

One New Book for the Preacher

Elizabeth McGregor Simmons

University Presbyterian Church, San Antonio, Texas

FROM PREACHERS TO SUFFRAGISTS: WOMAN'S RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS CONVICTION IN THE LIVES OF THREE NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN CLERGYWOMEN by Beverly Zink-Sawyer. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003. 246 pages.

I hope every preacher reading this review has a group of clergy friends like the women of the Preaching Roundtable. Once a year, we converge from our far-flung places of ministry for a gathering that is one-half biblical/theological/homiletic discussion and one-half feminist slumber party! Sometimes one of us can't make it because of the impending birth of her baby; in another year, it is the planning of a daughter's wedding that outranks the Roundtable on the preacher's to-do list. But amid the comings and goings of our busy pastoral lives, we have found it a fabulous thing to be a part of such a community, keeping in touch as best we can, praying for one another and cheering each other on when a baby is born or a daughter is wed, or a marathon race is completed or a sabbatical proposal is approved, or, yes, yet another Sunday sermon in Ordinary Time is preached.

It was through this community of amazing clergywomen that I became acquainted with three amazing clergywomen of the nineteenth century. Dean of Students and Preaching Roundtable member Edna Banes invited us to Union Theological Seminary/Presbyterian School of Christian Education for our 2005 gathering. While we were on campus, Professor Beverly Zink-Sawyer joined us for some conversation about preachers/suffragists Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Olympia Brown, and Anna Howard Shaw. In *From Preachers to Suffragists*, Zink-Sawyer shares more fully and analyzes in an engaging manner the stories of these three women who, in her words, "demonstrate how...two belief systems—belief in the equality of women and belief in traditional Christian doctrine—that were often portrayed as conflicting could be held together and employed for social change."

Antoinette Brown Blackwell (1825-1921) was one of the first women to complete the course of study at Oberlin College and the first woman to be ordained by a recognized Protestant denomination in the United States. Zink-Sawyer recounts the details of the opposition Brown Blackwell faced as she strove to fulfill her calling, including the mean-spirited assignment she received from one professor to prepare an essay on the New Testament passages commanding women's silence in church. The unhappy event proved to be beneficial to Brown Blackwell, however. She devoted her best efforts to the task, becoming a skilled biblical exegete through her engagement in the process, eventually revising that very essay to present "a logical argument on woman's position in the Bible, claiming her complete equality with man, the simultaneous creation of the sexes, and their moral responsibilities as individual and imperative" at the First National Woman's Rights Convention in 1850.

It was to the influence of Antoinette Brown Blackwell that Olympia Brown (1835-1926) traced her call to ordained ministry. Olympia Brown was a student at Antioch

College, and when several of her fellow students and she became frustrated that all guest lecturers brought to campus were men, these feisty young women raised private funds to secure Antoinette Brown Blackwell to lecture on a Saturday night and preach in a local church on Sunday morning. Olympia Brown later recalled, “It was the first time I had heard a woman preach, and the sense of victory lifted me up. I felt as though the Kingdom of Heaven were at hand.” Olympia Brown would go on to spend many years in parish ministry before making the momentous decision at age fifty-three to trade one field of ministry, her Universalist church in Racine, Wisconsin, for the larger parish of working for woman suffrage across the country while continuing to pastor smaller Wisconsin parishes on a part-time basis. She would experience the fruits of her labor when, at the age of eighty-five, she cast her first vote in a presidential election.

Beverly Zink-Sawyer’s recounting of Anna Howard Shaw’s (1847-1919) story struck a particular chord with me. It was heartening and empowering for a parish pastor of twenty-six years to read how Shaw rode the waves of conflict and peace in her Massachusetts Methodist Protestant congregation with competence, courage, and good humor. On one occasion, her congregation divided into two warring factions. In her autobiography, Shaw describes how each side resolutely refused to put their respective criticisms in writing (“apparently the first time they had ever agreed on any point”) and devised an original method of presenting their complaints—voicing them aloud in public prayer. The combination of energy, intelligence, imagination, and love Anna Howard Shaw employed in meeting this challenge makes for rejuvenating reading for any twenty-first century pastor who has “been there” (and haven’t we all?).

In reading Beverly Zink-Sawyer’s volume, I feel as if I have made three great friends for life in Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Olympia Brown, and Anna Howard Shaw. Zink-Sawyer compellingly presents not only their personal stories as pastors and social activists, but a sense of the Spirit which was in them, described by Brown Blackwell as “above me, and within me, and all around me...not the combined powers of earth and hell could have tempted me to do otherwise than to stand firm.” Through Zink-Sawyer’s fine efforts, readers are blessed to draw up their chairs and be seated at a Preaching Roundtable with three forebears whose Spirit-infused courage serves to fuel our own.