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Restoration Women Who Responded to the Spirit Before 1900

BONNIE MILLER

In 1841 the *Christian Palladium* published a statement from Elder J. Chadwick that women could “tell the story of Calvary, and invite sinners to Christ,” but not as preachers. “The ministerial and pastoral office implies *authority*,” he wrote, “and as such, is given exclusively to men.”¹ An opposite view was expressed by George T. Smith in the *Christian Standard* in 1893, “Can a woman do good by speaking in the churches? . . . If so, she is under obligation to use her talent God has given her. He will call her to account if she does not.”² Some, such as Elder Chadwick, opposed women preachers on the basis of the authority associated with the office. Yet in some churches women were allowed to preach provided they did not stand in the pulpit, which represented the position of authority.³ Others argued against women preaching based on Paul’s command that they be silent in the assembly. However, even they did not completely silence women, as often an allowance was made for a female lay speaker, missionary, or Sunday School teacher.

In spite of protests, the feminine voice was frequently the medium through which people heard the gospel. A few of these women are familiar names thanks to the publication of their biographies. For most, however, very little is known about them.⁴

They are heroes of the faith, however, and their stories deserve to be told and their lives honored. We will not attempt to resolve the argument concerning women preaching. That debate has been going on for centuries and will no doubt continue. We will consider the work done by some of these “female laborers” and honor their place in our history. These women believed their license to preach resulted from a direct command from God rather than human permission. They understood the prophecy of Joel as fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when God poured out his Spirit on his sons *and* daughters (Joel 2.28). Therefore, their conviction that they were called and gifted by the Spirit led them to oppose the prevailing religious culture.⁵

A distinction should be made between *exhorters*, *preachers*, *evangelists*, and *lecturers*. In the nineteenth century it was common to have several speakers during a church assembly. The preacher or evangelist presented a discourse on scripture, followed by one or more exhorters. The exhortation was usually an emotional appeal emphasizing the unrepentant sinner’s perilous state.

Preachers were usually ordained, giving them authority to perform marriages, preside at the Lord’s Supper and baptize sinners. Therefore, churches most often hired ordained preachers. Since women were not ordained until late in the nineteenth century, most of the women who preached were traveling evangelists or itinerants.

After missionary and temperance societies were founded, female lecturers became prevalent. These women often spoke in churches and were at times given charge of the Sunday morning assembly. Since their topic was mission work or the gospel of temperance, their address to the congregation was not considered preaching.

1. Elder J. Chadwick, “An Exposition of I. Cor. XIV 34, 35,” *Christian Palladium* 10, no. 2 (May 15, 1841): 24.

2. George T. Smith, “No Man Wishes Woman to Keep Silence in the Churches,” *Christian Standard*, 29 (1893): 799.

3. Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 201.

4. This article is a condensation of a paper presented at the Christian Scholars Conference, Rochester College, in June 2007. It includes an appendix with data on many other women and a more comprehensive bibliography. For a copy of the complete paper, contact the author at bonniemiller@vanchurch.org.

5. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 185.

The earliest record of a female exhorter is recorded by Joseph Thomas; he is more commonly known as “the White Pilgrim.” He didn’t identify her name, unfortunately, but reported in his journal that on December 15 and 16 of 1810 he held a two-day meeting at “brother Mulky’s” [*sic*]. This would be John Mulkey near Tomkinsville, Kentucky. Thomas wrote,

At night, meeting commenced again; the Christians were much exercised, among whom was a woman moved and surely by the power of the Holy Ghost, to speak to the people. I was no little astonished at her flow of speech and consistency of idea . . . Many felt the weight of her exhortation, and some were mourning under conviction the greater part of the night.⁶

While some have identified this exhorter as **Nancy Mulkey**, the youngest daughter of John Mulkey, that would be impossible since she was not born until four years after the 1810 meeting. We know from pioneer preacher Isaac Newton Jones that Nancy Mulkey did become an exhorter. Jones writes that Nancy was:

. . . a shouter, as then called . . . she would arise with zeal on her countenance and fire in her eyes, and with a pathos that showed the depth of her soul, and would pour forth an exhortation lasting from five to fifteen minutes, which neither father nor brother could equal, and which brought tears from every feeling eye.⁷

Another female exhorter of that time period is **Mahala Slaughter**. She was the daughter of a preacher, William Randolph, and was married to Isaac Slaughter, a nephew of “Old John” Mulkey. Another exhorter in the Christian Connection (an association of early reformers along the eastern seaboard preceding the Stone-Campbell Movement) is **Elizabeth Venner**, who traveled and exhorted for the well-known female preacher, Nancy Towle, between 1826 and 1830. Venner was described by Towle as a “tender and sympathizing friend.”⁸

The earliest recorded female itinerant in the Christian movement is **Nancy Gove Cram**. Born in New Hampshire in 1776, she was married to Jacob Cram who later left her for another woman. Cram was raised in the Freewill Baptist Church but was attracted to the teachings of a new religious group who simply called themselves Christians. As a result of a gospel meeting she conducted in Charleston, New York, she began working with the Christian Connection in 1812.⁹ With the help of Elder Jonathan S. Thompson, she formed at least two Christian churches in upstate New York, the first at Broadalbin and the second at Galway.¹⁰ She served over a year as the unofficial minister for a congregation she established in Ballston Spa, New York.¹¹

She died following a brief illness when less than forty years old. However, in her four short years of ministry, among her converts were seven who went on to become gospel preachers, including two women.¹²

One of Nancy’s converts was **Abigail Roberts**. Born into a Quaker family in New York, Abigail was described by Dr. David Millard as having “a very amiable and benevolent heart, was esteemed an excellent

6. Joseph Thomas, *The Life of the Pilgrim, Joseph Thomas, Containing an Accurate Account of His Trials, Travels, and Gospel Labours up to the Present Date* (Winchester, VA: J. Foster, 1817), 132.

7. J. W. Grant, *A Sketch of the Reformation in Tennessee* (Nashville: unpublished manuscript, 1897), 55.

8. Judith Bledsoe Bailey, *Nancy Towle, 1796-1876: Faithful Child of God* (September 29, 2000, Lane Memorial Library), www.hampton.lib.nh.us/hampton/biog/nancytowle/nancytowle1.htm (accessed December 7, 2006). Current address www.hampton.lib.nh.us/hampton/biog/nancytowle/nancytowle_0.htm.

9. John Franklin Burnett, *Early Women of the Christian Church: Heroines All* (Dayton, OH: Christian Publishing Association, 1921), 9, 11-12.

10. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 284; Debra Hull, *Christian Church Women: Shapers of a Movement* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1994), 24; “Read Family Connections” (Rootsweb, May 29, 2007), www.crab.com/~edrtjd/readgen/78fam.htm (accessed December 12, 2007).

11. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 405.

12. Burnett, *Early Women of the Christian Church*, 13.

nurse, and regarded as possessing a strong, vigorous mind . . . ”¹³ Aided by Nancy Cram, she began preaching the Sunday after her conversion in 1814. Abigail’s husband supported her preaching, traveling with her and escorting her to the pulpit.

Most ministers connected to the newly developing Christian movement, calling people to abandon denominationalism and become “Christians only,” were ridiculed and harangued as radicals, rebels, or heretics. This was compounded further by the controversy surrounding Trinitarianism. Some preachers, Abigail included, were understood as opposed to the Trinity because the word could not be found in the Bible. Abigail therefore encountered opposition to her preaching on several counts—she rejected the Trinity, espoused the “suspect” Christian doctrine, and was female. In spite of opposition, Roberts successfully organized at least four churches before her ministry was cut short by illness.¹⁴

The year 1820 marked the beginning of **Sarah Hedges’** ministry. Sarah was an active Methodist preacher for twelve years prior to joining the New York Eastern Conference of the Christian Connection.¹⁵ Unlike Abigail Roberts, Sarah’s husband did not approve or encourage her ministry, was abusive, and eventually deserted her. It is reported that Sarah frequently drew audiences of 1000-2000 and in 1820 she addressed the Christian Connection General Conference where she justified scripturally the right of women to preach.¹⁶ She died in New York two years before her fiftieth birthday.

Another New York preacher, **Deborah Peirce**, recounts in her book, *A Scriptural Vindication of Female Preaching (1820)* being “tormented by day and night” from fear of disgracing her Savior.¹⁷ More than thirty women are known to have preached among the Christian Connection churches, but little is known about many of them.

More is known about **Ann Rexford** who began preaching when she was nineteen. Twelve years later she married Russell Brown, a wealthy lawyer, and ceased her public ministry. Ann was a popular speaker, described as “young” and “rather beautiful.”¹⁸ Fellow Christian Connection preacher Joseph Badger applauded her in a letter to the *Christian Palladium* in 1835 for her “able, faithful, and interesting labors.”¹⁹

Undoubtedly one of the best known female preachers of the nineteenth century is **Nancy Towle**. Claiming no denominational ties but working among Christian churches, she preached throughout New Hampshire beginning in 1821. Following her baptism, it took two years of wrestling with God before she was willing to abandon family and social norms to take up the life of itinerancy. During her career she traveled by stagecoach, canal boat, seafaring ships, railroad, and even an open sled in a snow storm.²⁰ When she returned to the United States after preaching in England from 1829 to 1830, she noticed a definite decrease in the acceptance of female preachers. Perhaps it was a result of the disillusionment of many who had interpreted female preachers as evidence of the outpouring of the Spirit during the “end times.” When the millennial reign of Christ had not occurred by 1830, some decided these were not the end times and God’s Spirit had not been poured out on their daughters. The false predictions of William Miller in 1844 reinforced their beliefs that the end was not imminent.

Sometimes the call to preach was pressed upon a reluctant woman. **Sabrina Lambson** decided God was trying to get her attention while lying on her sickbed with a strain of tuberculosis. When cured through the power of prayer, she determined to give her life to telling others of God’s goodness.²¹ She began her ministry in 1824, preaching primarily in revivals. Her ministry came to an end after only nine years when she died at the age of thirty-four.

13. Philetus Roberts, *Memoir of Mrs. Abigail Roberts: An Account of Her Birth, Early Education, Call to the Ministry* (Irvington, NJ: Moses Cummings, 1858), 15-16.

14. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 207, 284.

15. Evan Williams Humphreys, *Memoirs of Deceased Christian Ministers* (Dayton, OH: Christian Publishing Association, 1880), 167.

16. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 177, 217.

17. *Ibid.*, 427.

18. Roberts, *Memoir of Mrs. Abigail Roberts*, 80.

19. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 230.

20. J. Bailey, *Nancy Towle*.

21. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, 270.

Another of Nancy Cram's converts was preacher **Mary Curry**. Her ministry was confined to the state of New York, although she often rode horseback to conduct meetings at distances of over one hundred miles. If a woman's husband were also a preacher, it was more acceptable for her to fill the pulpit in his absence. Mary Curry was among those who sometimes filled in for her husband Ezekiel or added the exhortation at the conclusion of his sermon.²²

While some women retired from the public sphere after marriage, others such as **Wealthy Sillsbury Edmunds** continued to preach. Her ministerial career spanned thirteen years beginning in 1833; she preached in Michigan, Minnesota and the western frontier. Sometimes it was necessary to support herself with a needle and thread doing handwork for others.²³ Other itinerant women such as **Eleanor Knight** reported similar employment, even knitting a pair of socks to pay her stage fare on one occasion. Knight was the victim of an abusive husband who eventually left her.²⁴ In 1839 Knight published her autobiography and lamented that she had initially resisted the Spirit's prompting, concluding that God had punished her, like Jonah, for disobeying him. She connected the tragic deaths of two of her small children to her disobedience before deciding to submit to "his holy will." Knight wrote, "There is no worse oppression than to press the word of the Lord within, and hinder those from speaking that long to speak . . ." ²⁵

The first mention of **Hannah Cogswell's** preaching career occurred in 1836 at the Christian Connection Conference in New Hampshire when she was commended as a female laborer. She had married a preacher, Frederic Cogswell, when she was only sixteen. One of her daughters, **Ruth Rowell**, also chose a career in the pulpit and preached in Minnesota. The family history reports that when Hannah and her husband traveled to appointments, preaching as they went, they were sometimes accompanied by Mr. Cogswell's cousin, Joseph Badger, the editor of the *Christian Palladium*. Additionally, Hannah had a sister-in-law, known only as **Mrs. Peavey**, who preached for the Christian Connection throughout New England and the upper Midwest.²⁶

As early as 1839 the Virginia Christian Conference officially recognized **Rebecca Miller** as her husband's preaching associate. Although not exactly ordained, it was one step closer than any other woman had come in our religious tradition. It was also one step further away from the Stone-Campbell stream. While Stone-Campbell churches were getting organized, Frederick Miller, Rebecca's preacher husband, chose to remain with the Christian Connection as it distanced itself from the "Campbellites." It was said he "came near to being swept away by the views of Alexander Campbell."²⁷ Rebecca died at the young age of thirty, four days after her husband's death.

Barbara Kellison not only preached but also wrote in defense of a woman's right to preach. In 1862 she published a forty-four-page pamphlet, "The Rights of Women in the Church." It was logical, systematic, and biblical as she pointed out scriptural arguments supporting women's right to preach. She argued that Christian women were treated worse than male slaves when it came to using their Spirit-given gift of preaching.²⁸ In the 1860 census both she and her husband gave "minister" as their official occupation.

Another woman listed in the census as a minister for the Christian Church was **Melissa Terrell**. She was ordained at the Ebenezer Christian Church in Clark County, Ohio on March 7, 1867, becoming the first woman known to be ordained in the Restoration Movement. Six months after Melissa's ordination, the Deer Creek Conference recognized her ordination although "officially" opposed to the ordination of female preachers.²⁹

22. Ibid., 223, 247.

23. Ibid., 248, 251, 302.

24. Ibid., 165, 177; 1850 Federal census.

25. Ibid., 191, 193.

26. Ibid., 247, 303.

27. P.J. Kernodle, *Lives of Christian Ministers* (Richmond, VA: Central Publishing Co., 1909), 147.

28. Hull, *Christian Church Women*, 47.

29. Burnett, *Early Women of the Christian Church*, 26.

Asa Coan, a Christian preacher in the early 1800s, reported that **Ellen Gustin** began preaching in 1854 in Maine. In 1869 she moved to West Mansfield, Massachusetts, where she was ordained and where she continued to preach for another five years.³⁰

A well-known woman whose ministry began in the 1870s is **Carry Nation**. Her mother was a distant relative of Alexander Campbell and Carry was raised among the Disciples of Christ after being baptized in 1855. Her first marriage to Charles Gloyd was not what she envisioned, as he was an alcoholic. Nevertheless she was heartbroken when he died. She then married David Nation, a lawyer and preacher, but he divorced her because she was away from home so often preaching against the dangers of alcohol. Due to her behavior, the Disciples disfellowshipped her in 1892,³¹ but she continued to preach against the evils of alcohol in any church that would allow her.

Mary Herr Kingsworth's career was cut short by death seven years after she was ordained. She united with the Christian Church in Illinois in 1855 three years after her marriage to John Kingsworth. Ten years later they returned to her birthplace in Pennsylvania where she was licensed to preach by the Western Pennsylvania Conference. Her ordination occurred there in 1872.³²

A woman well-known in Indiana was **Zerelda Wallace**, wife of David Wallace, the sixth governor of the State. Zerelda was elected first president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union of Indiana. It was her work for temperance that thrust her into the pulpit. The first time she spoke in church was a Sunday in 1883 when she refused the communion wine.³³ She rose in her seat and gave a moving argument against the use of spirits in the Lord's Supper. The church shortly replaced the wine with grape juice. She continued to speak from the pulpit in churches and other public forums in favor of prohibition.

Many women who filled the pulpit in the late nineteenth century did so on behalf of the Women's Christian Temperance Union or the Christian Woman's Board of Missions. **Emily B. Swank** began lecturing on temperance while studying at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. She was ordained by the Miami (Ohio) Conference in 1874 and was "an able expounder of christian [sic] ethics" until her death two years later.³⁴

When widow **Marinda Lemert** moved from Illinois to Washington State, she wrote the *American Christian Review* requesting preachers to come west to help where gospel laborers were few. Prior to her move west, she was a frequent contributor to the *American Christian Review*, the *Christian Standard*, *Christian Pioneer*, *Gospel Advocate* and *Christian-Evangelist*.³⁵ She also wrote the *Apostolic Guide*, arguing forcefully and scripturally for women's right to preach.³⁶ Her conclusions, she wrote, resulted from nine years of "careful and prayerful study of God's Holy Word upon this subject."³⁷

Marinda had a personal interest in this topic as she occasionally found herself in a church with no minister and felt compelled to speak "words of life" to those assembled.³⁸ She would return home feeling guilty for stepping out of the biblically prescribed role for women. This prompted her study, which concluded that restrictions on women were contrary to the Spirit of Christ. Her letters to the *American Christian Review* appealing to the Bible and the outpouring of the Spirit in defense of women's right to preach are some of the most reasoned and insightful of any writings on the subject.

Clara Babcock is usually cited as the first woman ordained in the Restoration Movement, but as we have seen, several others preceded her 1889 ordination.³⁹ Converted from the Methodist Church, Clara

30. Asa Coan, *Gospel Sermons by Christian Ministers* (Dayton, OH: Christian Pub., 1881), 202.

31. Hull, *Christian Church Women*, 50-52.

32. Humphreys, *Memoirs of Deceased Christian Ministers*, 188-189.

33. Susan Vogelgesang, "Zerelda Wallace: Death To-day of a Notable Indiana Woman," *Indianapolis News* (March 19, 1901): 37.

34. Humphreys, *Memoirs of Deceased Christian Ministers*, 351.

35. Fred A. Bailey, "Woman's Superiority in Disciple Thought, 1865-1900," *Restoration Quarterly* 23 (1980): 155.

36. Hull, *Christian Church Women*, 33.

37. M. R. Lemert, "Universal Equality of the Sexes in Christ," *Christian Standard* 23 (June 16, 1888): 374.

38. Elizabeth Hartsfield et al., *Women in the Church* (Lexington: College of the Bible, 1953), 14.

39. Hull, *Christian Church Women*, 30.

immediately began reaching out to her neighbors and friends with the gospel message. She became an active promoter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and spoke often about the evils of alcohol. One Sunday when speaking to the church in Erie, Illinois, the congregation was so impressed by her presentation they urged her to remain as their minister.⁴⁰ Her ordination followed a period she described as "careful study and prayer and mature deliberation."⁴¹

Sadie McCoy was ordained five years after her baptism in Bear Creek, Illinois. Her mother was a Primitive Baptist and her father was an abusive alcoholic who opposed her desire for an education. Not to be deterred, Sadie obtained an education and began teaching school. When she saw the need for more spiritual training for children she organized three Sunday Schools. Her future husband, J. R. Crank, recommended that she become the State Sunday School Evangelist for Illinois.⁴²

While conducting a teachers' training institute, a spontaneous revival broke out with ninety-six people making their confession of faith. The church asked her to be their minister, but she had no intention of becoming a preacher and refused their offer. However, one of the elders told her that if she refused the position, the blood of those people "would be on her soul."⁴³ She then accepted their invitation. The *Christian Standard* reported her success as due to "her ability to clearly and forcibly impart gospel truth, together with great earnestness in urging the claims of Christ."⁴⁴ She died at the age of eighty-five.

Near the end of the nineteenth century **Clara Hazelrigg** was ordained in 1897. She held protracted meetings in eight states⁴⁵ and in 1901 she addressed the Minneapolis General Convention where she argued that women preachers would result in a swifter elimination of "that bitter foe of the human race—the saloon." The following year she declared at the Convention that "Preparation, consecration, inclination, make up a call to the ministry, not sex or previous condition of servitude."⁴⁶

In this summation of the lives of female evangelists, we have recounted a wide variety of experiences. Some were single, some married. Some were raised in Christian homes, some in abusive, alcoholic homes. Some preached and others exhorted. Some held local pastorates; many traveled the circuit. Some enjoyed long preaching careers; others died young. Some were well-known, while most have faded from memory.

A prevailing argument voiced by these women in defense of their preaching (and the men who rose to their defense) was that they had been gifted by the Holy Spirit and no one had the right to deny the exercise of God's gifts.⁴⁷ They did not endure the hardships of itinerancy, persecution, loneliness, and frequent loss of health to gain fame or recognition, but because they felt compelled to preach.

On Sunday morning, October 1, 2006, Charme Robarts stepped into the pulpit of the Bering Drive Church of Christ in Houston, Texas. It was the first time this congregation had invited a female preacher. In introducing her, Dr. Brent Isbell, the regular Bering Drive preacher, said, "We have invited you to our pulpit *not* to make some point or fulfill some social or political agenda, but simply because we want to be the kind of community where all faithful voices are welcomed and honored . . ." ⁴⁸

May we honor the faithful voices of those who came before us and welcome those who will come after us.

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40. Mary Ellen Lantzer, *An Examination of the 1892-93 Christian Standard Controversy Concerning Women's Preaching* (Johnson City, TN: Emmanuel School of Religion, 1990), 17.

41. Clara C. Babcock, "Women in the Pulpit," *Christian Standard* 28 (June 4, 1892): 482.

42. Earl T. Sechler, *Sadie McCoy Crank (1863-1948), Pioneer Woman Preacher in the Christian Church (Disciples)* (Nashville: Disciples of Christ, 1950), 7.

43. *Ibid.*, 6.

44. Mrs. J. M. Van Horn, "Women as Helpers in Evangelization," *Christian Standard* 28 (1892): 787-88.

45. "Mrs. Clara Hazelrigg," *World Call* (March 1937): 29.

46. Clara Hazelrigg, "Help Those Men," *Christian Standard* 38 (January 18, 1902): 29, 83.

47. Frank G. Tyrell, "St. Louis Letter," *Christian Standard* 29 (March 4, 1893): 179; George T. Smith, "Let the Women Keep Silence in the Church," *Christian Evangelist*, 30 (1893): 279.

48. Edward Fudge, "Sister Speaks," www.edwardfudge.com/gracemails/family_notes266.html (accessed April 16, 2007).