentecostal pastors often present themselves as those who hear from God. This makes the God-talk rhetoric, a "thus says the Lord" rhetoric. In addition, God-talk is also practiced in the counseling room or what prophets call "one-on-one" consultations where the believer is alone with the prophet. In these sessions, the prophet or the pastor conveys a message that he has received from God to the person consulting the prophet. In most cases, it would be the male pastor or prophet giving counseling or prophecy to the female congregant which in a way opens a door for abuse (O'Connor, Walsh-Bowers, Ross, Sawchuk, and Hatzipantelis, 2006, Kgatle & Spaumer, 2023). Furthermore, there would also be room for abuse particularly if the pastor uses the language of God-talk rhetoric in the same conversations. These dynamics are explored in the next section to demonstrate how God-talk is used within some neo-Pentecostal churches.

Cases of Abuse through God-talk rhetoric

There are some of the pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches who use the rhetoric of "God told me" in perpetuating the abuse of women. The rhetoric of "God told me" is at the center of the



God-talk rhetoric among the neo-Pentecostal churches. Once a pastor says that God told him or instructed him to do something, it somehow becomes impossible to say no to such. In other words, when a woman hears that God told a man of God to sleep with her, it puts her in a position where she might be obligated to say yes to any request posted by the pastor. Some pastors claim to have heard from God when they sleep with women in the quest to heal them of various diseases. Agazue (2016a:18) shares a story of a prophet in Nigeria who slept with a student nurse “to heal her from a strange illness that the prophet told her she had. The prophet also convinced her that the strange illness would make her barren all her life.” This is a propensity of some neo-Pentecostal pastors who would manipulate women to sleep with them with the promise of healing them from various diseases.

Some neo-Pentecostal pastors use the manipulation of biblical text which is another form of God-talk rhetoric as discussed in the preceding sections. Cheryl Zondi explained how Omotoso allegedly used scripture, specifically Psalm 51, while they had sexual intercourse, or else she would face the wrath of God (Kobo, 2019). In this way, Psalm 561 is used as a cleansing text for the forgiveness of the sin of sexual immorality so that the victim can agree knowing she is forgiven. Psalm 51 was cited by David after he committed adultery with Bathsheba and began to ask for forgiveness from God, so by citing this psalm it shows that Omotoso knew that what he was doing was wrong. According to Banda, not only were scriptures used but the bible as a book would be placed on the victims demonstrating that it was their turn to have a sexual encounter with the pastor (Banda, 2020). However, Omotoso is not the only one to use scripture to subordinate his victims, even in marriages men use the bible to demonstrate that women are their subordinates. Scriptures like Ephesians 5:21-33 are used to force women into obedience as many men will assert that their wives are supposed to obey them in everything. However, a closer look at this scripture reveals that women are only called to submit to men who have a Christ-like character. They are not called to submit to every man out there who is oppressive and abusive.

According to Kroeger and Beck (2019), some believers do not see a conflict between their wrongful actions and their beliefs because of the manipulation of biblical texts, with some justifying their actions by using scriptures. Although neo-Pentecostal churches in Africa are very good at articulating scripture and the use of the Bible in general, according to Engelke (2007), at the same time they could use similar skills to justify the abuse of women. Similarly, scriptures were used by other pastors in the oppression of women including in rape cases and sexual assaults (Kobo, 2019). The question then is, does it make the bible wrong some neo-Pentecostal pastors use it to abuse others? Surely not, as there is so much wisdom in the bible with some of it borrowed from African indigenous knowledge that can help build Africa. What needs to happen is to trigger a balanced African reading of the bible that will condemn the wrongful use of the bible rather than condemning the whole book because of the few that are abusing it.

One of the biblical texts that is manipulated among the neo-Pentecostal pastors is Psalm 105:15 “Do not touch My anointed ones, And do My prophets no harm.” This biblical text is used to make the neo-Pentecostal pastor untouchable which in a way intimidates the victims of abuse. Kgatele and Frahm-Arp (2022) point out that pastors such as Timothy Omotoso have preached from Psalm 105:15 to make sure that they remain untouchable before the congregants. When neo-Pentecostal pastors such as Omotoso quote this biblical text, they also create an impression that they are the only ones anointed and their members or congregants are not or are less anointed. If a woman is abused in any form of abuse, they are not able to report the matter for fear of the “anointed one of God”. Furthermore, it is from this concept of anointing that some of the prophets in neo-Pentecostal churches would want to touch women’s private parts and to ‘heal them of diseases’. Agazue (2016b:3) points out that “exorcism methods include the ‘anointing’ of the private parts of those women whom they allege are possessed by witchcraft, mermaid, or marine spirits”. This is one of the reasons why products such as anointing oil have become popular among the neo-Pentecostal



churches in Africa because prophets use the same to anoint women's private parts. One South African prophet, has a propensity of touching the women's private parts when praying for them in the name of healing the same from challenges of barrenness and so forth (Kgatle, 2021). When confronted about the same issue, he would always claim the transfer of healing power is possible through touching the private parts of women.

The last God-talk rhetoric among neo-Pentecostal pastors is the rhetoric of calling a neo-Pentecostal pastor "papa", or "daddy". In the African context according to Kobo (2019:1) "Man of God, papa, daddy, have become popular names to refer to pastors, apostles, shepherds". These appellations make the neo-Pentecostal pastor a respectable person among the congregants and in a way, can also make the believers always accede to the demands of their pastors. When the allegations of Bishop I Makamu surfaced, there was an impression that he was a "daddy" and his victim was a "daughter" (Kgatle, 2023). This is another form that creates power dynamics within the neo-Pentecostal churches where a pastor or a prophet is a "daddy" or a "papa" and the congregants are more like children. This too creates some form of fear when a woman is abused because they might fear reporting their "daddy" or "papa". Kgatle and Frahm-Arp (2022:3) explain that the appellation "daddy" makes women so vulnerable because through it they think that their pastor or prophet cannot do any wrong thing to them. This builds some false level of trust between the pastor and the congregant particularly in counseling sessions where the congregant (a woman) would never think about sexual exploitation by their pastor (Kgatle & Spaumer, 2023:3). The current practices of the God-talk rhetoric among the neo-Pentecostal pastors need a revisit to deal with the abuses that are evident. The next section proposes the Pentecostal theology of hearing from God.

Pentecostal theology of hearing from God

The Pentecostal theology of hearing from God is expected to be grounded in the meaning of hearing from God. In other words, does God still speak in an audible voice the same way He spoke to Moses? Or are the prophets in neo-Pentecostal churches hearing ordinary voices and claiming to be hearing God speaking to them? Can a contemporary prophet in the 21st century hear the voice of God the same way old prophets heard the voice of God? And what do neo-Pentecostal pastors and prophets mean when they say that they can hear the voice of God? To ascertain that indeed a prophet is hearing from God is when their deeds are consistent with what Christ demands upon their lives. Hearing from God is not only seen in prophecy but in doing the works of Christ. John 10:27 states very well that "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me". Therefore, the meaning of hearing from God is grounded in being in a relationship with Christ and following him. Therefore, if a prophet claims to hear from God without knowing Christ and doing his work, then they are only claiming to hear from God but in essence far from him. And since, rape, sexual assaults, and womanising are inconsistent with what Christ teaches, then some of the neo-Pentecostal pastors only claim to hear from God but are not following Christ as they ought to, and especially as leaders of a 'flock'.

The other important aspect of the Pentecostal theology of hearing from God is to answer the question which God poses? Which God can encourage women's abuse including rape and other forms of assault? Which God can speak to the neo-Pentecostal pastor to be involved sexually with young girls? Which God can encourage a pastor to touch women's private parts sensually? God only speaks on behalf of the poor and the marginalised. God speaks in liberation of the oppressed, not in their further oppression. So then abusing women in the name of God, leads to a question "which God?" Furthermore, it is important in the development of the theology of hearing from God to consider the inconsistencies in what God tells an individual and what he has spoken in biblical texts or the scriptures. There cannot be a contradiction between what has been written. This might mean that any prophet claiming to hear from God but is inconsistent with what God has spoken in the written word then has a



claim that becomes invalid. Similarly, the Holy Spirit which many Pentecostals claim to have received cannot contradict the word.

Lastly, the Pentecostal theology of hearing from God should respond to the question of who qualifies to hear from God. If God speaks through the Holy Spirit as the foundation of Pentecostal theology, then every believer can be able to hear God for themselves through the same Holy Spirit. This means that both men and women can hear the voice of God. It is for this reason that neo-Pentecostal pastors whose majority happen to be male cannot claim to be the only ones who hear the voice of God. The congregant can hear God as much as the pastor or the prophet can hear God. It means that hearing God is the function of the community of believers rather than the function of the individual prophet. If all believers can hear God, then there will be no room for some to falsely claim to hear from God. This creates some equality in the Pentecostal theology of hearing from God.

Conclusion

This article explored the intersectionality of God-talk and women's abuses within the neo-Pentecostal churches through a case study method. The God-talk rhetoric within neo-Pentecostalism is known as the rhetoric of manipulation of scriptures, the rhetoric of God told me, the rhetoric of touch not my anointed, and the rhetoric of calling a pastor daddy or papa. These rhetorics have been used by some of the neo-Pentecostal pastors as a motivation for the abuse of women in their congregations. While this relationship has been explored in the past, this article made a new contribution through the development of the Pentecostal theology of hearing from God. The article proposes a Pentecostal theology that will decide on what it means to hear from God. In addition, the Pentecostal theology of hearing from God should be able to identify which God? In other words, can God speak to a pastor to abuse a woman? Furthermore, the Pentecostal theology of hearing from God should also be aware that when God speaks, it is through his word, or rather his communication with human beings should be consistent with what he spoke in his word. This theology can deal with various abuses including the abuse of women in neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa and elsewhere in the continent. Further studies could look at the God talk rhetoric and the abuse of other genders other than the traditional male and female genders. For example, we could answer questions in the future such as how God talk rhetoric influences the abuse of transgenders, and so forth.

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