

Vulnerability and readability

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

October 23, 2016

I could not be at the conference where [Kate Bowler](#) was speaking, so I turned on the font of all raging protest, celebrity news, and geeky updates—Twitter. She was talking about “The Imperfect Saint: Disclosure and Power in American Megaministry.” Here are some of the tweets:

[@katecbowler](#)

Exploring discourse of confession and gender among pastor-wives in evangelical "megaministry." [#cfh2016](#)

— John Fea (@JohnFea1) [October 22, 2016](#)

[@katecbowler](#) offering historical perspective on "your Mom's favorite preacher." [#cfh2016](#)

— John Fea (@JohnFea1) [October 22, 2016](#)

[.@KatecBowler](#) arguing that the language of confession has become a gendered route for women to achieve legitimacy in megaministry. [#cfh2016](#)

— William McCoy (@ENCHistoryProf) [October 22, 2016](#)

[@KatecBowler](#): Success among evangelical women on speaking circuit rests in confession-"picking through litter of their dark past." [#cfh2016](#)

— John Fea (@JohnFea1) [October 22, 2016](#)

[@KatecBowler](#) putting women mega-ministers in the context of the history of "women as sage" or women "advice-givers." [#cfh2016](#)

— John Fea (@JohnFea1) [October 22, 2016](#)

Denied access to the pulpit, women have made use of what has been discarded (like the health of the mind or emotions).-[@KatecBowler](#) [#cfh2016](#)

— William McCoy (@ENCHistoryProf) [October 22, 2016](#)

[@katecbowler](#): Mega-ministry women call themselves a "hot mess" to gain authenticity, but can't go too far without lose audience. [#cfh2016](#)

— John Fea (@JohnFea1) [October 22, 2016](#)

[@KatecBowler](#): the problem that's left is that every woman requires a tragedy. [#cfh2016](#)

— Chris Gehrz (@cgehrz) [October 22, 2016](#)

[@katecbowler](#): Men mega-ministers preach 80% content (Bible interpretation, etc.) & 20% anecdote. Opposite for women mega-ministers. [#cfh2016](#)

— John Fea (@JohnFea1) [October 22, 2016](#)

[@kkdumez](#) asks [@KatecBowler](#) how may twitter bios of women mega-ministry preachers mention coffee. Bowler says coffee= intimacy. [#cfh2016](#)

— John Fea (@JohnFea1) [October 22, 2016](#)

I read this and wondered if women have to trade intimacy for trust in ways that men do not. If we do, should we stop? Are we playing into stereotypes? Are we inviting people to take us less seriously?

I have complicated feelings about this, and maybe Bowler does too. Her [amazing NYT article](#) connected with me on a different level than [her book on prosperity gospel](#) (although I loved them both), because I saw her scholarly work on health and wealth gospel within a personal context—a 35-year-old woman, (I hesitate to write it... but I will to make my case...) a spouse, and a mother, with stage four cancer.

We know that one of the most enduring works of [spiritual memoir](#) was written by a man—St. Augustine. But I have read books where I felt like I was leering into the bedroom window of a neighbor. I felt guilty, dirty, *and* fascinated. I wondered how the words would affect her children (as the child of a Christian author mom, my mind always wanders there).

I am on the final stages of [a book](#) that's not a memoir, but it does delve into my past. As [Meredith Gould](#) described it, "You're writing from a different place." I'm not trying to explain large religious movements or even the inner workings of a congregation. I'm trying to describe what happens internally, and the only way I could recount it in detail was to talk about myself.

I made the shift for a couple of other reasons. I know what it's like to read a scholarly work. I'm interested in the topic, but I'm also skimming a bit, because I'm not concerned about it on a dissertation level. Then, all of a sudden, I notice how my attention gets fully engaged in the words. I become fascinated, and I realize that the author has drifted into a personal narrative, and he or she is suddenly explaining the *why*. Why the topic matters—not because they want to present a paper at [AAR](#), not because they want to gain tenure, not because they want to make a contribution to their field—but the real-life reason why the person cares. Then I'm fully participating.

Is that because I'm responding to some societal gender construct? And if I write on a personal level, then will my words only be read by women? Will they be disregarded? Maybe. But [women read more books than men](#) anyways.

I don't have a doctorate. I'm an accidental practical theologian who was stunned to find out that my books were regularly assigned in seminary classrooms. I'm never going to be a scholarly writer and my books will never be taken seriously in some circles. But I read a lot. I understand scholarly work *and* the power of vulnerability. I yearn to make sure that liberationist, feminist, womanist, and environmentalist theology can find a translator, so that it can bust out of ivory towers and into Sunday school rooms, bed stands, and book clubs. And I hope and pray that my words might

do that—even if it makes me a bit vulnerable.

Addendum: Meredith Gould reminded me of this brilliant tweet from Rachel Hackenberg.

"Spiritual memoir" isn't a new genre; it's just that - for generations - when white men write spiritual memoirs we call it theology. <_<

— Rachel Hackenberg (@RHackenberg) [October 12, 2016](#)