

Searching for the Source of the River: Forgotten Women of the Pentecostal Revival 1907-1914

Diana Chapman (PUSH Publishing, 2007)

2007 marks 100 years since the beginning of the Pentecostal Revival in Britain. What few people know is the numbers of women who were involved in this great outpouring of God's Spirit – but whose voices were subsequently silenced as spontaneity was replaced by structure and organisation. As Faith Forster writes in the Foreword: 'The more institutional the Church becomes, the more likely it is to be led by men... with often even the memory or record of women's involvement in the former stages being erased.' At a convention held in 1914, one topic on the agenda was 'A woman's place in the Church' and from this point on, women's public ministry was limited.

Diana Chapman has done extensive research on women in revivals, and used mainly primary sources – little has ever been written about these women. She presents a fascinating picture of some of the key women active in the revival, in the years 1907-1914. Women like Catherine Price, the first person to be baptised in the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues in connection with the outpouring, and who was part of the inner circle of leaders in the early years of the revival. Women like Mary Boddy, wife of Alexander Boddy, the vicar of Monkwearmouth, Sunderland, where the revival began, who exercised a healing ministry, and spoke at meetings around the country. Women like Polly Wigglesworth, who was a fiery preacher and took the lead in the Bradford Mission – and was wife of the better-known Smith Wigglesworth.

The author brings the stories of these and other women alive, and highlights what women today can learn. They are presented as inspirational stories and role models for women in leadership today. In the final chapter, 'Running with the Flame', the point is made that all these women 'ran according to the gifting God had given them, not their gender...The flame is there for you to take hold of and claim ownership.'

She quotes the expression, 'ancient future', coined by postmodern writers: wisdom for the future is found afresh in the past. Yet in some church circles today, women like those described would still be barred from fulfilling their ministries because of their gender – unless they went to the mission field.

While the book describes women in the Pentecostal tradition, it is intended to provide a link for Spirit filled believers today with those of the past. The author longs for women who are called by God to exercise their ministry, confident that they are empowered by the Word and the Spirit.

The book was published remarkably soon after the manuscript was finished, and this may account for some errors which should have been corrected by the proof-reader, and an occasionally clumsy style. But these are minor quibbles. This is a fascinating book, and an important contribution to the story of women's leadership in the Church.