

Saving Women

Retrieving Evangelistic Theology and Practice | By Lacey C. Warner |
Reviewed by John Lommel

The church's patriarchal past (and present) is notorious for hiding and diluting the work of women for the kingdom of God. Lacey C. Warner removes the shadow from the evangelistic work of seven women from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in her book *Saving Women: Retrieving Evangelistic Theology and Practice*. Dr. Warner is the associate dean for academic formation and associate professor of the practice of evangelism and Methodist studies at Duke Divinity School. Her purpose in writing this book is that, "by retrieving historical precedents for evangelistic practices broadly conceived, significant models may be cultivated for a contemporary church that often struggles with its identity and purpose" (5), while also providing an "historical theology of women's contributions to evangelistic ministries" (6). Warner summarizes the lives and ministries of Dorothy Ripley, Sarah and Angelina Grimké, Julia A. J. Foote, Frances E. Willard, Helen Barrett Montgomery, and Mary McLeod Bethune in such a flowing narrative that one feels intimately engaged with each woman.

Ripley followed the itinerant evangelistic ministry model of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but also attacked slavery in the United States and preached to the enslaved Africans. She received approbation from President Jefferson to preach to the slaves in order to legitimize her work among them. Ripley considered all peoples to be from one blood, and thus believed all needed to hear the gospel. Warner observes, "Ripley's example legitimates an evangelistic theology that subverts the tradition of limited atonement by offering the gospel to all" (268).

The Grimké sisters worked hard for women's rights and the abolition of slavery, but also added important evangelistic theological contributions. The Grimkés developed an idea of sin that included a lack of self rather than an excess of pride. This lack of self then penetrates every aspect of society. Such an expansion of the definition of sin to include social and institutional dimensions also expands the realm of evangelism. Salvation, then, becomes empowerment to become all that God has designed a person to be, which includes education for women and slaves. This empowerment then breaks institutionalized sin. Although not all may agree with the Grimkés' view of sin, the modern church needs to grapple with the complexities of sin on the global scale.

Julia A. J. Foote, an African American evangelist in the late nineteenth century, was the first woman in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church to receive ordination. When she first experienced sanctification, she felt led to preach, but did not believe that the Bible allowed a woman that vocation. After realizing the Bible supports women preaching, she began an

evangelistic career that included working for ecclesiastical rights and racial reconciliation. She felt that sanctified people would naturally work against the sin of racial prejudice and segregation. Foote showed that “a careful evangelistic theology avoids both extremes of *works righteousness* and *antinomianism* allowing persons and communities to experience a living transformation” (271), an important balancing act for the contemporary church.

Willard focused her evangelistic ministry through the National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, using evangelism to spread the temperance message along with advancing women’s suffrage. The evangelistic meetings coupled with the temperance message led to the formation of a women’s church. Frances Willard demonstrated, which the contemporary church is again coming to understand, that social responsibility must be part of any comprehensive evangelistic theology (272).

Montgomery’s was one of the earliest New Testament translations by a woman, and her book *The Bible and Missions* predates the same themes by Karl Barth. She was also the first woman to serve as president of the Northern Baptist Convention while being extremely active in the women’s ecumenical missionary movement. Montgomery provides an important critique to many churches that evangelistic theology must rely upon the entire salvation narrative, including both the Old and New Testaments.

Bethune was the first African American woman to establish a four-year institution of higher learning for African Americans. This, along with her work toward racial reconciliation, emphasized physical needs equally with spiritual needs as a focus in evangelism. Bethune showed that “a faithful evangelistic theology does not ignore the present implications of salvation for an eschatology that merely looks to a future reward” (276).

Warner does a wonderful job of condensing the lives and work of these women. If the contemporary church would embrace their practices, its influence in this post-evangelical, postmodern society would increase (one can see such practices in the Emerging Church Movement¹). *Saving Women: Retrieving Evangelistic Theology and Practice* will spark conversation among leaders and churches about more effective and holistic evangelism. We would do well to learn from the lives of these women.

1. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, eds., *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2007) and Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005) provide the most comprehensive understanding of the Emerging Church. In reading these books, one will quickly see how the Emerging Church is embracing the principles of the women in *Saving Women*.

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