

God's Daughters

Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission | By R. Marie Griffith |
Reviewed by Dr. James R. Beck

God's Daughters is an ethnographic analysis of Women's Aglow Fellowship, a 30-year-old women's organization that originally developed out of the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International. Women's Aglow is the largest interdenominational women's mission organization in the world. Dr. Griffith's book, based on her 1995 Harvard Ph.D. thesis, is built on her observer-participant findings. The analysis is warm and respectful and is built on a genuine liking the author developed for these praying women. The author describes her own personal Episcopalian affiliations as substantially different from the spiritual sensibilities of her new-found WAF friends. Griffith undertook her work to describe the depth and complexity of the lives of these women in contrast to the rather flat, uni-dimensional stereotypes used by outsiders. In this purpose the author has succeeded.

Griffith describes Women's Aglow as an eclectic and adaptable group, a mix of "moral austerity, cheerful pragmatism, and apocalyptic urgency" (p. 65). The organization gives its members opportunities to develop leadership in ways they couldn't do in their own churches. At the heart of the organization is its central message: through prayer women can find healing, empowerment, and freedom. Prayer and the accompanying narrative accounts (written and spoken testimonies) bring about radical renegotiations of power and a reshaping of personal identity for these women.

As the book's subtitle indicates, Griffith was especially interested in how these women lived with doctrines of submission. Early in the history of the movement, submission was presented by the organization in a standard format that has seen innovative and historical development in recent years. "Contemporary evangelical women continuously redraw and renegotiate the boundaries of power and authority" (p. 16), and Women's Aglow Fellowship is no exception to this rule. Slowly public meetings and written materials began to give more prominence to mutual submission as an important concept. For example, WAF began with a group of five male pastors serving as the organization's advisory board. Many women viewed these men as the proper "covering" they needed so that the women's organization could be biblically structured. This "covering" ethos has gradually shifted to one of gender symmetry. The meaning of the functions served by this board of advisors is different to different members. Many now see them as helpful outsiders who are available to help the group if needed but who are otherwise quite uninvolved. In 1993 the international group quietly changed its constitution to allow females to serve on this board of advisors for the first time. Local advisory boards, however, continue to be all-male.

One of the contexts out of which WAF arises is the recovery movement which is in turn a part of the larger therapeutic culture. A major theme of the prayer work that the organization urges upon its members has to do with the myriad of emotional trials which besets the modern woman. The movement helps its participants own up to anger by helping them envision alternatives to it as well as to shame. Women who struggle with weight loss, physical attractiveness, need for affection, or desire for intimacy are encouraged to pray that God will help them with their struggles. They learn that their new spiritual family can replace a disappointing earthly family, that unfeigned submission will be a means toward deliverance from most if not all of their problems, that Jesus can be their companion even if their husbands will not be, and that they can develop true intimacy with God through prayer. Although the content of these themes is clearly psychological, the organization rarely identifies them as such and presents them instead as spiritual teachings.

Griffith describes one rather upsetting feature of Women's Aglow. The organization seems to enforce some unwritten rules for its leaders, apparent from the fact that they all share the following characteristics: a "buoyant style of deportment, speech and gesture intended to communicate the inner radiance of a close relationship with Jesus. In this way aspects of physical appearance, including weight, hairstyle, makeup, clothing, and so forth, work as indicators not simply of social status but of moral righteousness as well and so further uphold distinctive hierarchies within the organization at large" (p. 158).

Currently the organization is reporting some decline in membership. But these mostly women keep praying and have started working at racial reconciliation. During these days when definitions of Christian womanhood continue to shift, WAF serves a vital need in the evangelical world, and Griffith's book helps us understand it more completely.

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