



Holy Boldness: Women Preachers' Autobiographies

Susie C. Stanley

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From its inception in the nineteenth century, the Wesleyan/Holiness religious tradition has offered an alternative construction of gender and supported the equality of the sexes. In *Holy Boldness*, Susie C. Stanley provides a comprehensive analysis of spiritual autobiographies by thirty-four American Wesleyan/Holiness women preachers, published between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. While a few of these women, primarily African Americans, have been added to the canon of American women's autobiography, Stanley argues for the expansion of the canon to incorporate the majority of the women in her study. She reveals how these empowered women carried out public ministries on behalf of evangelism and social justice.

The defining doctrine of the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition is the belief in sanctification, or experiencing a state of holiness. Stanley's analysis illuminates how the concept of the sanctified self inspired women to break out of the narrow confines of the traditional "women's sphere" and engage in public ministries, from preaching at camp meetings and revivals to ministering in prisons and tenements. Moreover, as a result of the Wesleyan/Holiness emphasis on experience as a valid source of theology, many women preachers turned to autobiography as a way to share their spiritual quest and religiously motivated activities with others.

In such writings, these preachers focused on the events that shaped their spiritual growth and their calling to ministry, often giving only the barest details of their personal lives. Thus, *Holy Boldness* is not a collective biography of these women but rather an exploration of how sanctification influenced their evangelistic and social ministries. Using the tools of feminist theory and autobiographical analysis in addition to historical and theological interpretation, Stanley traces a trajectory of Christian women's autobiographies and introduces many previously unknown spiritual autobiographies that will expand our understanding of Christian spirituality in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America.

The Author: Susie C. Stanley is professor of historical theology at Messiah College. She is the author of *Feminist Pillar of Fire: The Life of Alma White*.

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