

1-1-1999

## Same Faith, Different Fates: Culturally Defined Answers to the "Women's Question" in Disciples of Christ and Church of Christ Movements

Frances Grace Carver

Cynthia Cornell Novack

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Carver, Frances Grace and Novack, Cynthia Cornell (1999) "Same Faith, Different Fates: Culturally Defined Answers to the "Women's Question" in Disciples of Christ and Church of Christ Movements," *Leaven*: Vol. 7: Iss. 4, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol7/iss4/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu](mailto:bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu).

# Same Faith, Different Fates:

## *Culturally Defined Answers to the "Woman's Question" in the Disciples and Church of Christ Movements*

BY FRANCES GRACE CARVER  
AND CYNTHIA CORNELL NOVAK

### **A Narrative Introduction: Silena Moore Holman and Clara Hale Babcock**

Those who think that all Church of Christ women in the late nineteenth century were as corseted in opinion and public role as they were in dress will need to rethink that stereotype in light of the lives of Silena Moore Holman and Clara Celestia Hale Babcock.

Born on July 9, 1850, in Dechard, Tennessee, Silena Moore lived out what she herself described as the ideals of the "new woman." From the age of fourteen until she married Dr. T. P. Holman at the age of twenty-four, Silena Moore worked as a teacher, a role that defined her for a lifetime and one that she used in arguing that an educated woman—no longer a "clinging vine"—was instead a "bright, wide awake companion."<sup>1</sup>

Modeling the active, wide-awake woman about whom she wrote, Holman survived at the age of eleven the death of her father, who was killed in the Civil War; secured teaching jobs, which allowed her to purchase a home for her widowed mother and four siblings; married; raised eight children; worked in her local church congregation; fulfilled the responsibilities of an elder's wife; and assumed leadership in the Tennessee Women's Christian Temperance Union, which grew in number under her leadership from fewer than two hundred to over four thousand.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the responsibilities of home and public life, Silena Moore Holman between 1888 and 1913 drafted

a number of powerful articles for the *Gospel Advocate* that questioned the limited role accorded to women in the Churches of Christ. Despite sharp responses from David Lipscomb and others, Holman firmly challenged the male leadership to consider the overall spirit of the scriptures instead of looking narrowly at one or two passages. Asserting that she herself "had neither talent nor inclination to be a public speaker," she nonetheless struggled with problematic passages because, she argued, women who had gifts for public ministry should be allowed to use them:

I believe that a learned Christian woman may expound the scriptures and urge obedience to them, to one hundred men and women at one time, as well as to one hundred, one at a time, and do much good, and no more violate a scriptural command in the one instance than in the other. ...<sup>3</sup>

She framed her arguments around this principle: "Those who love the Bible seek to harmonize its teachings."<sup>4</sup> She agreed that the biblical injunction "Let your women keep silent" was "as clear as the noonday sun." It was "only those dozen or so other passages" that "mystified" her!<sup>5</sup>

In carefully constructed arguments that were thick with biblical, historical, and literary references, Holman queried her opponents about biblical interpretation, historical record, and contemporary worship:



1. If women have always been silent, then why does Paul address issues such as prophesying and praying, which assume women's participation?

2. If women are to keep silent, then why is there evidence that the term "deacon" is used in the New Testament to describe women's work in the early church, work that would necessitate women's speaking?

3. If women were silent, then why does Pliny the Younger, writing to the emperor Trajan in A.D. 104, indicate that he has had to "apply the torture to some young women who were called ministers (ministrae)?"<sup>6</sup>

4. If women are to keep silent, then why are they permitted to sing in the worship?

5. If women are to keep silent, then why are they permitted to write music whereby their voices are heard through their songs?

6. If women are to keep silent in church, how is the word *church* defined? Could women speak if a group of people met, but they didn't describe themselves as a church?

Some of her complex questions served to point out the hair-splitting nature of the responses of male leadership when they clung literally to scripture:

Suppose a dozen men and women were in my parlor and I talked to them of the gospel and exhorted them to obey it? Exactly how many would have to be added to the number to make my talk and exhortation a public instead of a private one?<sup>7</sup>

Emphasizing her determination to study the "woman's question" until the answers satisfactorily revealed a unified intention in scripture, she concluded one of her early pieces with these compelling words: "My only endeavor has been to reconcile Paul with Paul, and himself with other inspired writers."<sup>8</sup>

In 1896, still dissatisfied with the answers men provided about the "woman's question," Holman pointed out that few seemed surprised when men at the close of the century were different from their forefathers. But unfortunately, Holman noted, "a large part of the world seems to be immeasurably astonished" when women are not "the same women their grandmothers were in

every respect." She concluded: "Is it not unreasonable to expect that they should be?"<sup>9</sup>

Clara Celestia Hale Babcock, for one, clearly agreed that the "new woman" could not be like her grandmother, nor would she wish to be. Like Holman, who was born the same year, Babcock lived a life on the frontier of "new womanhood."

Born on May 31, 1850, in Fitchville, Ohio, Clara Hale married Israel R. Babcock in 1865 at the age of fifteen and subsequently birthed and mothered six children. Daughter of a Methodist minister, Babcock remained an active Methodist until she "converted" to the Christian Church at the age of twenty-five after attending a series of meetings during which she was drawn to the teachings on baptism.<sup>10</sup>


In 1888, the same year that Silena Moore Holman began to articulate her stance in the *Gospel Advocate*, thirty-nine-year-old Clara Hale Babcock was the first woman to be ordained in another branch of the Stone-Campbell movement, the Christian Church, or Disciples. Over the next twenty-nine years of her ministry, Babcock conducted twenty-eight revival meetings; "converted" fourteen hundred people; organized the congregation at Rapid City, Illinois; held lengthy pastorates in at least four places; and remained an active participant in the Illinois Woman's Christian Temperance Union. In her 1892 year-end report to the *Christian Standard*, Babcock described some of the "visible results" of her ministry:

[I] can truly say, I never preach to empty pews or a restless congregation; our audiences have demanded enlarged buildings. The spacious house erected at Erie last year is full at regular services. Have doubled our seating capacity at Thomson this year; are now ready for paint. Will dedicate soon without a dollar indebtedness to raise. We can come up to that service with thanksgiving. The spiritual tone is good. Enmity, strife in the family of God have given place to charity, and harmony now prevails. . . . Am now in perfect health. Have not missed an appointment in over four years.

After her death, Babcock was eulogized as one who demonstrated "strong intellect, clear presentation of the Scriptures, and effective appeal on behalf of Christ."<sup>11</sup>

Obviously, the narratives of these two women parallel one another in fascinating ways: Both lived out



 *In the late nineteenth century, when the debate over women's inclusion in ministry unfolded in the respective journals of each group, significant cultural and regional differences shaped divergent outcomes.*

their lives in the midst of a society marked by a belief in the dualistic public/private distinction. In the private sphere, for example, both women accepted the culturally sanctioned roles of wife and mother, raising large families. In addition, both modeled the shift toward a raised consciousness about women's importance in the larger public sphere. Both staunchly advocated temperance and worked on its behalf, and both lived out their faith commitments by actively involving themselves in public debate about controversial church issues.

However, their paths are marked by clear differences as well. Why did women like Babcock receive sanction for their public ministry from the Christian Church (or Disciples), whereas women in the emerging Church of Christ group, like Holman, found themselves attacked by church leaders for even expressing the desire to serve in public ministry? We want to suggest that, in large part, the answer lies in differences between Midwestern culture, where the Disciples were stronger, and Southern culture, where the Churches of Christ were stronger. In the late nineteenth century, when the debate over women's inclusion in ministry unfolded in the respective journals of each group, significant cultural and regional differences shaped divergent outcomes.

What were the cultural differences that shaped the outcome of the debates over women's ministry? We would like to examine three: (1) principles of biblical interpretation, (2) views about womanhood, and (3) Reconstruction era politics and economics.

### **Principles of Biblical Interpretation**

The Midwestern and Southern cultures, which birthed the different branches of the Stone-Campbell movement, were influenced by their respective views of biblical interpretation. Their differing methods of biblical interpretation were developed and solidified during the debates over slavery and evolution. These two debates served as dress rehearsals for the debate over women's ministry. By the time the two branches began debating the question of women's ministry, the

literalist method had become entrenched in Southern culture and the historical-critical and thematic methods had heavily influenced Midwestern culture such that the outcome of the debate was fairly sealed from the beginning. Pro-slavery Southerners used a literal interpretation of certain biblical passages from the Old Testament and the Pauline epistles to argue that slavery was divinely ordained. The very economic survival of Southerners was dependent upon a literal interpretation of scripture, and so they were very hostile toward the more general way that anti-slavery and abolitionist preachers in the Northeast and Midwest interpreted the Bible. These preachers acknowledged that a handful of passages seemed to condone slavery, but they argued that the overarching principles of the gospel (i.e., love your neighbor as yourself; everyone is equal in God's sight) overrode those more specific, culturally bound affirmations of slavery. They began to incorporate historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation that were filtering from Europe into seminaries in the Northeast in the mid-nineteenth century and, eventually, in the Midwest. Such new methods were anathema in the South.

It is little surprise, then, that when members of the Churches of Christ (as well as other denominations in the South) began debating the issue of women's ministry, they would rely on a literal principle of biblical interpretation. This approach was part and parcel of their cultural survival, and they were not about to adopt the new methods that influenced the evil, hated North. The Southerners' literal approach forced them to focus the discussion on two passages—1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–12—both of which seemed to state clearly that women were to be silent and were not permitted to teach. The literal application of these two "commandment" passages, however, blinded them to the numerous other passages that provided exemplary and thematic evidence for women's ministry—a point not lost on Holman.

It was in the debate among the Midwestern Disciples that these other passages were offered as argu-



ments for women's ministry. The Midwest was settled largely by abolitionist and anti-slavery pioneers from the Northeast, who ingrained into the regional culture the idea that scripture was to be read for its general, overarching principles. Moreover, scriptural evidence should harmonize. Thus, according to Babcock, who addressed the "woman's question" using arguments that sounded much like Holman's, 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 must be culturally bound commandments, because they conflict with many other passages that point to a wide range of public ministries for women.

### Views about Womanhood

In addition to regional customs of biblical interpretation—concretized during the battle over slavery—the Churches of Christ and the Christian Church grew up in the midst of divergent views of womanhood. In the South, where the culture remained largely rural and women were restricted to the private sphere to bear and raise as many children as possible, "ornamental womanhood" dominated assumptions about women.<sup>12</sup> The woman was an ornament that adorned her husband's world; she supported male activity rather than initiating her own. The husband had authority over the wife, based on the principle of headship. Headship assumed a hierarchical understanding of human relationships—an understanding that had also undergirded the slavery system, such that the white "master" was to the African "slave" what the husband was to the wife. As will be noted below, there were several important cultural and economic reasons for the persistence of "ornamental womanhood" in the South throughout the century, although Southerners insisted that the issue was "biblical," not "cultural."

It was this view of womanhood that served as the backdrop to the debate in the Churches of Christ over women's roles, seen clearly in the responses to Holman in the *Gospel Advocate*. E. G. Sewell, for example, argued that the woman's only realm was the home, where she was to beautify rather than partner, and where her principal function was to provide a place of rest and support for men:

Every instinct of humanity points to *home* as her realm, and no picture of home-life has ever been drawn but she finds a place there, for without her there is no home. It is hers to adorn and beautify,

to keep it pure from all contaminating influences, a place in which fathers, husbands, sons, and brothers can find rest after toil.<sup>13</sup>

According to Sewell and Lipscomb, who built their arguments on the "ornamental womanhood" assumptions prevalent in Southern culture, women were not permitted to enter the public sphere but were to be concerned only with the reproduction and nurture of children and the support of men. They went so far as to curse the very desire of some women for public ministry or any form of work. For example, in the conclusion to one of the responses he framed to Silena Moore Holman, Lipscomb wrote: "It is an unnatural, unwomanly, ungodly ambition that would prompt women to leave this (the bearing and nurture of children) for any other work in the world."<sup>14</sup>

Holman—a somewhat atypical Southern woman because of her WCTU work outside of the home and her urban residency—argued against this restriction, because her own life experiences had proven that the public/private dichotomy underlying "ornamental womanhood" was false. She knew that women had a lot to contribute in the public sphere, because she had experienced it. Economics often demanded it, and women were equal to the task. She herself had worked to save her family from devastation, a story she recounted with vivid detail:

My mother, as I have just said, was left a widow with a house full of girls, when I, the eldest, was just fourteen. We had to live somehow. There were no boys among us, excepting a nursing babe. My father had lost his all in the war, as did so many people who fought on the losing side. Something had to be done, for we had no male relations to shoulder the burden of our support, and we had to do it ourselves. I had gone to school all my life, and had a moderately good education for a girl my age. So, young as I was, I gathered a few of the neighbor children around me and began to teach them. At first, they paid me just what they could for this; for they, too, were poor. I was so fortunate as to give satisfaction, and was soon able to get a better situation. So, though I was a girl, I was able to help my mother. I gave her everything I made except barely enough to clothe me in the simplest way. By that



**U**“Useful womanhood” posited as ideal women those who stepped outside of the home and partnered with men to struggle for social reform, civilize the frontier, and evangelize the unconverted.

means, I was able to help her educate my brothers and sisters and provide them with the necessaries, if not many of the comforts, of life. Our little home was sold, and with the assistance of a widowed grandmother, who entrusted me with such part of her estate as she intended to give me at her death, I bought it, paying three-fourths of the money myself, in order that we may all have a home we could call our own. What could we have done if there had been no “career” open to me but in someone’s kitchen, which would not more than have enabled me to support myself?<sup>15</sup>

According to Holman, her experiences after the Civil War gave her occasion to rejoice as the century ended “that so many occupations were open to women.” Her correspondence in the *Gospel Advocate* indicates that she understood how the narrow view of the male church leadership imperiled the progress women had made. She protested the male editors’ claim that their view of womanhood was the biblical one, pointing out weaknesses and inconsistencies in their use of biblical passages. She noted, for example, that if Paul had willed that women marry and bring up children, then why had he, in the seventh chapter of 1 Corinthians, given them full permission to remain unmarried if they wished? Despite her tenaciousness, she was a lone voice crying in the wilderness of a culture whose dominant view of ideal womanhood circumscribed the role of women as fixtures in their husband’s homes and wombs to bear children.

In other regions of the country, however, a different view of womanhood prevailed. In the area now known as the Midwest, where the Disciples were concentrated, “useful womanhood” prevailed. Based on the revival rhetoric of Charles Finney—who advocated the pursuit of “useful” lives for God and who empowered women to be social reformers and public exhorters—“useful womanhood” posited as ideal women those who stepped

outside of the home and partnered with men to struggle for social reform, civilize the frontier, and evangelize the unconverted. Women were urged to “use” their moral influence for “social housekeeping” as well as for private domesticity, in part because social problems and preaching fields were seen as so overwhelming that women were needed to fill the ranks. But women had also proven themselves to be up to the task. The women who moved west shed their long, white, corseted ornamental styles of dress in order to battle snakes, walk through prairie winds, and build dugouts and log cabins. Male church leaders were not about to argue that these same women could not preach.

The pragmatism of the “useful womanhood” view pervaded the debate on women’s ministry in the *Christian Standard*, which took place among Disciples concentrated in the Midwest. In conjunction with the “useful womanhood” perspective, the arguments over women’s ministry assumed God’s blessing of public ministry, focusing on practical issues such as the need for more laborers, the physical stamina of women to baptize, and the utilization of gifts. The Midwestern view of womanhood served to facilitate women’s entry into public ministry since, according to “useful womanhood,” women were divinely required and called to make use of whatever gifts and resources God had given them. On the contrary, the Southern view of womanhood, recorded concretely in the Holman-Lipscomb debate, made it impossible for women to be blessed in their gifts of public ministry and, rather, cursed even their desire for it as unnatural, evil, and socially destructive.

### Reconstruction Era Politics and Economics

In addition to views of womanhood and biblical interpretation, the post-Civil War political, social, and economic environment shaped the outcome of the debate over women’s ministry in both regions. The war devastated the South, wiping out its men, bringing many





*Every generation in the Churches of Christ from Holman onward has had to reargue the “woman’s question,” because the voices and the narratives of our foremothers are absent from the written record.*

families to financial ruin, and cursing it with the shame of defeat. Although during and after the war women had stepped into leadership roles—like Holman, working to keep her fatherless family afloat—male church leaders soon sermonized them back into the private sphere. There were several reasons for this. First, the working woman—dubbed the “new woman”—was seen as an invention of the evil North, and Southerners like Lipscomb acidly denounced anything that came from the North: “The habit of women preaching originated in the same [Northern] hot bed with easy divorce, free love, and the repugnance to child bearing.”<sup>16</sup>

Second, Southern males reacted strongly against changing roles for women because the need to repopulate was so great in the aftermath of the war. With slavery now illegal and sons dead from the war, Southern farmers had a greater economic need for women to bear children. Church leaders argued that the “new woman”—and certainly the women who entered the ministry—would not bear children, and the religiosity of the South would also be undermined as had happened in the Northeast. As Lipscomb wrote:

A woman with a thirst for the publicity and applause of the rostrum, won’t bear children and guide the house. . . . New England is becoming Romish in its faith because puritan women won’t bear children and the Romish do. . . . The southern people are more religious than the northern—a much greater proportion are church members.<sup>17</sup>

Third, the shaming defeat suffered by Southerners catalyzed a conservative, reactionary, defensive retrenchment of the “good old days” and the social values—including submissive, domestic, maternal womanhood—that had characterized the prewar South. Having lost their pride, security, and hope in defeat, Southern males were not about to lose what little power and dignity remained for them by sharing the public sphere with women. The postwar South was a culture in mourn-

ing and chaos; as usually happens at such cultural crossroads, the response was to control the process of change and the pathway to progress. This conservative reactionism frustrated Holman. In an exchange with Lipscomb in 1896, she pointed out the hypocrisy inherent in the belief that only men could progress with the changing times, noting that “women have in them the elements of progression as well as men, and in spite of it all, they will progress with the ages as men do.”<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusion

Holman and Babcock stood at the door of the twentieth century asking similar questions about women’s ministry. The answers they received were markedly different, we suggest, because of regionally defined cultural differences. So, what have been the consequences for contemporary women in both traditions?

Because of Babcock’s official affirmation as a minister and the written record of her work, documented both by herself and by others, she left a pastoral legacy for generations of women in the Disciples branch of the Stone-Campbell tradition. This legacy serves to mirror to women who feel the call to ministry that their desires are God-given and deserving of community nurture.

The same has not been true in the Churches of Christ. Despite Sewell’s assurance that women and their work in the church would always be remembered, we in the Churches of Christ who stand heartbroken at the door of the twenty-first century disagree. Our women and their work in the church have been forgotten. Every generation in the Churches of Christ from Holman onward has had to reargue the “woman’s question,” because the voices and the narratives of our foremothers are absent from the written record. Why are they absent? Because historical records document the labors, achievements, and words of named, official position-holders like Lipscomb and Sewell—not laypersons like Holman. With no such record, there is no pastoral legacy.

Largely due to the early responses to this question in the *Gospel Advocate*, Church of Christ women have

not only been denied nurture for their gifts and a place to exercise them, but they have also had to deal with the weighty anger, frustration, disappointment, alienation, and isolation that come when they are told that they are divisive and misguided for expressing a desire to respond to God's call to public ministry. They are also told that they are aberrations—that previous women in the church have not had the same calling. But this is not true, as the example of Holman illustrates.

In light of post-Civil War Southern culture, the *Gospel Advocate* responses may have made sense to many church members in the late nineteenth century and, through unquestioned transmission, to many in the present time. However, we find it unreasonable to assume that we can or should be like our grandmothers who, despite holy longings, had to accept the answers that were given to them. To women who enter the twenty-first century no longer defined by the ideals of "ornamental womanhood," those answers do not make sense.

Both Silena Moore Holman and Clara Celestia Hale Babcock illuminate our path with their courageous narratives. We are still seeking answers to the questions Holman framed one hundred ten years ago. But, more precisely, we seek the blessing to put on Babcock's vestments of public ministry so that, rather than rehearsing worn-out arguments, our gifts are focused on healing a wounded world.

**FRANCES GRACE CARVER**, formerly a church historian at Pepperdine University, now teaches at Redlands University.

**CYNTHIA CORNELL NOVAK** teaches in the Humanities Division at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Silena Moore Holman, "The New Woman. No. 2," *Gospel Advocate* (16 July 1896); Debra Hull, *Christian Church Women: Shapers of a Movement* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1994), 56.

<sup>2</sup> "Brother Larimore's Tribute to Mrs. Silena Moore Holman," *Gospel Advocate* (14 October 1915); reprinted from the *Nashville Tennessean*.

<sup>3</sup> Mrs. T. P. Holman, "Woman's Scriptural Status Again," *Gospel Advocate* (21 November 1888).

<sup>4</sup> Mrs. T. P. Holman, "Let Your Women Keep Silence," *Gospel Advocate* (1 August 1888).

<sup>5</sup> Holman, "Woman's Scriptural Status Again."

<sup>6</sup> Mrs. T. P. Holman, "The Scriptural Status of Women," *Gospel Advocate* (10 October 1888).

<sup>7</sup> Holman, "Let Your Women Keep Silence."

<sup>8</sup> Holman, "The Scriptural Status of Women."

<sup>9</sup> Mrs. T. P. Holman, "The New Woman," *Gospel Advocate* (9 July 1896).

<sup>10</sup> Hull, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Hull, 30. See also Mary Ellen Lantzer, "An Examination of the 1892–1893 *Christian Standard* Controversy Concerning Women's Preaching" (master's thesis, Emmanuel School of Religion, 1990), 17–21.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Hogeland, ed., *Women and Womanhood in America* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1973), 104.

<sup>13</sup> E. G. Sewell, "Woman and Politics," *Gospel Advocate* (22 October 1884).

<sup>14</sup> David Lipscomb, "Woman's Station and Work," *Gospel Advocate* (10 October 1888).

<sup>15</sup> Holman, "The New Woman. No. 2."

<sup>16</sup> David Lipscomb, "Should Women Preach Publicly?" *Gospel Advocate* (5 August 1891).

<sup>17</sup> Lipscomb, "Woman's Station and Work."

<sup>18</sup> Holman, "The New Woman. No. 2."