Fundamentalist women

by Betty A. DeBerg in the July 1, 1998 issue

By Brenda E. Brasher, Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power. *(Rutgers University Press, 224 pp.)*

Why are well-educated young women attracted to Protestant fundamentalism? After all, the rhetoric of the Religious Right is reactionary on many issues concerning family life and gender roles, and within fundamentalist congregations women are barred from many positions of clerical and lay authority.

Brenda E. Brasher, professor of religion at Mount Union College and herself a more liberal Christian, explores this question through an intriguing, up-close look at the lives and spiritual impulses of women active in two large fundamentalist congregations, both in California. One of these churches, with about 4,000 members, is affiliated with the Calvary Chapel movement. It is located in a working-class, ethnically diverse urban neighborhood. The other is part of the Hope Chapel reform movement within the Foursquare Gospel denomination and is located in a wealthier urban neighborhood closer to the coast.

These congregations, according to Brasher, provide a “sacred canopy” built of certain theological tenets: primarily biblical inerrancy, but also the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Jesus and premillennial eschatology. The other building materials consist of “social maxims” that support strong gender differentiation and heterosexual marriage. Running right down the center of the canopy is “a sacred wall of gender” that separates men and women both ontologically (they are completely distinct in nature) and practically (women may not be senior pastors or members of the governing boards, for example).

Brasher’s conclusion after months as a participant-observer among the women of these congregations is that “the restrictive religious identity they embrace improves their ability to direct the course of their lives and empowers them in their relationships with others.” The key to this empowerment is each congregation’s women’s ministry program, led by women for women. These programs have added capable women to the churches’ ministerial staffs. And while the organizational

influence of the women's groups has not been publicly recognized in these congregations, male pastors and lay leaders have been forced to take women's desires and responses into account.

These women's groups usually take the form of Bible studies. These study circles often function as primary support groups for their members, many of whom are between 20 and 40 years of age. They have felt the cultural turbulence surrounding marriage, gender roles and parenting. Fundamentalism gives them clear-cut perspectives on these complex matters and enables them to interpret the rule of submission in marriage as "equal submission." It gives them religious arguments to support the claims that they make on their husbands for a better marriage.

Brasher's readable book provides chapter-long looks at these women's conversion experiences, spiritual lives and theology; their positions within the official and unofficial power structures of the congregation; and their symbolic and lived domestic lives. Some sense of their family situations is important to Brasher's analysis, for she discovers that most converted to fundamentalism in the midst of domestic crises--many of which involved marital problems.

For those who have studied the history of women in mainline Protestantism, much of Brasher's story is familiar. During the 19th century, when the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational churches of the mainline upheld a doctrine of women's distinct nature and separate spheres of influence, they too refused to ordain women to pastoral ministry or allow women official power in congregations. In response, women established a vast empire of local, regional and national organizations which historians have called the "women's parallel church." Members of the Ladies Aid, for example, could not vote in congregational meetings, but they shaped parish life and policy nonetheless. Similarly, in fundamentalist congregations today, women have parallel structures and ministries through which they wield significant but unofficial power.

What strikes me as different about the fundamentalist women's programs Brasher studies is their acceptance of therapeutic norms and models. Women gather to study the Bible in order to enrich their lives of faith and to find the emotional and psychological support they need to negotiate their complex lives. In contrast, the Ladies Aids served church dinners and raised money to retire the mortgage on the church; their members shared fewer intimate personal and family problems with one another.

I was surprised that Brasher discovered so little political activism among these women. These “second-wave fundamentalists” seem relatively uninterested in the antiabortion movement, for example. But that my expectations proved erroneous is an example of why Brasher’s work is so important. If we continue to understand fundamentalism as merely a product of its male leaders and their public pronouncements, we will ignore the female majority, and their religious perspectives and activities will go unnoticed.