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Ethics in the Age of the Spirit: Race, Women, War, and the Assemblies of God

by Howard N. Kenyon

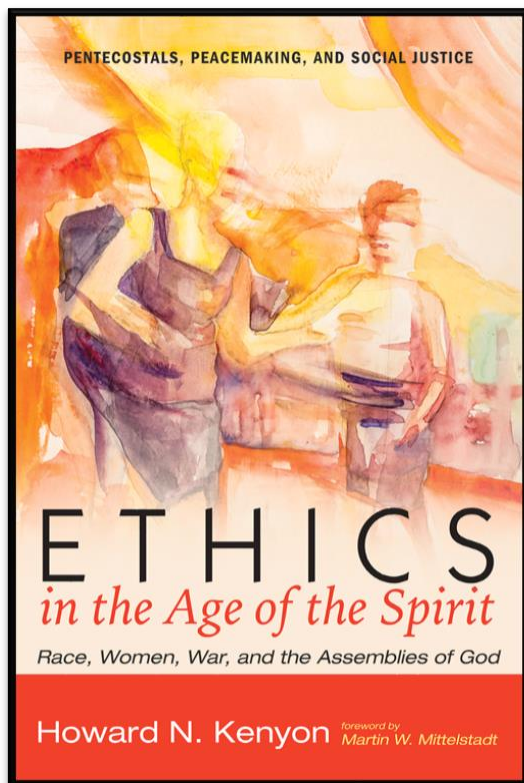
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New Title from Howard N. Kenyon

Ethics in the Age of the Spirit: Race, Women, War, and the Assemblies of God



What causes us as a people of faith to think and act the way we think and act? Are we motivated by whatever is most practical, by a particular understanding of Scripture, by the influence of the culture around us, or by something more profound? On the premise that Pentecostalism does have much to contribute to the study of ethics, this book explores how one group, the American Assemblies of God, has wrestled with issues of racism, women in ministry, and Christian involvement in war. In the process, readers are invited to examine the connection—or disconnect—between what we believe and how we live out our faith.

Howard N. Kenyon is vice president of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. He is a lifelong Pentecostal, and his work has included university student outreach, pastoral care, intercultural ministry, direct service to those in need, and public policy advocacy. He has lectured at hundreds of universities, seminaries, and conferences throughout the United States and in numerous other countries. Through his essays, blogging, and social media conversations, he continues to speak out on faith and ethics.



Q: Why this book now?

My research began in the late 70s and I finished the original work a decade later. I had no idea back then how pertinent these issues would be this far into the twenty-first century. I'd had people contacting me, asking me how they could better access my dissertation and research from thirty years ago. Apparently in the intervening years, quite a bit of interest in my research and insights has been brewing, especially among academics. I also felt what I had to say has remained quite relevant to the church, particularly my own church tribe.

Q. What do you mean by the book being relevant for today?

If not always perfect in execution, the early Pentecostals were radical in their commitment to fulfill the Great Commission and the two greatest Commandments. That less-than-perfect execution has continued, something we should not hide, something we should call out if we really want to pursue all that God has for us. Unfortunately, the Church has often been more beholden to societal dictates, to accommodation, to – as I focus on in the book – allowing racism, male centrism, and nationalism to influence our calling, instead of living out the radical call of the Spirit's ethic. These happen to be the headlines of today.

Q. How did you get it published?

I heard rumblings from contacts that there was an interest in having my work available, other than just on Dissertation Abstracts. Then Darrin Rodgers of the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center put me in touch with Marty Mittelstadt and Jay Beaman, who head up the series, "Pentecostals, Peacemaking, and Social Justice", for Wipf and Stock. Turns out Jay and I have been living just five miles of each other for the past decade and had never met! Marty and Jay were fairly insistent about getting this book published.

Q. Why did you wait so long to publish this book?

Two things. First, shortly after I finished my dissertation, I left for Asia, some rather remote parts of Asia, in fact, where I had little ongoing engagement with the American academic scene. Communication was very limited, nothing like what we have today in the digital world. Second, I didn't really see any way for the book to be published. Publishing, especially of Pentecostal academic works, has come a long way in the past three decades.

Q. Is this book just a reprint of your dissertation?

No, I've added chapters and done quite a bit of rearranging of material, made some updates. While I did some condensing, I left in all of the source material because I am aware how useful this body of information can be for researchers. Some of the new material is autobiographical, helping readers understand why I came to write the work in the first place. And I've added material to bring the survey forward to the present.

Q. Why the autobiographical focus?

I come at this book as an insider, one who grew up and remains Pentecostal. I'm writing to my own tribe. As a young Pentecostal I wrestled with our movement's track record, particularly on the issue of black-white race relations. In my twenties, I struggled less with my faith than with how my faith was to be lived out in the world. What are the everyday implications of our life as believers? The issue of living out one's belief has become a lifelong passion for me.

Q. Who is your intended audience?

There are two audiences actually – church leaders and academics. There is something in this book for everyone – everyone who takes the church seriously and is willing to do her or his part to ensure that the church lives up to its God-given calling. While this book may not initially appeal to the casual reader, I have a feeling the book will challenge anyone who opens its pages.

Q. What does this book have to say to church leaders?

What is the Spirit saying to today's church in America and are we willing to heed the Spirit's call? I hope pastors and other church leaders will be willing to engage with the tough questions I've asked. And I especially hope up-and-coming leaders and students – tomorrow's leaders – will engage, will be willing to wrestle with the hard questions that we have too often avoided.

Q. And what does it offer academics?

I think this volume will be very useful for scholars and researchers, especially in Pentecostal and evangelical circles. I believe it is a very thorough review of how we got to where we are. I could have condensed the book, but I felt that this in-depth historical look was needed so that people would thoroughly grasp where we came from, where we wound up, and where we could be. My hope is that this work will be used to stir up more questions, more research, more insights, for more of each are sorely needed.

Q. What do you hope people will take away from reading the book?

We Pentecostals can get intense. We are a people of passion. We are an experiential people. But our passion, our experience must be saturated with the dictates of the Word and the Spirit. It can't just be emotion for feel-good sake.

While I don't think that first generation of twentieth-century Pentecostals always did everything right, I do think that embedded in that Pentecostal impulse was – and still is – a desire to do right in everything. That impulse came out of what nineteenth-century believers called the higher Christian life, holiness – being wholly devoted to Christ. Christians – preachers and laity alike – were to answer to a higher calling, regardless of the cost.

I hope people will see that the church was never meant to settle for anything less than the high calling of the biblical witness and the Spirit's leading. The church is ever tempted by the expedient, for going with the flow, all too often forgetting that, as earlier Pentecostals loved to quote, "It is not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit saith the Lord."

An Excerpt from *Ethics in the Age of the Spirit: Race, Women, War, and the Assemblies of God*

A trilogy of issues—black-white relationships, women in ministry, and attitudes toward war—were what Dempster suggested, a means of getting at the whys, looking beyond a specific issue—race relations—to see larger patterns of ethical behavior and thinking in the fellowship. Much as a surveyor might propose three points to gain perspective, the three topics could point to something bigger: an ethical posture of an entire denomination.

These issues were not chosen because they had necessarily been self-evident concerns within the movement. Race relations was little more than a footnote embedded in Assemblies of God mythology, while pacifism, which dominated the attention of the denomination in its earliest years, disappeared from memory within a generation. In the twentieth century, few social-oriented topics ever achieved significance among either the leadership or the constituency. Occasional intrusions into political discussion were made by editors and leaders, as when the nation was “threatened” with a Roman Catholic for president. Only the topic of divorce and remarriage with its implications for church and family were of perennial concern. Otherwise, ethical discussion was limited to personal behavioral standards and to encroaching secular humanism.

As I began my research, I was warned I would find little useful material. On the contrary, each of the three issues proved to be a study in itself. But nothing, not even the idea of considering the very ethical foundations of the movement, was as controversial as the sole topic of racism....

When I reached the office of the general secretary, his receptionist ushered me in without delay. Short, thin, his balding head fringed with white hair, Joseph R. Flower invited me to sit and we briefly chatted up mutual connections. We had several, our family histories intersecting at various junctures, such connections perhaps my passport into this inner sanctum.

Abruptly and yet calmly he invited me over behind his desk, opening a right-hand drawer filled with file folders. “Much of this,” he said, “has never before been seen. I am entrusting it all to you.”

Brother Flower was a son of J. Roswell Flower, the first general secretary and a founding father of the Assemblies of God. A man of few words, all softly spoken, the son was intimidating only in title. As with everyone else on that floor, he served in the shadow of larger-than-life Thomas F. Zimmerman, general superintendent of the fellowship.

I was on a quest, my holy grail the moral core of my wing of American evangelicalism, the Pentecostal movement, particularly the Assemblies of God. The beginning of the fellowship is well documented: how a small gathering in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1914, founded what would become a worldwide movement of fifty million adherents by the end of the century.

My quest had little to do with that gathering and even less with the phenomenal growth that was to follow. I wanted to understand how the Assemblies came to shift its moral ground—more than once—over the intervening years.

For some reason, Flower trusted me to walk out of that room with a box full of heretofore top-secret files, files that gave witness to a strange history of ecclesiastical shadow dancing and strict racial segregation. I could barely contain myself to get those files home and pour through them. Flower had told me he wanted them turned over, once I was finished, to the denomination's archives (now known as the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center in honor of his family). The archives were under Flower's oversight, but I was to have first review of these records and for as long as I needed. And he expected me, a mere youth, to live up to his trust. What was in these files?

Praise for *Ethics in the Age of the Spirit: Race, Women, War, and the Assemblies of God*

“...a must on the reading list of every serious Christian.”

—**Thomas F. Reid, Bishop of The Tabernacle and the Covenant Community of Churches**

“It has been my privilege to know Howard Kenyon since the early 1980s. He is a friend and colleague in ministry. This book gives a wonderful picture of history that should help us to consider our future.”

—**Darius Johnston, Lead Pastor at Christ Church Fort Worth, Regional Executive Presbyter of the North Texas District of the Assemblies of God**

“Howard Kenyon’s thought-provoking book tackles a discomfiting topic for Pentecostals today: What are we to say to the ethical issues of our day—in particular, racism, women in ministry, and Christian involvement in war? Within these pages, Kenyon serves Pentecostals well, challenging them to reengage their theology and experience to inform how they think and live ethically. How fitting that, in the process, Kenyon models the very prophetic voice he is calling people of the Spirit to raise for this generation and time. Outstanding work. Inspiring read.”

—**Beth Grant, Assemblies of God Executive Presbyter, missionary educator**

“Many women, immigrants, and ethnic minorities in our AG fellowship have not always felt at home in their own tribe. This book lifts and affirms in so many ways. It lifts from inaccuracy, ignorance, and indecision. In reading it, I felt my Black hands lifted, like Moses. It affirmed my worth and purpose in the kingdom of God. Dr. Howard Kenyon is a prophetic voice of truth, justice, and restoration in this age of the Spirit.”

—**Walter Harvey, President, National Black Fellowship, Assemblies of God**

“In this work, Howard Kenyon takes us on a journey from early Pentecostalism through the Assemblies of God, focusing on three ethical issues: race relations, women in ministry, and attitudes towards war. . . . [T]his is a book worth repeatedly contemplating and reflecting on to remember the past and plan for the future.”

—**Paul W. Lewis, Associate Dean and Professor of Historical Theology and Intercultural Studies, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary at Evangel University**

“Issues surrounding race, war, and women have bedeviled the Pentecostal movement from the beginning. Its pragmatism led to its alignment with Evangelicalism. Using the example of the Assemblies of God, Kenyon outlines the development of the fellowship's historical decisions in all three areas. He challenges his readers to return to the sources that guided early Pentecostals in making their ethical decisions—Scripture and the contemporary working of the Spirit—in order to become more fully Pentecostal.”

—**Cecil M. Robeck Jr., Senior Professor of Church History and Ecumenics, Fuller Seminary**

