

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO OUR WOMEN PREACHERS?

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It is evident that there is a lack of women in the preaching ministry today. It has not always been this way. Women have proclaimed God's truth throughout Scripture from Esther in the Old Testament to Phoebe in the New. Within the last 150 years, women have had a prominent role in the preaching ministry.

Beginning in England in the 18th century, John Wesley gave a handful of women the opportunity to preach. In the early 19th century, during the revivals of Charles G. Finney, women gained freedom to preach in America. Finney's revivalism paved the way for the practice of full ordination of women. Church historian Donald Dayton says, "The most controversial of Finney's new measures in his revivals was his encouragement of women to speak and pray in public and mixed meetings."¹ Even when he was opposed by church officials and congregations, Finney stood his ground and gave women opportunity to speak in public. In most cases, this public speaking was not full-fledged preaching, but it gave women more power to speak than they had ever had.

This tradition carried on into Oberlin College. Asa Mahan, the first president of Oberlin, had close ties with Finney and was undoubtedly influenced by him. Dayton says, "Oberlin was the first coeducational college in the world. Later feminists found it still a little stodgy, but a very high percentage of the leaders of the women's rights movement were graduates of Oberlin."² Asa Mahan was so proud of this heritage that he suggested this epitaph be put on his tombstone:

The first man, in the history of

the race who conducted women, in connection with members of the opposite sex, through a full course of liberal education, and conferred upon her the high degrees which had hitherto been the exclusive prerogatives [sic] of men.³

Sarah Anders says, "Education enabled some individual women to pioneer in public life, decades before they would be organized to effect national changes."⁴ The better educated that women became, the more they began to see the inhumanity of men toward other men and women. The war to free slaves led to a war to free women. Dayton gives several reasons for this connection:

The basic egalitarianism of evangelicalism that supported abolitionism was also extended to women. Those who had mustered the courage to attack one social institution found it easier to attack another. Women who mastered the antislavery argument found unexpected parallels to their own situation. But probably most important for the Evangelicals were the parallel problems in the interpretation of Scripture.⁵

As the Scriptures were explored to find answers to the slavery issue, passages were also found that liberated women. Gal. 3:28 was one key passage: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." Passages that had kept women quiet in churches for ages were no longer valid in light of the newly discovered universal truths.

These views led to the ordination of Antoinette Brown, the first

woman ordained in the United States, in 1853. Brown, a Congregationalist, graduated from Oberlin College three years previously and was "deeply indebted" to Asa Mahan's leadership. Luther Lee, a Wesleyan Methodist, preached Brown's ordination sermon, "Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel," using the Galatians passage as his text. He said,

Females have a God-given right to preach the gospel. I take it upon myself as my portion of the effort on this occasion, to defend and substantiate the above proposition. To make any distinction in the Church of Jesus Christ . . . purely on the ground of sex, is virtually to strike this text from the sacred volume, for it affirms that in Christ there is no difference between males and females, that they are all one in regard to the gospel of the grace of God.⁶

As time went by, more women became involved in several facets of ministry, including work in rescue missions and soup kitchens. They seemed to have a natural sense of compassion, perhaps because they themselves felt oppressed. Seeing the opportunity and need for ministry, they began going to the places men were neglecting. This led to women's involvement in missions. Timothy L. Smith sums up the situation thus:

Practically all of the group had at first believed that their "call" was to *foreign* missionary work, at that time the only public ministry in which women were actually welcome. All insisted that "providential" circumstances had thrust them out into the ministry, first as

"home missionaries" and rescue workers, then as evangelists and, in some cases, pastors.⁷

Sandra L. Myres makes the distinction: "Men directed and administered the local churches as well as denominational organizations, but women were in charge of an increasing number of auxiliary groups."⁸ The auxiliary groups they became involved in included Sunday Schools and home/foreign mission societies. They also helped build churches and schools and entertained traveling ministers.⁹ Lyle E. Schaller makes this important observation:

The greater the sensitivity of a denomination to the oppressed and the downtrodden, and the larger the proportion of the membership that is drawn from among those at the bottom of the social class scale, the greater the probability that that denomination has a long history of accepting women as ministers.¹⁰

Another reason why women became involved in ministry comes from the theology of the Holiness Movement and "the essential nature of the place of public testimony in the holiness experience which gave many an otherwise timid woman the authority and the power to speak out "as the Holy Spirit led her."¹¹ C. B. Jernigan tells how, even in the midst of opposition, many women began to get "into the experience of entire sanctification" and would shout and testify at every opportunity they could.¹²

A closer look at this theology is important. Two of the major biblical passages in support of women in the ministry are Gal. 3:28, which we have looked at, and Acts 2:17, a quote from Joel, which reads, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy" (NIV). These verses appear to break down any barriers that there might have been between men and women. In addition, the holiness message is a message of the possibility of freedom from indwelling sin by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Dayton's summary of the correlation between holiness theology and feminist theology is worth noting.

Feminist theologies generally emphasize the extent of the new that is created in the Christian dis-

pensation and identify patriarchal patterns with the old. Thus those theologies that are the most optimistic about the change that is possible in human life are the most likely to accept feminist principles . . . the perfectionist theologies tended to see the subordination of women as part of the sinful state out of which redemption was being effected . . . the subordination of women . . . was merely descriptive of the sinful state in which we find ourselves and without any normative value.¹³

One person who had a great impact on the Holiness Movement was Phoebe Palmer. It was largely because of her influence that many denominations in the movement were committed to the ordination of women.¹⁴ Phoebe Palmer's influence started when she began holding testimony and prayer meetings in conjunction with her husband's preaching campaigns, where women were encouraged to pursue gospel work. These meetings became known as the "Tuesday Meetings," and by 1886 there were 238 in operation. Smith says, "These intimate little gatherings brought together the most earnest Christians of all evangelical sects under the leadership of women."¹⁵ One of Palmer's most famous books is *The Promise of the Father*. Harold Raser sums up some of the impact of this book, saying, "She argues at length for women's right to minister in the Church. . . . The book appeared in a day when women were not generally given important places of ministry in American churches and most certainly not allowed to be ordained."¹⁶ In broader terms, the book shook many traditional foundations of the subordination of women.

Phoebe Palmer influenced Catherine Booth, cofounder of the Salvation Army. Catherine's husband, William Booth, was a preacher. Catherine often went on campaigns with him, and soon she herself began preaching. It is said that she was a better preacher than her husband. Thousands flocked to attend her revival services, sometimes advertised: "Come Hear a Woman Preach." Her sermons were based on the Pentecost account in Acts 2, by which she argued that the Spirit was poured out on *all* people,

women included. Because of her influence, the Salvation Army was built upon the premise of equality of women, which it still advocates today.¹⁷

Women preachers were influential in the early holiness churches. According to Melvin Dieter, "The new holiness churches, which were organized out of the movement in the closing decades of the century, were among the first to grant full ministerial rights to women."¹⁸ By the mid-1880s the Mennonite Brethren church gave full privilege to women ministers. Since its beginning, the Church of the Nazarene has given women full opportunity to preach. H. C. Morrison said of the Church of the Nazarene at the turn of the century, "Women are ordained to preach, and may sit in yearly conventions as delegates."¹⁹ One in eight churches in the United Missionary church were started by women.²⁰ As many as 20 to 25 percent of the preachers and leaders in the Church of God (Anderson, Ind.) were women. Also, the Pentecostal churches supported women in the ministry.²¹ As many as 20 percent of early Nazarene preachers and as many as 30 percent of Pilgrim Holiness preachers were women.²²

It has not remained this way for most holiness churches. Since World War I, the number of women preachers has declined. Floyd Cunningham gives several possible reasons for this. The first reason he gives is the rise of fundamentalism in the church. The church began to look at the Bible legalistically. This new scriptural outlook resulted in a new emphasis on rules and laws. John R. Rice, in his book *Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives, and Women Preachers*, gives the attitude of many during the period between world wars. Rice uses New Testament passages such as 1 Tim. 2:11-15 and 1 Corinthians 14 to prove that women should not preach but should, in fact, keep silent in the church.²³

Cunningham's second reason for the decline of women preachers is also a result of fundamentalism, dealing with the *absolute* ethic versus *interim* ethic. The interim ethic places a woman in the traditional role, subject to her husband and silent in the church. Rice's view falls

into the interim category. People began focusing on specific passages in the New Testament that seem to belittle women. On the other hand, the absolute ethic is based on the universal principles found in such passages as Gal. 3:28 and grants women equality with men. The shift of the 19th century was toward the absolute ethic, but the shift in the 20th has been back toward the interim ethic.²⁴

Ruth Graham, wife of evangelist Billy Graham, sums up the view of many, saying,

I personally am "agin it" [women preaching]. For one thing, I do not feel that we have much of a shortage of men. For another thing, I believe that it basically goes against the principles of Scripture. . . . I think if you study you will find that the finest cooks in the world are men . . . the finest couturiers, by and large, are men; the greatest politicians are men; most of our greatest writers are men; most of our greatest athletes are men. You name it, men are superior in all but two areas: women make the best wives and women make the best mothers.²⁵

Many denominations have fewer women preachers today than at the turn of the century. At that time, at least 20 percent of the ministers in the Church of the Nazarene were women. In 1973, only 6 percent were women.²⁶ Once firmly committed to women in the ministry, the Nazarenes are now letting this commitment fall to the wayside. Not all churches, however, are marked with a decline in female ministers. The United Methodist church, for example, is experiencing an upswing of women preachers. Nancy Van Scoyoc even says, "In some churches more women hold leadership positions than men."²⁷

Several things are keeping

women from entering the preaching ministry. First, there is the problem of ecclesiastical politics. There appears to be a "club mentality" among male ministers. The "brotherhood" is represented by the typical white male married to a lovely, obedient wife with three children. Women have a hard time fitting into this club and are often excluded. Though the official standing of the church is friendly toward women preachers, the people of the church are not. Seth Cook Rees writes,

Nothing but jealousy, prejudice, bigotry, and a stingy love for bossing in men have prevented women's public recognition by the Church. No church that is acquainted with the Holy Ghost will object to the public ministry of women.²⁸

A recent article in the *Christian Century* states:

Women are dropping out of the parish ministry more frequently than their male counterparts. . . . A primary reason for the drop-out rate was the reluctance of parishioners and church staff people to acknowledge authority when it is vested in women.²⁹

The problem is that district superintendents and local churches are not looking for women preachers. Women are forced to enter other fields of ministry.

A second cause keeping women from entering the pastoral ministry is the decline in interest among women wanting to enter the ministry. Though education is available, the number of women studying for the pastoral ministry is dropping. Women either transfer to denominations that welcome women preachers or they switch to religious education or missiology majors.

In summary, it is a sad reality that the number of women preachers is declining in holiness churches. Our heritage in the Holiness Movement

is rich with godly women who toiled as preachers. Our theology is one of freedom, yet we keep many from fulfilling God's call on their lives. A restructuring of attitudes and practice must occur.

NOTES

1. Donald W. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 88.
2. Donald W. and Lucille Sider Dayton, "Women Preachers and Evangelical and Holiness Roots," *Preacher's Magazine*, SON 1979, 19.
3. See n. 1.
4. Hollis, Mace, Mace, and Anders, *Christian Freedom for Women and Other Human Beings* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1975), 18.
5. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*, 89.
6. Donald W. Dayton, ed., *Holiness Tracts Defending the Ministry of Women* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1985), 5.
7. Timothy L. Smith, *Called unto Holiness, The Story of the Nazarenes: The Formative Years*, vol. 1, (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1962), 156.
8. Sandra L. Myres, *Western Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque, N. Mex.: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 203.
9. *Ibid.*, 203, 204.
10. Lyle E. Schaller, *Women as Pastors* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 13.
11. Melvin Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1980), 42, referring to A. M. Kiergan's *Historical Sketches of the Revival of True Holiness and Local Church Polity from 1865 to 1916* (n.p.: Published by the Board of Publication of the Church Advocate and Good Way [1972]), 44.
12. C. B. Jernigan, *Pioneer Days of the Holiness Movement in the Southwest* (Kansas City: Pentecostal Nazarene Publishing House, 1919), 146.
13. Dayton, *Holiness Tracts*, viii.
14. Dayton and Dayton, 20.
15. Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 124.
16. Harold E. Raser, "Phoebe Palmer: Ambassador of Holiness," *Preacher's Magazine*, SON 1983, 23.
17. Dayton and Dayton, 20.
18. Dieter, 43.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 83.
21. Dayton and Dayton, 98.
22. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*, 98.
23. John C. Rice, *Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives, and Women Preachers* (Wheaton, Ill.: Sword of the Lord Publishing, 1941), 39-46.
24. Floyd Cunningham, interview, Northwest Nazarene College, Nampa, Idaho, May 25, 1988.
25. Ruth Graham, comment in "Others Say . . ." column, *Christianity Today*, June 6, 1975, 32.
26. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*, 98.
27. Nancy J. Van Scoyoc, ed., *Women, Change, and the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 62.
28. Dieter, 43-44.
29. "Women as Parish Clergy," *Christian Century*, Jan. 23, 1985, 72.

Pontius' Puddle

