"Mrs. Woodworth’s meetings are a reproach and a disgrace to the religion of God. Her claims that she holds conversations with God are very presumptuous and impious."1

Not to permit a woman to obey the call of God is a violation of women’s rights. Countless women throughout history have had a narrative of knowing that God has called them to a pulpit or some other kind of ministry; nevertheless, the voices and experiences of such women all-too-often remain marginalised, even silenced. Mary Magdalene arguably preached the first sermon, “He is risen!” Despite their passion and their experience, however, contemporary Christian women who attempt to enter ministry are challenged at every step with arguments such as that they are too ambitious, they are neglecting their families, or they are unnecessarily disruptive. There is, and has always been, a patriarchal prejudice against women who seek to preach from a pulpit.

The recovery of the voices of women preachers throughout history is desperately needed to complete our knowledge and understanding of the calling and the sacrifices that women make to respond to such a call. An important feature in the history of the Pentecostal movement has been the key roles women have played in foundational organizational positions. Given attitudes regarding women in religious authority in the last half of the nineteenth century, an unusually high proportion of women were leaders in the American Holiness movement. It was out of this movement that Pentecostalism grew. A host of churches and Bible colleges were established, and books and magazines were published by women who had experienced and promoted the new teachings on the Pentecostal experience known as “the baptism in the Holy Ghost.”

Maria Beulah Woodworth Etter

Among the first women to emerge as a Holiness preacher was Maria (pronounced Mar-EYE-ah) Woodworth Etter, then known as the Trance Evangelist, but now known as the Mother of the Pentecostal movement.

Woodworth Etter (1844–1924) lived and preached in an era when women were required to be silent in church, and to submit to their husbands’ authority, both at home and in the broader social spectrum. It was a time when “honouring” (in some cases, enabling) an abusive husband was masked as a virtue. It was an era that has since been silenced by time and has ultimately been eclipsed by the historical recovery of significant male voices such as those of British evangelist Smith Wigglesworth and the brothers John and Charles Wesley.

Before she began her ministry, Woodworth Etter claimed that angels regularly came into her bedroom at night and carried her over prairies, lakes, forests, and rivers, where she would see long fields of waving grain that would fall into sheaves as she began to preach.2 She had many such dreams and visions, which she interpreted as a call to preach.

At her revival meetings, people danced, laughed, cried, shouted, screamed, and fell into trances that sometimes lasted several days. Woodworth Etter’s friends were the common people, and her enemy was the patriarchy of the Protestant evangelical and Pentecostal churches. She did not bother to court the good opinion of her male colleagues; in fact, she refused to become embroiled in the hair-splitting theologies that were engulfing the rapidly growing Pentecostal movement, and instead concentrated on her own controversial “trance” tours. In some cases, however, she did not view theology as mere hair-splitting; she called the emerging anti-Trinitarian “Oneness” movement, for example, “the biggest delusion the devil ever invented.”3

One of her greatest critics was John Alexander Dowie, a Pentecostal healer who himself faced opposition from clergy, slanderous tabloids, and relentless city officials.4 Despite the fact that Dowie wore his own persecution as a badge of spiritual honour, he travelled up and down the American coasts preaching against Woodworth Etter and her meetings. On one occasion, he even cancelled all of his own healing meetings to free himself to sabotage her trance crusades. In response, Woodworth Etter prophesied that Dowie’s ministry “would go down in disgrace, and that she would be living when he was dead.”5 At the end of his ministry, Dowie proclaimed and appointed himself a living apostle, and built his own small “city,” named Zion, in Chicago, Illinois, where his followers could escape persecution and prepare for God’s final destruction of the earth. Newspapers proclaimed him to be “in the moonlit border of insanity,” and his followers abandoned him in droves. Dowie died a lonely and remorseful man in 1907.

Woodworth Etter was eighty years old when she died in 1924, having maintained her acute mental powers and her popularity with the common people until the end. She had buried all six of her children and her two husbands. Her first husband openly harassed, abused, betrayed, and persecuted her, and then died after she divorced him; the second she described as the greatest love of her life and a gift from God. He was not well-educated, neither was she a confident extravert; nevertheless, she travelled from American coast to American coast, blazing a trail for women in ministry and in Pentecostalism.

Woodworth Etter’s written heritage was lost and thus silenced until 1977, when her great-great-great-grandson researched his family tree and began looking for the sermons and narratives that had made his foremother a household name. The Assemblies of God publication The Pentecostal Evangel states that Pentecostals today regard Woodworth Etter as a pioneer and a salvation-healing, itinerant evangelist.6

Maria Beulah Woodworth Etter, the Trance Evangelist

Meredith Fraser

1 From a pulpit.
2 She had many such dreams and visions, which she interpreted as a call to preach.
3 The Pentecostal Evangel.
Personal Background

Maria Beulah was born on July 22, 1844, in New Lisbon (now simply Lisbon), Ohio, the fourth daughter of Samuel and Matilda Underwood, both of whom were neither Christians nor even nominal churchgoers, a fact which caused Maria some grief later in life; she felt that she had missed out on general Christian socialising that would have stood her in good stead when she was being aggressively questioned by educated male clergy. Samuel Underwood was an alcoholic who frequently abandoned his family to binge drink, leaving them with no money for food or warm clothing. When Maria was around eleven, her father died of severe sunstroke.

There were eight Underwood children. Maria’s widowed mother, Matilda, had no way of providing for her children, so the eldest daughters (including Maria) were sent out to work. This was a devastating blow on top of the distress of her father’s death and the humiliation of his alcoholism, since Maria longed for an education, a dream which then became impossible. She continued to study and read at home whenever she could, but in her adult years her education certainly was not as complete as that of the typical preacher during her day.

When she was thirteen, Maria converted to Christianity at a Disciples of Christ congregation. Samuel and Matilda had been attending the church for a year when he died, and Maria was forever grateful that her father had been converted before his death, for she believed completely in an eternal hell as the final destiny for the unconverted. During Maria’s conversion experience, she heard God’s call to become an evangelist: “I heard the voice of Jesus calling me to go out in the highways and hedges and gather in the lost sheep.” When she was baptised the following day, Maria was visibly accompanied by a supernatural experience that was to become her ministry trademark. As she was going into the water, a light came over her, and the people in the congregation saw the change around her and said that she had fainted.

Maria was extremely anxious to obtain an education so that she could be “useful in the vineyard of Christ.” Her financial circumstances made it impossible, however. Her solution to her dilemma was one that many Pentecostal and other Christian woman still employ in the twenty-first century. To obtain a pulpit, many contemporary Christian women simply marry a pastor, minister, or priest. Maria determined to marry an earnest Christian with whom she could enter into mission work: “I had never heard of women working in public except as missionaries, so I could see no opening, except, as I thought, if I ever married, my choice would be an earnest Christian and then we would enter upon the mission work.”

Maria’s personal memoirs depart from her missions-oriented purpose at this point, however. In her testimony about her life and experiences, she states that her first husband was converted in the Methodist church after they were married. Maria describes his conversion as “very bright” and that “he seemed to speak with other tongues.” She states that they had a happy home for a while, but that when trials came, he became discouraged.

Regardless of how genuine his conversion was, she made a poor choice when she married “Mr. P. H. Woodworth” (whom she never called by his given name, Philo Harrison), a discharged veteran suffering with a brain injury. They married after a brief courtship and settled in the country near Lisbon, where Maria was constantly overcome by grief, sickness, loss, and discouragement. Five of her six children died, one after the other.

An interesting feature of her writing is that she does not often describe her children’s lives, but frequently recurring narratives do describe their last agonies in death. Several of her children are named only once or twice in her narratives, and the sixth child is not named at all. The five named children were Lizzie, Willie, Gertie, Freddy, and Georgia. The sex of the sixth child is not evident. It was Lizzie who lived beyond infancy. Maria was continually ill, and all of her children were sickly until their respective deaths.

Throughout this tragic period in her life, Maria seldom mentions her red-bearded husband, Mr. Woodworth. His presence is not evident as either a partner in her grief or a nurse in the poor health of either her children or herself. Later, however, when he began to behave badly at her public meetings, she said that sorrow had affected him as a permanent derangement and described how he would go around their farm looking for their deceased son Willie, saying that someone had taken him away.

Maria’s own grief for her children was obviously overwhelming, but she resorted to seeking a supernatural experience of God to help her to overcome her pain:

When alone I missed my darling so much that I wept as though my heart would break. Then I would always pray and as I prayed I would forget everything earthly and soar away by faith to the Golden City, and there see my darlings all together shining in glory, and looking at me and saying “Mamma, do not weep for us, but come this way.” I would always end in praising and giving glory to God for taking them to such a happy place.

P. H. Woodworth had no desire to be involved in Christian ministry, which may cause Maria’s readers to wonder about her initial decision to marry him. Lizzie, Maria’s oldest and only living child, was also opposed to her mother becoming a preacher. Her opposition is not surprising, however, given that she lived in a culture when women were not even permitted to vote in a political election. Maria herself was desperately shy, and her entire temperament shrunk from the thought of becoming what she termed a “gazingstock for the people.” Nevertheless, she continued to hear and see God speaking to her in vivid dreams and visions. The message always had the same theme—that if Maria would take an evangelical pulpit, she would reap souls as a farmer might reap sheaves in a harvest.

Maria was frequently ill, however, often hovering between life and death, and a casual reader might ascribe her frequent trances and visions to delirium, or as a reaction to the loss of her children. She personally believed every occurrence to be a
genuine experience of God, however, and that she was called to an evangelistic ministry, so she asked God to baptize her in the Holy Ghost:

I want the reader to understand that at this time I had a good experience, a pure heart and was full of the love of God but was not qualified for God's work. I knew that I was but a worm. God would have to take a worm to thresh a mountain. Then I asked God to give me the power He gave the Galilean fishermen—to baptize me for service. I came like a child asking for bread. I looked for it. God did not disappoint me. The power of the Holy Ghost came down as a cloud. It was brighter than the sun. I was covered and wrapped up in it. My body was light as the air. It seemed that heaven came down. I was baptized with the Holy Ghost, and fire, and power, which has never left me. Oh, praise the Lord. There was liquid fire and the angels were all around in the fire and glory. It is through the Lord Jesus Christ and by this power that I have stood before hundreds of thousands of men and women proclaiming the unsearchable riches of Christ.19

During one of these mystical experiences, Maria surrendered her future to God. She promised God that if he would restore her health, prepare her, and show her the work to be done, she would try to do it. She began to recover immediately. It was 1880, she was thirty-five years old.

Maria's resistance was not because she did not want to work for God. Added to her fears concerning her lack of education and depleted personal confidence was the concern that she was a woman. She received a great deal of opposition from those in whom she confided. She said: “I would have been glad to preach had I been a man, and not had so much opposition from my husband and friends.”20 She was also worried that being a woman preacher would bring disgrace to God: “I thought if I were a man it would be a pleasure for me; but for me, a woman, woman preacher would bring disgrace to God: “I thought if I

Ministry

Maria became an immediate success. She held revival meetings in the churches in her home area around Columbia County, Ohio, and began to plant new churches immediately. Before she left home for her extended revival tours, “going west” as she called it, she had preached over two hundred sermons. All were ecumenical for eight different denominations.

At the time, religious revivals or tent meetings were like carnivals coming to town. In isolated rural areas, they may well have been the only recreation to visit within many years. When Maria reflected upon her instant success, however, she said: “God wonderfully blessed my labours in every place.”22

Several church groups recognised her preaching and organisational abilities and approached her with attractive offers. The Friends wanted her to travel as a revivalist for a year, and the United Brethren wanted her to take charge either of the Women's Missionary Society or of a circuit of churches. A group called Bible Christians wanted her to take three large churches for them, and the Methodists also offered her a church.23 With the exception of The Friends' offer, which was an itinerant ministry, these offers were all within ten miles of her home, and each group offered a good salary. The itinerant ministry offered by The Friends appealed most to Maria because she felt called to be an evangelist, and her heart was already set on “going west.”24

All around her in eastern Ohio, churches excitedly accepted the new woman minister, but in her own household, Maria's husband and daughter thought that she had lost her mind. Mr. Woodworth reluctantly consented to Maria preaching in their local area, but for over eighteen months he would not participate in her dream to become an itinerant evangelist. He did finally agree to accompany her on her evangelistic mission to the West, a tour endorsed by the United Brethren church, and Maria records then that he became not merely willing but eager to go with her and fulfill her calling.25 Her narratives do not speculate on his sudden change of heart, however; rather, they ascribe the move to the Holy Spirit. He must have known that such a career move would offer few comforts and even smaller financial remuneration. Her readers cannot help but wonder if he was afraid that she would go without him. Perhaps he saw the entrepreneurial potential. He certainly did develop a commercial enterprise selling food, books, and Maria's photographs at her tent meetings. In fact, newspaper reporters often criticised his efforts, sometimes likening him to the moneychangers in the temple.26

During the Second Great Awakening of 1858, many churches had allowed their congregations to “do their own thing.” There was a new cultural mood regarding spiritual manifestations. Revival meetings were often scenes of utter confusion. Because of such licensed disorder, many services were described as purely emotional displays, with little evidence of any genuine teaching or preaching. Several male preachers at the time, particularly famed evangelist Dwight L. Moody, frowned upon such audience participation. His services required only three things—singing, giving, and responding to his altar calls—and he instructed his co-workers to break into a hymn if his services “got out of hand.” During a Billy Sunday meeting, worshippers were actually evicted from the church for responding with an interjected “Amen” or “Hallelujah.”28

Maria did not prevent her congregations from participating. Perhaps her association with some Holiness groups from earlier
revivals influenced her judgement in this area, or perhaps she developed her style because of her own ecstatic experiences. She permitted emotional displays that she felt were in order and actually believed that a lack of spiritual manifestations was a sign of apostasy.  

In 1884, Maria severed her association with the United Brethren Church and was licenced instead to preach by the Thirty-ninth Indiana Eldership of the Churches of God. Her relationship with them was always tenuous and volatile, however, and in 1904, she was asked to return her Churches of God credentials. Paradoxically, although Maria attracted incredible numbers of unbelievers to the church during these twenty years, she was perhaps the most criticised woman evangelist during the same period, with the cruellest criticisms often coming from her own denomination.

Despite this criticism, and her acutely shy humility, Woodworth Etter became one of the largest drawcards within Pentecostalism in her day. She travelled throughout the United States, initially taking her first husband with her. After their divorce, she travelled alone or with friends, and then she travelled with her second husband (Samuel Etter, whom she married in 1902). On many occasions her daughter Lizzie joined her; at other times, Lizzie remained with family members to complete her schooling. Maria finally built a tabernacle in central Indianapolis, Indiana (which she constructed from design to completion within two months), so that instead of her taking her message to the people, they could come to hear her preach:

We have a large, neat, comfortable tabernacle. Indianapolis is a large, beautiful, centralised city, a city that is easily accessible to the saints in the North, South, East and West. All those travelling across the continent can conveniently stop off here. The Lord has made it plain that this place is prepared to call the saints together from all parts of the world and to get a special enduement with power from on high.

Maria continued to preach at her new temple. She outlived both her second husband, Samuel Etter, and her only remaining child, Lizzie. Lizzie was injured in a bus accident in Indianapolis and died just one month before Maria died in 1924. One cannot help but wonder if Maria finally gave up her zest for revivalism once she had lost these final two significant pillars of personal emotional support.

Conclusion

Woodworth Etter was a remarkable woman. It hurts to be torn apart, an experience that she relived many times throughout her long life. Despite her many misgivings, her fear of failure, and the loss of nearly all whom she loved, Woodworth Etter launched out on a wide and challenging project on her own because she believed that God had called her to it.

It is still not easy to be a woman in ministry. Despite the dedicated work of many contemporary feminist theologians and historians, any Christian woman who steps toward a pulpit finds herself at risk of hostility, harassment, and humiliation. The challenges are intense and personal, usually involving a questioning of her ideas, her accomplishments, her commitments to her family, and her character and integrity. In the twenty-first century, we still need to remove sexism from the church, and we still need to assist women who are called to stand in a pulpit. The worth of such women and the value of their work for God should never be underestimated. Their energy and their vulnerability should never be exploited.

What women have to offer, and how their voices can be used as a source of strength, should be an encouragement to other women. Such is the legacy of Maria Woodworth Etter. She should have been hailed as a great leader and example in church history, and no doubt would have been, had she been a male preacher.

Notes
3. Liardon, Complete Collection, 856–57.
5. Maria Woodworth Etter, Life and Testimony of Mrs M B Woodworth Etter (1925) 12.
7. Some biographers incorrectly state that Maria’s father was struck by lightning. This is because she incorrectly states it herself in The Holy Spirit (Whitaker, 1998) 7. Later and more frequent personal narratives, however, indicate that it was sunstroke. Her father, who was already affected by sunstroke, was carried home during a thunderstorm.
10. Maria Woodworth Etter, “Maria Woodworth Etter tells her Story,” in Liardon, Complete Collection, 35.
11. Woodworth Etter, The Holy Spirit, 8. This was Maria’s first documented trance. Later witnesses also said the light around her often changed during one of her trances. Why her first witnesses associated the light with her fainting is not evident. Since the baptism was outdoors, a more likely explanation would be the sun moving from behind clouds. When Agnes Ozman first spoke in tongues at the Azusa Street Revival, witnesses claimed that she had a halo around her head and face. See Eric Gritsch, Perspectives on A Movement: Born Againism (Fortress, 1982) 71.
13. Elaine J. Lawless addresses this dilemma for Pentecostal women in “Rescripting their Lives and Narratives: Spiritual Life Stories of Pentecostal Women Preachers,” JFSR 7/1 (1991) 53–71. Lawless found that poor white Pentecostal women in Indiana and Missouri simply stated that “God told them” to preach, a recurring folkloric narrative among Pentecostal women which empowers women to bypass the authority of male dominated Pentecostalism. According to Lawless,
any Pentecostal male or female minister’s right to a pulpit hinges completely upon a call from God (57).

16. Woodworth Etter, Diary 27
17. Liardon, Complete Collection. See particularly “Preparation for Service.”
18. Kilian McDonnell states that trances at the time were believed to have their origin in hysteria or schizophrenia. Contemporary socio-cultural psychological data, however, has disproved the theory. See Kilain McDonnell, Charismatic Renewal and the Churches (Seabury, 1976) 80.
20. Liardon, Complete Collection, 46.
21. Liardon, Complete Collection, 46.
22. Woodworth Etter, Diary, 32.
24. Woodworth Etter, Diary, 32.
25. Woodworth Etter, Diary, 36.
29. Warner, Woman Evangelist, 221.
32. Warner, Woman Evangelist, 8.

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