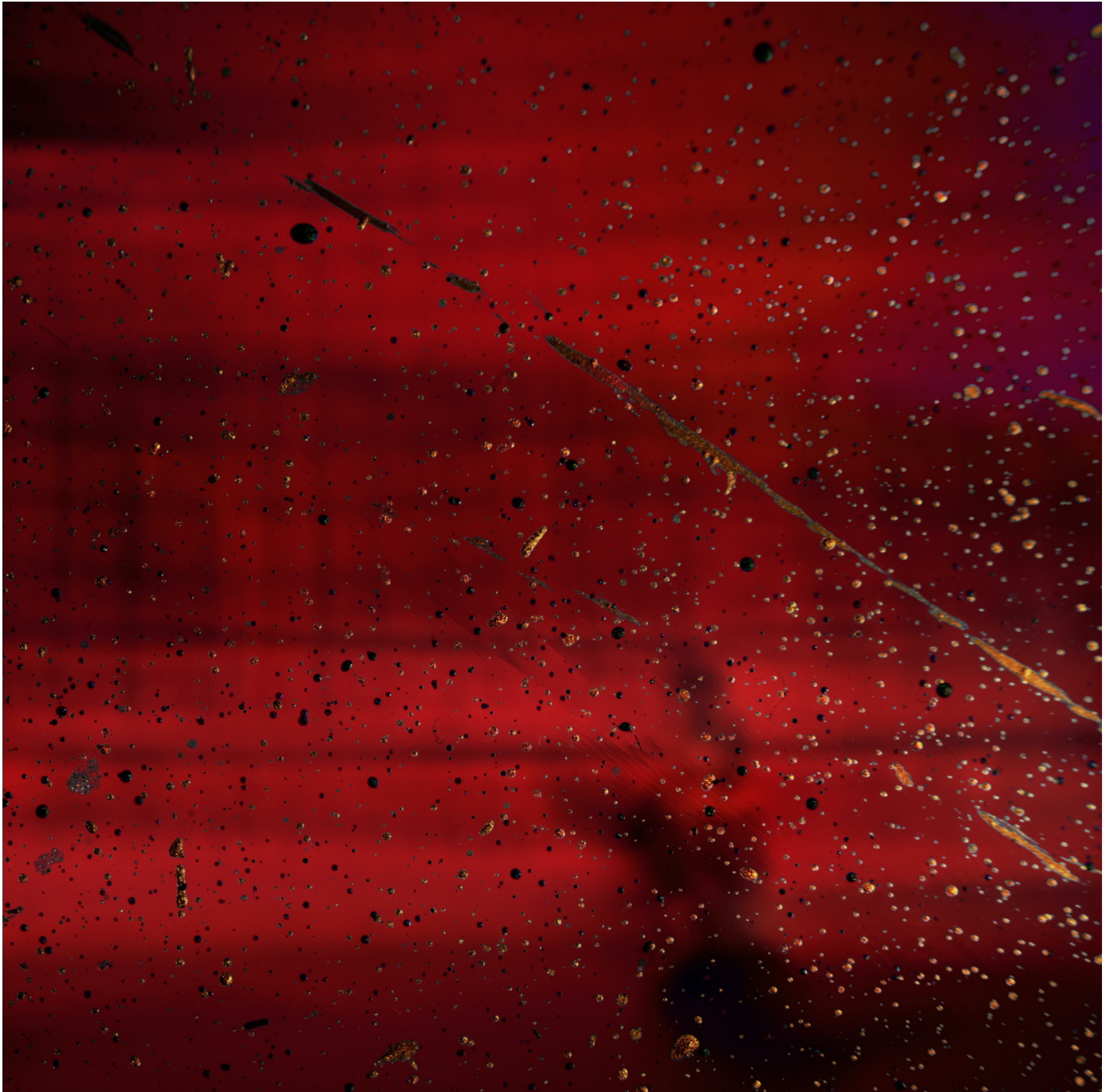




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2021 Volume 29





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The Preacher's Wife:

The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities

Kate Bowler. Princeton University Press, 2019. 368 pages. \$29.95 (hardcover).

Perhaps comedic candour in discussing tough or sensitive subjects is to be expected of Kate Bowler, the *New York Times* bestselling author of the memoir *Everything Happens for a Reason: and Other Lies I've Loved*. Bowler's more recent scholarly work, though, showcases the author's ability to seamlessly incorporate methodical research alongside her signature frankness, wit, and wordplay, making *The Preacher's Wife* a pleasurable and informative read.

Bowler's book examines Christian female influence, power, and celebrity in the United States. *The Preacher's Wife* primarily focuses on the 1970s to the present, with the rise of conservative Christian women of megachurch fame. Bowler also traces women's changing roles in Christian leadership through American history, dating back to the precarious and fleeting power of female missionaries in the nineteenth century. Biographical case studies of some of the most well-known Christian women throughout this history, and into the present elucidate how women have continued to navigate (and manipulate) both changing and obstinate ideologies about gender and sex within the theological, social, and cultural universe of Christianity in the U.S.

This book consists of five chapters, each analyzing a potential role available to Christian women: "The Preacher," "The Homemaker," "The Talent," "The Counselor," and "The Beauty." Bowler defines each titled position, identifies ways in which women embrace, reject, and/or are excluded from each, and demonstrates how

women often alter the confines of these roles to create meaning and significance for themselves. Throughout, Bowler asserts that the most intrusive barrier for women obtaining authority in Christian leadership, historically and today, is the theology of complementarianism. This idea is defined in Bowler's helpful "Glossary of Important Terms" as the belief "that God assigned men the role of headship over the family and the church. It holds that although both men and women bear the image of God, the sexes have separate gifts" (xv). Bowler shows how this theology, which often posits women as "helpmeets" to men, has not only been integral to the prohibition of female preachers and ordination of women in many denominations, but has also been (re)claimed by conservative Christian women as a place of distinction. Some conservative women have used complementarianism in response to emergent second-wave feminist ideologies of gender equality, to differentiate themselves from "women's libbers," who they understand to be theologically corrupt (83). Bowler demonstrates that this distinction among conservative Christian women persists today.

Bowler focuses on conservative Christian women because it is these Protestant denominations that continue to churn out the most famous, well-financed, and/or wealthy Christian women in America. However, Bowler does not ignore liberal denominations and the women within them. Liberal Christian denominations, defined by "their supportive attitudes toward women in the pulpit" (xvi), provide the foundation of one of the book's most interesting and innovative lines of inquiry: the differentiation between liberal women navigating acceptable power (and the limitations thereof) versus conservative women obtaining *influence* outside of traditional or available structures. Bowler argues that liberal mainline Protestant denominations, which embrace "theological progressivism, left-wing politics,

and social justice leanings” (xvi), have not in fact provided significant avenues of leadership for liberal women overall, despite official acceptance of female ordination beginning in the 1970s. Bowler notes that since this time, conservative Christian women have continued to achieve more recognition and material influence than women in mainline denominations. Bowler ascribes this potential paradox to the fact that allowing female participation in liberal Christian leadership created tokenistic authority for a few select women, while not changing the fundamental structures that deny women real power within the tradition (44). Moreover, the illusory availability of formal leadership opportunities discouraged liberal women from seeking out other influential roles, namely in the Christian marketplace. The market, which includes the publication of bestselling self-help books, memoirs, hosting and appearing on Christian television programs, and running women’s conferences, has instead been monopolized by conservative women who obtain both “popular power” and cultural influence through the celebrity status that often ensues (49). Bowler argues that conservative women focus their attention on market influence, in part, because more traditional positions of Christian leadership are not theologically of interest to them (and also remain officially closed to them).

A notable, and perhaps initially off-putting, component of *The Preacher’s Wife* is Bowler’s inclusion of photographs of the individual women highlighted throughout the text. Bowler’s decision to showcase the physical attributes of the women being discussed only becomes clear in the last chapter, “The Beauty,” where the importance of appearances for Christian women is made known. In this chapter, Bowler expertly shows how beauty standards can dictate how a woman will be perceived within her Christian community, and how such standards are enforced not only by external forces (both

the wider Christian and secular cultures) but also by women policing one another and themselves into compliance. As Christian beauty standards change in conformity or rejection of wider cultural norms, it is a woman’s ability to exemplify and represent the expected attractiveness standards that can ease tensions around her religious identity and can determine her influence within the tradition.

Bowler focuses on white women for much of the text because “they were typically the best-known stars, but also because there has always been a much larger print industry to promote them and a marketplace to reward them” (7). Although statistically the megachurches Bowler studied were predominantly white, she also discusses Black women, Latina women, and Asian women where their experiences intersect with her narrative. For example, in “The Talent” Bowler examines positions of influence obtainable by Black women in Black churches (and beyond) through their involvement in gospel music, beginning in the early twentieth century (129). Bowler also makes visible some of the gaps and silences regarding race in existing representations of Christian female power (for example in the aforementioned quote regarding the racist exclusivity of the print industry and marketplace). In so doing, Bowler challenges her readers to think about the reasons behind such exclusions, and the consequences of such erasures.

The Preacher’s Wife is a book about gender, power, influence, race, and capitalism. Students and general readers alike, interested in any of these topics, will find this an interesting and important read. Bowler’s astute and innovative deductions, sympathetic treatment of her subject, and scholarly rigor will have all types of readers devouring this book—and thinking through some very tough questions as they do so.

Reviewed by: Laurel Andrew (Concordia University)

