

SPIRIT ON THE LOOSE IN TIMES OF TRANSITION: EARLY WOMEN PREACHERS IN THE U. S. A.

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During the past two decades historians have written texts that give witness to the reality that women have been preaching in the United States since before its founding as a nation. Quaker women were preaching in the colonies before the official birth of the United States in 1776. Evangelical women and women associated with Holiness traditions preached throughout the late 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries—long before the strong press for women’s ordination in mainline denominations that has often defined our conversation around women preaching today. Many of these early preaching women did not press to be ordained; they simply wanted to be free to preach the Gospel as they believed God had called them to do, and often did so as traveling itinerants. Along the way they endured many hardships, suffered great ridicule, overcame tremendous obstacles, and enjoyed great success as multitudes were inspired and changed by their proclamation. Yet sadly, their story is little known among today’s preachers, female or male.

In her book *Daughters of Light: Quaker Women Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad 1700 – 1775*, Rebecca Larson estimates that between 1300 and 1500 Quaker women preached on the British Isles and in the American colonies in the first three-quarters of the 18th century.¹ They traveled the east coast between South Carolina and Maine, with many of them preaching on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. They ranged in age from 17 to 69, and came from every station of life.² Some were recognized by their communities to be “Public Friends” because of their giftedness in public speaking and vocal prayer, and were sent out by those communities with formal letters of introduction to other Quaker meetings in in Europe or North America.

One of these women, Rachel Wilson (1720-1775), peached in places as diverse as Faneuil Hall in Boston, the New Haven, Ct. courthouse, the College of New Jersey in Princeton (at the written invitation of 51 students), and the old Baptist Meeting House in Charles Town (Charleston), SC. She was likened in eloquence to the popular evangelist George Whitefield, and among those to whom she preached were: then governor of New Jersey William Franklin (son of Benjamin Franklin); Rev. Ezra Stiles, a Congregationalist minister who later became president of Yale College, Virginia Assemblyman Patrick Henry, and then governor of Virginia, Norborn Berkeley.³

In *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America 1740-1845*, Catherine Brekus lifts up the preaching of evangelical women during the First and Second Great Awakenings in

¹ Rebecca Larson, *Daughters of Light. Quaker Women Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad 1700-1775* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 63. Larson notes that “one source noted the deaths of 834 female ministers between 1700 and 1799 within the compass of the London Yearly Meeting alone. (Six yearly meetings existed in the American colonies.) Male preachers initially outnumbered female preachers on the London Yearly Meeting list, but as the eighteenth century progressed, the number of women ministers equaled or exceeded the number of men in later decades.” (p. 63)

² See Larson, *Daughters of Light*, 86.

³ See Larson, *Daughters of Light*, 233-237.

the U. S. She estimates that more than 100 black and white women preached in churches, at camp meetings, at outdoor revivals, and in gathering halls from the mid 18th to mid 19th centuries. Though they attracted large crowds and their influence on building up churches and inspiring their audiences was highly significant, “they were virtually written out of their churches’ histories in the mid-nineteenth century—a silence that has been perpetuated ever since.”⁴

In *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*, Bettye Collier-Thomas tells the stories of late 19th and early 20th century African American preaching women who became widely known in the U. S. for their preaching ministries. Women like Elizabeth (last name unknown), Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Amanda Berry Smith, and Sojourner Truth—some slaves, some freed—were trailblazers who

“overcame ridicule and rejection, penury, fears of re-enslavement and discriminations, and unhappy marriages, among other obstacles. After experiences with conversion and sanctification, in which the Holy Spirit commissioned them to preach, they each set out to answer this call. Nothing could deter them—not laws and attitudes that opposed women’s preaching, not even geographical limits. These women spread their message throughout the Northeast, the mid-Atlantic states, the South, the Midwest, and even across oceans.”⁵

Even before women began preaching in the “New World,” we have solid evidence that many women had already been preaching on the continent of Europe. Quaker women had been preaching in England since their founding in the mid 17th century. Margaret Fell, an early leader in Quakerism who later married George Fox, was herself a preacher as well as an outspoken proponent of women preaching.⁶ According to Curtis Freeman, Puritan women were also preaching during this era on the European continent. Freeman notes that between 1640 and 1660 as many as 300 “women prophetesses” who were radical Puritans were preaching and publishing their thoughts in England.⁷ By the 1760s Methodist women, such as Sarah Crosby and Mary Bosanquet-Fletcher, had moved from exhorting to preaching in England with John Wesley’s reluctant approval. And the character of Baby Suggs Holy in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* reminds us that though their histories are largely lost to us, women were spiritual leaders in slave communities long before emancipation arrived,⁸ and may well have been preaching in Africa long before they were forced into slavery.

In surveying this history, questions naturally arise around the conditions that allowed and encouraged women to preach. Are there any patterns that can be observed about the openings that women found for preaching, and what occasioned them? Were there any conditions—ecclesially, theologically, socio-culturally, politically, personally--in which women’s preaching

⁴ Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 7.

⁵ Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder. Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1950-1979* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998), 55.

⁶ Fell’s most famous publication is a pamphlet entitled, “Women’s Speaking Justified,” in which she argued, on the basis of the spiritual quality of the sexes, that women had received the Inner Light just as men, and thus were capable of being prophets.

⁷ See Curtis W. Freeman, ed., *A Company of Women Preachers: Baptists Prophetesses in Seventeenth-Century England. A Reader* (Waco, Tx.: Baylor University Press, 2011), 17.

⁸ See Judylyn S. Ryan, “Spirituality and/as Ideology in Black Women’s Literature: The Preaching of Maria W. Stewart and Baby Suggs Holy,” in Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker, eds., *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, 267-287.

was more likely to flourish than in others? How and where did these women find the inspiration, strength, and courage to preach, despite the very real obstacles they faced?

In this article I identify three significant types of transitions that seem to have occasioned the rise of women as early preachers in the United States: 1) ecclesial and theological transitions; 2) political and geographical transitions, and 3) personal transitions in the lives of the women preachers themselves. In each instance I will examine what it was about these transitions that made openings for women preaching possible. Finally, I will briefly reflect on what we might learn from this history for opening the pulpit to people “on the margins” today.

1) Ecclesial and theological transitions

One of the things that stands out when reading the history of early women preachers is how often their opportunities to preach came in the midst of the emergence of a new sect or denomination. When the Spirit was “on the loose”—that is, not tamped down by church hierarchies and polity or hemmed in by church dogmas, but allowed to manifest itself in new ways--women frequently found openings to respond to the Spirit’s promptings in their own lives, and to preach the gospel.

Quaker women, for instance, were encouraged to preach from their founding because of the theology embraced by their founder George Fox. Among Quaker tenets was a strong belief that each person possessed the Spirit of God within her or himself and could rely on the Spirit of Truth—the presence of the risen Christ within—to lead them into all truth. “Since ‘the light is the same in the male and female, which cometh from Christ,’ Fox believed that, by the power of the Spirit women had the same capacity as men to voice the Word of God.”⁹

Quakers did not rely on professional clergy to lead their meetings, nor did they observe sacraments such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Instead they sat in silence, waiting for the Spirit to speak within members of the gathered community. “Since Quakers believed that inspired words came from the same source, the indwelling Spirit of God, it was irrelevant who actually preached at the meeting.”¹⁰ Larson notes that their contemporaries were often shocked by the gender equality evidenced when Quakers gathered for worship. Young girls could be quite vocal at such meetings while leading men remained silent.¹¹

In *Strangers & Pilgrims*, Catherine Brekus makes the case that many of the evangelical women who preached in the U. S. in the 18th and 19th centuries, came not from the more well established denominations (such as the Presbyterian and Episcopal churches), but from emerging sects and denominations such as the Millerites, Freewill Baptists, Christian Connection, and African Methodists, who believed that the end of the world was near, and that women were needed to herald Christ’s imminent return to earth, calling people to repentance and salvation.

... these sects invested female preaching with transcendent significance. Indeed, they did not allow women to preach in spite of their ‘femininity,’ but *because* of it. A female preacher was a religious outsider in a way that a male preacher could not be. She was a stranger and a pilgrim who had sacrificed everything—pride, money, family and security—for the glory of God. She was a ‘mother’ or a ‘sister’ who would nurture the family of God. . . Most of all a female preacher was a living embodiment of Joel’s promise that women as well as men would prophesy at the end time.¹²

⁹ Larson, *Daughters of Light*, 17.

¹⁰ Larson, *Daughters of Light*, 18.

¹¹ Larson, *Daughters of Light*, 18.

¹² Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 160.

Many of these emerging sects were taking root among people from humble origins, and in a climate that valued heartfelt religious experience and direct divine inspiration more than theological education. Consequently they “created a religious culture in which even the most humble convert—the poor, the unlearned, the slave, or the female—felt qualified to preach the gospel.”¹³

Early evangelical preaching women claimed their right to interpret the scriptures as they saw fit, and defended their right to preach by reference to Old Testament leaders such as Deborah, Miriam, Huldah, and Esther, as well as to New Testament Pauline co-workers such as Phoebe and Priscilla and the four daughters of Philip.¹⁴ They also deemed to be highly significant—as had the Quaker women before them—the prophet Joel’s promise that the Spirit would be poured out in the latter days on men *and* women. More than the Quaker women before them, it was important to these evangelical women to make a Biblical defense of their call—which they frequently did both in their sermons and in their written autobiographies.

In *Daughters of Thunder*, Betty Collier-Thomas notes that many of the African American women preachers of the late 19th and early 20th century were influenced by and drawn towards the Wesleyan Holiness tradition in their preaching. For example, Julia Foote, the first woman to be ordained a deacon (1895) and the second woman to be ordained an elder in the AME Zion Church (1899) was heavily influenced by the Holiness movement within Methodism and its perfectionist doctrines of sanctification. For more than 50 years she served as an itinerant evangelist, “traveling and lecturing widely at camp meetings, revivals and churches in California, the Midwest, the Northeast, and Canada.”¹⁵

But Foote was not the only African American preaching woman influenced by Holiness beliefs. Collier-Thomas notes that with only one exception, all of the 19th and 20th century preaching women she identifies in her book were associated at some point with Methodism—and many with its holiness tradition.¹⁶

What were the essential tenets of holiness belief? Collier-Thomas identifies six: “Its doctrine (a) centered around experience, (2) had roots in Scripture, (3) emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit, (4) created an aura of freedom that encouraged experimentalism, (b) had a reformist and even revolutionary nature, and (6) encouraged the formation of sects.”¹⁷

Many of these tenets were especially conducive for encouraging the preaching of women. For example, the emphasis on a direct experience of the Holy Spirit led many preaching women to assert that they had been called by a power higher than the Church—namely, by the power of God made manifest to them through the Holy Spirit—and thus had to answer that call to preach. Many of these women also claimed that they had been sanctified instantly (as opposed to the gradual sanctification over the course of a lifetime that John Wesley had espoused), had been made holy by the Spirit, and thus were liberated from the sins that might have otherwise constrained them from preaching. The revolutionary nature of the holiness movement helped

¹³ Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 141.

¹⁴ See Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 217-19.

¹⁵ Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 59.

¹⁶ Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 15.

¹⁷ Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 13. Collier-Thomas refers her readers to the following article for a deeper discussion of these six tenets: Nancy Hardesty, Lucile Sider Dayton, and Donald W. Dayton, “Women in the Holiness Movement: Feminism in the Evangelical Tradition,” in Rosemary Radford Ruether and Eleanor T. McLaughlin (eds.), *Women of Spirit; Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 241-249.

these women find the courage to leave their families and go on itinerant preaching missions for months at a time, often encountering dangers and hardships all along the way. It also empowered many of them to deny denominational law and polity that would restrict their freedom to preach, and to boldly take their places in the pulpits of camp meetings, churches, and other venues where people gathered for worship. As Collier-Thomas puts it: “Empowered by their beliefs in holiness and sanctification, they overlooked their own hesitations about the matter. They professed that they did not believe in having women preach, and agonized over how to preserve their marital relations and attend to their duties as wives and mothers, but then they all decided that they had to dedicate their lives to preaching the gospel.”¹⁸

One of the troubling patterns that can be observed in this history is that the more new sects and denominational movements became institutionalized, the more the preaching of women was silenced and their preaching history eliminated from church historical records. While the Spirit was often “on the loose” in the early days of such movements--especially among poorer and less educated populations of women-- over time patriarchy and hierarchy in church governments silenced their preaching, and forced them to “stay in their place.” Perhaps the notable exception is Quakerism where the lack of an ordination process and a theology rooted in the equality of the women and men allowed women more freedom for a longer period of time.

It is also important to note that none of these denominations or sects approved the kinds of structural changes that would allow women to be ordained, and to perform churchly duties such as baptisms and the Lord’s Supper. Consequently, itinerancy was often the only mode of preaching ministry open to them, with only a handful actually serving in local churches.

2) Political and Geo-political Transitions

A second type of transition that seems to have opened the way for women to preach can be seen in political transitions, and the new geographies for preaching they occasioned. For instance, the founding of European colonies in the “new world” occasioned opportunities for preaching across continents that otherwise would not have existed, and provided fertile new soil on which European women might preach. This reality is certainly evidenced in the history of the Quaker preaching women of the 1700s. Experiencing both the “push” from the British Isles where Quakers were legally penalized for being dissenters from the Church of England, and the “pull” to a new world where Quakers not only dominated the colonial governments of Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, but also served New Jersey and North Carolina governments in significant numbers,¹⁹ Quaker women—often with the blessing and endorsement of their meeting houses in the British Isles—preached throughout the colonies in the 18th century. As Rebecca Larson notes, “Quakerism, with its unpaid, travelling ministry, ‘requiring no church building, a minimum of organizational apparatus, and offering a faith shorn of liturgy, sacraments, and an intricate theology’ was uniquely suited to colonial American circumstances.”²⁰ These travelling Quaker women were known for their plain dress, their radical faith, and their eloquent speaking. They attracted large audiences and made strong positive impressions not only on women but also on leading men who came to hear them as well. Some of them, like Lucretia Mott, also became

¹⁸ Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 21.

¹⁹ Rebecca Larson notes that half the population of Newport, Rhode Island was Quaker in 1704, and that Quakers also controlled half the seats in the North Carolina General Assembly in 1703. Some historians have referred to this era as “the Golden Age of Quakerism in America.” See *Daughters of Light*, 3-5.

²⁰ Larson, *Daughters of Light*, 7

leaders in the abolitionist movement, and in advocating for women's equality in the rest of society.

Another example of how geo-political realities opened the way for women to preach is witnessed in the westward expansion of the American frontier in the nineteenth century. Here—as in the case of the early Quaker preaching women—political and ecclesial realities were often intertwined in opening the way for women to preach. For example, because there were not enough seminary- educated men willing to preach in the western territories, some denominational bodies began waiving their high standards for clergy education—which opened the door for women's proclamation. One such example can be found in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, a group which broke away from the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. because it advocated less stringent clergy education, greater sympathy for some of the Great Awakening revival techniques, and greater doctrinal freedom of expression. Louisa Woosley, a Cumberland Presbyterian from Caneyville, Kentucky, traveled by horseback for many years in order to preach in the western territories in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and was such a successful itinerant preacher that her presbytery actually ended up ordaining her in 1889—the first woman ordained in any Presbyterian denomination.²¹ A number of other evangelical women were also enabled to expand their territories for peaching with the westward expansion of the U. S.

Of course not all geo-political realities in the U. S. were conducive to women preaching. Catherine Brekus notes the tremendous risks African American evangelical preachers of the early 19th century took when they dared on occasion to preach below the Mason Dixon line or in other states where slavery was the norm. Furthermore, she notes that most of the evangelical preaching women before the Civil War came from the northern U.S. states, and not from the more conservative southern states where societal pressures were stronger on women to stay in their place.

3) Personal Transitions in the Lives of Early Preaching Women

What empowered these women to preach, and what gave them courage to do so in the face of tremendous ridicule, persecution, and opposition, was their deep-seated belief that they had been called by God to do so. Whether it was through a dream, a vision, or a personal encounter with God while fully awake, whether the call came through study of the scripture or while at prayer or during a religious meeting, evangelical preaching women consistently testify in both their sermons and their autobiographies that it was God who had called them to preach, and that they had had nothing whatsoever to do with that call. Indeed, many describe themselves as being poor, uneducated, and lacking in eloquence, and marvel at being called in spite of their many limitations.

Yet despite that strong sense of call, many of these women delayed answering that calling for months or even years because of the opposition they faced. “Nancy Towle [a 19th c. nondenominational preacher], debated for two years before finally becoming an itinerant; Jarena Lee [an early 19th c. African Methodist preacher] waited eight years; and because she was

²¹ In her autobiography, Louisa Woosley reports that during the first four years of her ministry she preached 912 sermons “for which God has given me two souls each.” Indeed, she could not answer positively all the invitations she received to preach. Over 500 new members were received into the Cumberland Presbyterian Church through her ministry during that four-year period. See Louisa M. Woosley, *Shall Woman Preach? Or the Question Answered* (Originally published in 1891 by Louisa Woosley. Reprinted in Memphis, Tn.: Frontier Press, 1989), 100-101.

illiterate and a slave, Elizabeth [a late 18th c. African Methodist preacher] procrastinated for twenty-nine years.”²²

What is even more striking, however, is that in nearly all the recorded cases, evangelical women only began preaching after significant illness or tragedy struck their lives. Louisa Woosley recounts going through several serious battles with physical illness including one in which “I was reduced to a frame, and as helpless as an infant” before finally acquiescing and agreeing to preach the Gospel.²³ Ellen Stewart, a Methodist from Ohio, “tried to quench the spirit by choosing to get married rather than to preach, and as a result, she sank into a deep depression.” It was not until two years later that she began preaching.²⁴ Elleanor Knight (a Christian Connection preacher) had suffered abuse from her husband²⁵ and had lost two children to death—children she believed God had taken away from her as a result of her spiritual disobedience—before she actually began preaching.²⁶ Jarena Lee lost her husband and several children to death, and was a widow supporting two infant children alone when she finally began itinerant preaching.²⁷ And Zilpha Elaw, an early 19th c. African Methodist preacher, almost died from an internal inflammation before commencing her preaching ministry.

One cannot help but wonder, when reading the stories of these women, how much the societal pressures to conform to the “feminine” norms of the day, and the ecclesial and societal roadblocks raised to their preaching as women contributed to their illnesses of mind and body, and to their despair. Pressured to marry and have children, ridiculed and admonished for “exposing themselves” when they dared speak in public, and encouraged to live into a feminine ideal of subservience, piety, and humility, these women faced obstacles at every turn. What is remarkable is that they nevertheless persevered, believing in their heart of hearts, that they would be forsaking God’s calling upon their lives if they did not, seizing the openings available to them (and often pressuring for more), and trusting the Spirit to empower them and give them the words to proclaim.

Some Concluding Reflections

So what might we in the church today learn from this history of early women preachers in the U. S. A.? For starters, we are reminded that God’s Spirit not only rests upon those whom our denominations deem to ordain through official channels, but also upon countless others who may not seem smart enough, educated enough, doctrinaire enough, or the right gender, race, class, or sexual orientation to meet our human standards. It was through the ministry of Spirit-anointed lay people, women and men, that the church of Christ was first given birth, and as this history reminds us, it is often through the preaching of Spirit-anointed lay people of all varieties that the church today continues to be reborn and renewed. Perhaps, rather than bemoaning the increasing number of “uneducated” lay people who are serving pulpits in geographical areas underserved by ordained clergy, we seminary-trained clergy should be celebrating and encouraging them. Perhaps rather than jealously guarding our local parish pulpits we should be opening them to lay people both within and without our congregations, who have received a Word from God that

²² Catherine Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 190. Material in brackets added.

²³ Louisa M. Woosley, *Shall Woman Preach? Or the Question Answered* (Originally published in 1891 by Louisa Woosley. Reprinted in Memphis, Tn.: Frontier Press, 1989), 98-99.

²⁴ Catherine Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 189.

²⁵ Catherine Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 177.

²⁶ Catherine Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 191.

²⁷ Dennis Dickerson, “Foreward,” in Jarena Lee, *Religious Experiences and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, “A Preaching Woman”* (Nashville, TN.: AMEC Sunday School Union/Legacy Publishing, 1991), x.

they are led to bring to us. And perhaps rather than viewing preaching primarily as a clerical calling, we—who believe the Spirit has indeed been poured out on *all flesh*-- should reclaim it as a calling of the whole people of God.

Second, this history reminds us of the deep harm that is done to those in our midst who are called by God's Spirit to preach, but who, on the basis of gender (or race, sexual orientation, class, etc.) are denied the right to preach. The history of these early preaching women gives testimony that such denials have, in the past, led to serious illnesses of the body, mind, and spirit. Women have suffered—and suffered mightily—by the refusal of churches to allow them to do what they believe in their hearts God has called them to do. Perhaps it is time for mainline denominations who have in recent years celebrated the anniversaries of the ordination women, also to repent of their past histories of discrimination against women and suppression of their voices in the pulpit. And perhaps it is time for denominations who still deny ordination to women and others to do some serious soul-searching about the harm they are causing in the process.

Finally, this history calls us to become as savvy as serpents in our readings of the times and our identification of those moments of transition that can be openings for people on the margins to preach. I think, for example, of that Roman Catholic Latina seminarian I taught several years ago who had a burning in her bones to preach, but loved her church too much to leave it. She seized upon the internet as a place where she could do so freely and publicly, and developed a blog site where she could preach and enter into dialog with people the world over about her sermons. I also think of that Ph.D. student I know who has a special passion for African American women's preaching, so has developed a website that celebrates and encourages it, along with providing a forum for posting Black women's sermons. These women, it seems to me, are following in the footsteps of their female preaching ancestors of earlier centuries—taking those openings that are available to them in this time of technological transition in our world—and using those openings to foster women's preaching of the Gospel.

A Personal Postscript

In a book he wrote about one branch of our family's history, my (now deceased) maternal grandfather recounts that two Quaker preachers from Ireland, Mary Peisley and Catherine Payton, visited a colony of Quakers living in the area now known as Camden S.C. in December of 1753, and preached there for 12 days. Among the settlers were a family of Englishes, my ancestors, who had immigrated to the new world from Ireland only five months prior. My grandfather, a very conservative Presbyterian minister who opposed women's ordination (including my own), comments on the courage of these women and the hardships they must have endured as they traveled the 125 miles from Charleston to Camden, covering territory that had no road going through it until that very year. He also surmises that several of the youth in the English family were probably among those converted by these women and their preaching. Yet when it comes to giving reasons for the decline of Quakerism in SC later in that same century, he also comments, "Such itineration as was undertaken by Mary Peisley and Catherine Payton, *besides laboring under the prohibition expressly laid down in Scripture (I Timothy 2:12-14)*, was not suited to the pioneer life of South Carolina at that period."²⁸ I cannot help but wonder, however: would I be doing what I am doing today had it not been for the courageous witness of these early Quaker preaching woman?

²⁸ James English Cousar, Jr., *Quaker Turned Presbyterian. The Spiritual Pilgrimage of Robert ("Robin") English*, (self-published; copyright 1956), 12. Italics added for emphasis.