Leah Payne


Many women in ministry today continue to engage the residue of challenges from historical and current religious limitations. Leah Payne in _Gender and Pentecostal Revivalism: Making a Female Ministry in the Early Twentieth Century_ submits the lives of Maria Woodworth-Etter and Aimee Semple McPherson for consideration. Specifically, Payne shows readers the ways in which Woodworth-Etter and McPherson navigate their ability to rise and garner fame despite the cultural and religious challenges they faced establishing a ministry as women in a male dominated profession.

There are a number of goals that Payne attempts to address. However, two questions are posed in the introduction, which guide the subsequent goals. The first question Payne asks is, “How did two Pentecostal women overcome their gender, divorce, single motherhood and public scandal to become authoritative revivalist pastors?” And the second is, “What is it about Pentecostalism that allowed for such talented women to rise so remarkably within the movement?” As Payne answers these questions readers are introduced to some Pentecostal history, socio-cultural issues of gender, the stigma of divorce, the struggles of single parenthood and private lives on display via public scandal in the lives of these female ministers.

Pentecostalism facilitated and restricted the women’s development as leaders/pastors in ministry. From authority, to dress, to meeting spaces, preaching performance and the efficacy of their ministry, female ministers throughout the Christian tradition were, and continue to be, not only a small group but often a persecuted group. “Thus, female ministers in the 1890s–1920s used diverse means to make a case for their authority as ministers (35).”

During the 1890’s–1920’s, a new wave of biblical interpretation known as higher criticism came from German seminaries into American ministerial circles. However, Woodworth-Etter and McPherson did not engage this nor any other scriptural arguments in favor of or against women in ministry; instead they created identities based on the bible. Woodworth-Etter created the image of the Warring Mother and the Mother of Israel, which closely aligned with Deborah of the book of Judges. McPherson adopted the bride of Christ persona, which was used often during this time in Pentecostal literatures. These biblically based identities also coincided with the womanly ideals of the 1890’s–1920’s. Each woman constructed her own narrative, or call story. It was through the particularity of their calls, in conjunction with biblically based identities,
which helped them to establish their authority as ministers, particularly as female ministers. In addition, Woodworth-Etter and McPherson continued to address their authority, and identity throughout their ministries, as they delivered sermons, wrote their autobiographies and other writings.

Payne’s argument is that Woodworth-Etter and McPherson co-opted socio-cultural understandings of womanliness in service to their ministerial identities. It was through their ministerial identities in conjunction with the standard revivalist practices of music, preaching, offerings, and altar calls in their services that these female ministers demonstrated their capacity as pastors without seminary education, denominational backing or any claim to apostolic succession. Payne attempts to address this in several ways. Payne’s first goal is to show how gender construction was up for reinterpretation during the time of Woodworth-Etter and McPherson’s ministries. Secondly, Payne illuminates the ways in which Pentecostalism changing and distancing itself from its holiness roots. More specifically, Payne shows the ways in which early generations of the Pentecostal movement and Pentecostal theologies about the relationship between the practitioner and the world were under (re)construction. Lastly, through addressing issues of authority both its construction and maintenance in Pentecostalism, Payne shows how Woodworth-Etter and McPherson helped to shape ministry and the Pentecostal movement just as they were shaped by Pentecostalism and ideals of womanhood during the turn of the century.

It is interesting how the more things change the more things stay the same. This book brings to light the challenges that women in ministry still continue to deal with today. The challenges of gender raised from both a religious and societal standpoint prove daunting. Confronting what and who is female or male continue to draw boundaries and divide not only society but also the Church. The stigma of divorce and single parenthood still weigh heavy and even more so for women in ministry as with Woodworth and McPherson. And even the brightest of stars reputation can still be marred by public scandal—with women often paying a much heavier price than men. Yet, the ways in which Woodworth-Etter and McPherson navigated these challenges makes their stories worth telling. Writing women into history is a challenging task because the epistemology of women have been undervalued in society and in the church. Payne should be praised for raising these particular issues in the lives of these women.

While I appreciate the issues this book raises on behalf of women and Pentecostal history there are also some challenges I encountered as well. There were excellent points that the author raises during her explication that seem to fall by the wayside. For example, the author gives a great treatment of the