

BOOK REVIEW

BOWLER, Kate. *The Preacher's Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. 368pp. Hbk. ISBN 9780691179612. £25.

Reviewed by: Lieke L. Schrijvers, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands; Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium. Email: l.l.schrijvers@uu.nl

In *The Preacher's Wife*, Kate Bowler looks into a fascinating group of modern Pentecostal women: the wives of pastors of megachurches in the United States. Sometimes called co-pastor, sometimes first lady, these women became increasingly public over the past fifty years, leading to several television shows, autobiographies and self-help books and hugely popular lectures at Pentecostal conferences. Yet their power is limited in many regards. Written with wit and empathy, the author manages to bring forth the nuances of their stories, careful not to present these women as passive doormats nor as glorious heroines. These women, Bowler states, “were not simply kept in place by the men in their lives. It was more complicated than that” (p. 244). Combining interview material with media discourse, Bowler brilliantly unveils the complex negotiation of power by preachers’ wives in the spotlight.

After the opening (“a Personal Note”) and the introduction, Bowler distinguishes five different types of preachers’ wives that sometimes overlap, but also have particular characteristics to them. Chapter 1, “The Preacher” looks into a minority of women in Pentecostal ministry: women who are pastors themselves and have institutional power. This is an exception, since most women’s power in megachurches is noninstitutional. Chapter 2, “The Homemaker”, functions as a basis for the rest of the book. In all cases, Bowler argues, preachers’ wives are expected to be a homemaker and to consistently show that “her first ministry [is] to her home” (p. 85). Chapter 3 (“The Talent”) then looks into those who became famous because of their talent, not only in their role as homemaker and wife. Especially in black churches, gospel singers stepped beyond the stage of church, to the national and even global stage. Yet, also for these women, Bowler shows, it is crucial not to step too far away from the traditional family values of Pentecostalism. The risk of becoming too secularized is always present, and women are constantly scrutinized regarding their values (p. 143).

The most complicated role of women is described in Chapter 4, “The Counselor”. Even though pastors’ wives often did not enjoy education in the field of counselling (or if they did, they do not refer to it), they often take on a role of counsellor. Influenced by psychology and women’s empowerment, the counsellors typically cater to women’s self-help audiences, with topics such as food

and body issues, mental wellbeing and sex advice. A large market has developed for books, which are always related to the personal experiences of the wives. Counselling and confession is a “bargain” for preachers’ wives, Bowler argues, since their “platform was built on her own experiences”, and each tragedy could lead to a potential lucrative book deal (p. 189). These tragedies, however, had to make sure that “the heroine remained the heroine” (p. 185): women such as Jennie Allen and Priscilla Shirer have to balance between giving testimony to their own struggles and imperfections, while also maintaining the spiritual authority over women’s issues.

Chapter 5 focuses on “The Beauty”, a category that, similar to the homemaker, overlaps with all the former. Added to the pressure to perform the role of submissive wife, homemaker, mother and counsellor, preachers’ wives are asked to pay meticulous attention to their looks. They would typically be thin (especially in white churches), good looking, fashionable and charming. Even though they might share imperfections in confessions, they would not allow imperfections in their looks. The chapter also adds four counterfigures to this ideal of the preacher’s wife. These are the adulteress (who can almost never redeem herself, whereas man can); LGBTQ+ women (providing the story of transgender woman Paula Williams); single women (who can make singleness their selling point); and older women (who should try to appear young until they cannot fulfil the beauty ideals any longer). The conclusion of *The Preacher’s Wife* returns to all the different roles women can have, and reflects on the impact of current social developments, particularly the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, the rise of Donald Trump to president and the #MeToo discussions. Throughout, Bowler relates these stories to developments in the wider context and history of US Pentecostalism, such as the rise of televangelism, feminist culture wars, and women’s advice columns. Bowler additionally shows awareness of the differences within white and black Pentecostal churches, although this is not the main focus of the book, and connects her analysis to other scholarship about Pentecostalism.

Bowler’s analysis includes material from a variety of resources, while consistently amplifying women’s own voices via the numerous biographical vignettes. The common thread in all chapters is the complicated negotiation of power by preachers’ wives, especially in public media accounts, which form the starting point of the chapters. It should be no surprise that the few scratches in the surface come up in the interviews the author held with (sometimes anonymized) women. This material adds a much welcomed layer to *The Preacher’s Wife*. However, the methodological choices of the author are not always transparent, and the difference in types of sources is not reflected upon thoroughly. Furthermore, references are made to Bobbie Houston, co-pastor of Hillsong Church in Australia, but for the rest the book is particularly American and might not reflect the role of women in other Pentecostal settings.

The Preacher’s Wife tells a compelling story of ambivalence: the preachers’ wives have to carefully navigate the boundary between private family life and public celebrity status. They are submissive to their husbands, while outshining them in many regards. They gain immense popularity and play a crucial role

in church, yet they often do not receive a salary of their own, nor can appoint successors. They struggle with past experience, but also show an immense commitment and joy in their faith. To conclude, they are powerful, but this power is highly precarious indeed. All in all, *The Preacher's Wife* provides an engaging and insightful study that contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of women in the recent history of Pentecostalism in the United States.