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# Her-Story

by Fran Carver

## Our Foremothers in the Faith<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction: Amplifying the Voices of Our Past

History is like a song service: a blending in wondrous harmony and delicate balance, a cacophony of individual parts. History, like music, is successful when there is not only a provocative narrative (melody), but also a rich sinew of human experience (harmony) that fleshes out the narrative. If you have ever heard a song service without the soprano and alto voices, then you have experienced what history is like without its full flesh. This is precisely our problem: the “joyful noise” of our story of origin has been limited to bass and tenor voices. We have shaped ourselves according to a narrative of our “history” that ignores “her-story.” Most historical treatments of our movement mute the contributions of women,<sup>2</sup> as do courses on “Restoration History” in our colleges which, in the words of one catalogue, teach about the “men” who led the movement. Women’s historical voices have been silenced. It is my hope that the next few pages will breathe life back into the lungs of our foremothers so that their voices might sing to us from across the decades, strengthening our own halting efforts to find a voice with the courageous and nurturing echoes of our past.

But concerning the past, we of the Stone-Campbell tradition have been double-minded in our approach. On the one hand, we have rejected historical tradition in favor of restoring “the primitive church.” In our quest for the purity of the first-century church, we have viewed the intervening centuries as “apostate” eras whose layers of “human invention” had to be rejected to practice “true Christianity.” On the other hand, have you ever heard a church member say, “Well, we’ve always done it this way”? Such a remark points to an emphasis on historical tradition that seems to contrast oddly with the ahistorical quest for the primitive church. What difference should it make, according to our

restorationist vision, whether “we’ve always done it this way” (e.g., men serving communion) if it contrasts with the practice of the primitive church (e.g., men and women serving communion)? Thus, we are both “ahistorical” because we reject post-biblical traditions and “historical” because we refuse to affirm church practices that have no historical precedent in our recent collective memory.

Our collective memory, however, can be unreliable; we lose those strands of our past which are not part of our working narrative. This article seeks to amplify such lost echoes, with two aims in mind. First, I want to suggest an alternative view to that mindset which says “We’ve always done it this way” with reference to men’s dominance of public spiritual leadership as our only historical precedent. Many of us have grown up in the faith unaware of the important contributions of women’s leadership to our movement; our familiarity with men’s dominance in our present public gatherings makes it seem as if it has always been done this way. But has it?

Secondly, this brief survey of women’s historical roles will raise the issue of cultural influence. Where did our current notions of gender roles originate? Are they pristinely extracted from the Bible, or are they perhaps more rooted in the cultural norms of the nineteenth century? I will suggest that, generally speaking, women’s roles in our movement coincided with Victorian cultural expectations, even though the reality of what women were doing did not always conform to the rhetoric of these cultural expectations.

### Women’s Participation in the Stone-Campbell Movement

So many different women’s voices have contributed to the Stone-Campbell “choir of the past,” it is difficult to designate only a few as “soloists.” Nonetheless, women in our early movement seem to have contributed through at least seven roles: (1)

deputy husbands<sup>3</sup>, (2) mothers, (3) educational pioneers, (4) missionaries, (5) “deaconesses,” (6) social reformers, and (7) preachers/exhorters.

#### *Deputy Husbands*

Our movement would possibly have failed had its early male leaders not been capacitated to travel extensively, write and publish, preach and lecture, and so forth. And how were they so capacitated? Their wives were willing to be “deputy husbands,” that is, to take on the husband’s family responsibilities during his frequent absences “for the cause.” For example, one day while chopping wood, the famous Kentucky preacher Raccoon John Smith was struck with an urgent call to leave his farming duties and family to preach the gospel. He announced to his second wife Nancy:

Nancy, I shall work no more! Get whom you please to carry on the farm, but do not call on me! . . . I am determined, from this time forth, to preach the Gospel, and leave the consequences to God.

According to Smith’s biographer, Nancy enthusiastically adjusted to her new role as farm manager, family provider, and single parent for five to six children “to relieve him of every temporal care.” Despite her enthusiasm and hard labor, however, the family struggled to overcome a cycle of poverty, indebtedness and low food supply.<sup>4</sup>

Christiana Rittenour Thomas, wife of traveling preacher Joseph Thomas, had to promise Joseph at their engagement that she would let him travel and would not be a “stumbling block” in his way. Since Joseph was away most of the time and had sold his possessions to finance his itinerant preaching, his family was virtually homeless and fatherless. When Christiana and the children were “near death’s door,” she wrote to him, saying that he must not neglect his preaching by coming to be with the family, even though she yearned for his companionship. In a letter published in the *Palladium*, she indicated her hope that her sacrifices would win her vicarious glory with Joseph as a result of his preaching:

When I joined him in matrimony, I agreed never to stand in his way in preaching the gospel, and I have reason to be thankful that God has to this day enabled me with all cheerfulness not only to submit, but to aid him by my prayers . . . I have gladly suffered with him for the sake of Jesus, and I strongly hope I shall be a sharer of his reward in heaven.<sup>5</sup>

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Clara Hale Babcock answered such admonishments by pointing to her success at combining motherhood with a full preaching career.

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Thomas and Alexander Campbell likewise left the management of farm and household in the hands of capable spouses during frequent and often months-long preaching trips.

Such men never seem to have noticed the contrast between this reality (i.e., women functioning as male leaders of the household) and the rhetoric of “true womanhood” (i.e., language which encouraged women to have “heavenly” and “sentimental” thoughts<sup>6</sup>). One might wonder precisely how “heavenly” and “sentimental” they felt while slopping hogs!

#### *Mothers*

Just as many people criticize some of our churches for “caving in” to a culture characterized by increasing openness to women’s professional leadership, it would appear that Stone-Campbell churches of the previous century “caved in” to a cultural tendency to elevate the role of mother as the ultimate achievement for women—an emphasis which ignores certain anti-family New Testament passages. Some Stone-Campbell women saw the task of motherhood as all encompassing. In 1886, a woman named “Sarai” wrote to the **Firm Foundation** to criticize women who desired to “leave home and children and lecture on temperance and preach” since “infinitely much more good would [be accomplished] by staying home and making happiness for husband and children.” However, others, such as Clara Hale Babcock, answered such admonishments by pointing to her success at combining motherhood with a full preaching career in Illinois. She wrote to the **Christian Standard**:

am forty-three years old, the mother of six children, and every living relative of mine has been brought to faith and obedience. I have a happy home; each member is willing to sacrifice some, if need be, for the salvation of souls and glory of God. By the encouragement of my family and the blessing of God, my labors have resulted in the conversion of over three hundred and I am still determined to go forward preaching the Word.<sup>7</sup>

The strong religious influence of mothers can be seen in Joseph Thomas' conversion. He writes that his mother "exhorted" him, "we[pt] and prayed" over him, and encouraged him to go to church gatherings.<sup>8</sup> Another mother, Zerelda Wallace, received immortal fame from the pen of her step-son Lew who used her as the model for Ben-Hur's mother in his novel-turned-movie.<sup>9</sup> Other women, such as Annie Rains and Jennie Clark of Texas, served as mothers to orphan children, touching the lives of well over a hundred youngsters.<sup>10</sup>

Stone-Campbell churches participated in a deaconess movement highly influenced by a European model.

#### *Educational Pioneers*

In addition to reflecting the broader culture's elevation of mothers, our movement also reflected the opening of educational opportunities to women for the explicit purpose of teaching them how to be good mothers. Since the destiny of the country rested on good motherhood, leaders such as Alexander Campbell, Walter Scott, P. S. Fall and others argued that women must be educated, "not to make them good scholars," but to teach their offspring more effectively.<sup>11</sup> Alexander Campbell advocated female education precisely on the basis that it would produce good mothers:

... if the question rested on my vote, whether, as a general rule, the female sex, or the male sex, ought to be better educated, as a philanthropist I would say, The ladies should have it. And if any one asks me, Why? I would answer, Because posterity always depends for its mental and moral character incomparably more upon the mothers than upon the fathers of the existing generation.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, the prominent churchman J. W. McGarvey admitted Gustine Courson to his course at the College of the Bible only on the condition that she sit on the back row, arriving after the men students had already seated themselves and leaving before they were dismissed. She was also required to retire from the class whenever McGarvey discussed a "questionable" text. In his report to the trustees in 1905, he assured them that education would preserve rather than threaten customary gender roles:

Someone remarked, after we have admitted some of these women, that we will soon be turning out female preachers; but I replied that by the time they study the Scriptures with us they will learn that women are not to be preachers.<sup>13</sup>

Educational opportunities assuredly had a less conservative effect than McGarvey might have hoped, especially under the tutelage of social reformers such as Alexander Campbell's sister, Jane Campbell McKeever. For over two decades, this friend of the famous abolitionist John Brown directed Pleasant Hill Seminary, which doubled as a station on the underground railroad. Other educational leaders included Charlotte Fall Fanning, who administered several schools in Tennessee with her husband Tolbert, and Annie Tuggle, who taught and raised funds for several African-American Church of Christ schools.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Missionaries*

Similar to women in many churches of the time, Stone-Campbell women sought out educational opportunities as training for the mission field, like Gustine Courson, mentioned above. Before and after the Civil War, our foremothers courageously adventured to foreign and domestic areas despite the threats of hostile populations, strange diseases and imminent starvation. One of the first women missionaries was Mary Rebecca Williams, who worked with a missionary couple in Palestine and helped establish a school in Jaffa. Sarah Andrews offers perhaps the most exemplary life of preaching in foreign lands. Despite imprisonment during World War II, she established at least eight congregations in Japan before she died in 1961.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Deaconesses*

In nineteenth-century America, domestic missionaries often received the title of "deaconess," although this term also had a broader meaning. Similar to many other churches of the time, Stone-Campbell churches participated in a deaconess movement highly influenced by a European model. At the local church level, "deaconesses" were responsible for gathering church women "to sew and make garments for the poor and needy" as well as for missionaries. Perhaps the three "deaconesses" at the Baltimore church where Alexander Campbell visited in 1833 engaged in these acts of charity, but they may also have participated in the planting of the church in Kelton, Pennsylvania.<sup>17</sup> Or it's possible, given their urban setting, that these Baltimore "deaconesses" engaged in "missionary work" to the city's marginalized groups: the poor, the "drunks," the

“fallen women,” and the “foreign-born.” While to our ears the office of “deaconess” has a certain feminist ring to it, it seems to have completely lacked this connotation in the past; to the contrary, some historians view the creation of the office as an attempt to mollify rights-agitation among women by giving them a title that had little functional meaning except for decorum: ministering to those “whom it might have been improper for the Deacons to have visited.”<sup>18</sup> Despite the conservative intentions and rhetoric, the reality was that “deaconesses” performed some of the more arduous tasks of urban ministry.

### *Social Reformers*

Whether called “deaconesses” or not, many Stone-Campbell women participated in urban and human rights reform. The most famous social reformer of our tradition is Carry A. Nation, the hatchet-wielding preacher of prohibition from Kansas, whose name and portrait were sprawled across every major newspaper of the country during 1901 following her destruction of a local saloon. Carry’s mother was said to have been a cousin to Alexander Campbell himself, and Carry seemed proud of this genetic and theological lineage, often announcing before her hatchet brigade attacked a saloon: “Here come the Campbells!!” But she often conflicted with local “Campbellite” church leaders for bringing “undesirables” such as reforming alcoholics, poor washerwomen, and non-white people to church. Even though she was hauled out of church services for “speaking in the assembly,” she did not consider herself a “feminist”; rather, she viewed herself as a “mother of the human race.”<sup>19</sup>

### *Preachers / Exhorters*

As with other new religious groups emerging in the pre-Civil War period, the early Stone-Campbell movement permitted much more leeway for women to preach in public than do Churches of Christ in our own century. Joseph Thomas in his diary talks about several women who functioned as preachers or exhorters. He tells of at least three women, being moved by the Holy Spirit, who had a powerful influence on “spectators” who sometimes came expressly for the purpose of seeing women “taken with the jirks and shouting,” who thereby “exhorted to the astonishment of the congregation.” He describes the exhortation of one woman who, moved “surely by the power of the Holy Ghost,” spoke on the eternal separation of the righteous and the wicked. Another account possibly of the same woman—Nancy Mulkey—says her exhortations out did those of her male relatives: sermons which “neither father nor brother could equal.”<sup>20</sup>

In the Northeast’s Christian Connection movement (loosely associated with the early Stone-Campbell movement) Abigail Roberts was one of several prominent women preachers. Expelled from the Methodist Episcopal Church “because she felt it her duty to preach,” Abigail established several “restorationist” churches in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.<sup>21</sup> As one report stated: “No candid person can travel through this region and see the fruits of this sister’s labours and dispute the propriety of female testimony.”<sup>22</sup> However, not everyone was convinced that “good fruit” pointed to “good practice.” One opponent was a Presbyterian minister who accused the women preachers of being slackard mothers, deceivers like Jezebel of Rev 2:20, and an “outrage upon the decencies and happiness of

**I**f we listen closely, we can hear the steady rhythmic beat of the soprano and alto voices of our history

life.” He also was shocked that they read the Bible literally and sought to restore New Testament Christianity.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps early restorationists saw a connection between a restoration of New Testament Christianity and the use of women preachers. Nevertheless whatever connection may have been understood in the early years was rejected as the movement sought a more secure place in a cultural setting that viewed women preachers as a threat to social order and home life. David Lipscomb seems to have been the transitional figure here with his belief that “The habit of women preaching originated in the same hot bed with easy divorce, free love, and the repugnance to child-bearing.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Nonetheless, women did a lot of “preaching.” We may argue over what “preaching” means exactly, just as “Priscilla” and Selina Campbell (Alexander’s wife) did in letters to the **Christian Standard**. For “Priscilla,” preaching involved rather typical activities:

Sister Campbell admits that she herself is guilty of the indiscretion of preaching Christ in her kitchen, in her parlor, in steamboats, railroads, stage-coaches; and is the pulpit more sacred than these? Where does she find a ‘thus saith the Lord’ for preaching in a steamboat rather than in a meeting house?<sup>25</sup>

Our foremothers joined in many lively debates over women's roles, and they disagreed with each other over what the Bible allowed—just as women do today. Those men and women of a century ago who understood the Bible to confirm the dominant gender roles of late nineteenth-century America won the debate in our churches. Yet women's historical "preaching" of the good news—whether laboring to support their husbands, nurturing their children, teaching students, studying the Bible, evangelizing in foreign lands, serving the poor and the marginalized, crusading for social reform, giving revival sermons, or establishing churches—this "preaching" must be amplified. We must revive their songs, their prayers and their writings so that when our young daughters and grand-daughters, nieces and sisters, seek ways to exercise their gifts among us, we can point them to our foremothers in the faith who have composed the music, written the score, and sung the parts to which our young women may now add their own vital voices. We must no longer tell them "But we've never had women do that." We have had, we do have, and we will have. And if we listen closely, we can hear the steady rhythmic beat of the soprano and alto voices of our history, swelling with their male counterparts in a courageous chorus of "Anywhere, anywhere, fear I cannot know; anywhere with Jesus I can safely go"—words of 1887 reverberating to us from the heart of a very talented Stone-Campbell woman, Jessie Hunter Brown Pounds, author of over six hundred hymns.

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### Questions for Discussion

1. What, if anything, surprises you about this brief account of women's participation in Stone-Campbell history? Are there any stories you can tell about your foremothers in the faith and their activities?
2. With which of the seven roles do you most identify? Can you think of any roles the author neglected to mention?
3. How did the author support her suggestion that our movement generally reflected broader cultural customs in relation to gender roles? What do you think about this suggestion? How do you think it applies to the current situation: to what extent should the church be an alternative voice to culture and to what extent a reflection of culture?
4. Share some reflections on historical tradition. Although sometimes labelled "biblical precedent," what are some historical traditions that influence us as a church community? Can you think of any of our "traditions" which might conflict with the Bible? To what extent is our understanding of gender roles rooted in tradition rather than the Bible?

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Mark Carver for indispensable editing suggestions as well as for helping me to recover my own voice, buried in years of silence and fear.

<sup>2</sup> Important and welcome exceptions are C. Leonard Allen, *Distant Voices* (ACU Press, 1993), Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of the Churches of Christ in America* (Eerdmans, 1996), and the revised edition of Leroy Garrett's *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, (College Press [1981] 1994).

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Laurel Thatcher Ulrich for this term from *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*, (Knopf, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> John Augustus Williams, *The Life of Elder John Smith, With Some Account of the Rise and Progress of the Current Reformation*, (Cincinnati: R. W. Carroll & Co., Publishers, 1870) 93, 192, 238-9.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Thomas, *The Life of the Pilgrim, Joseph Thomas, Containing an Accurate Account of His Trials, Travels and Gospel Labors, Up to the Present Date* (Winchester, VA: J. Foster, Printer, 1817) 238, 265, 288-289, 292, 302, 308. Christiana's letter is quoted in the *Centennial of Religious Journalism* (Dayton, OH: Christian Publishing Association, 1908) 349. Thanks to R. L. Roberts for pointing me to this source.

<sup>6</sup> Quotes from Walter Scott, "Perfection—No. 23, To Wives" and "Men and Women," *The Evangelist* (1841) 39-42, 167.

<sup>7</sup> For "Sarai," see "Talk with the Sisters," *Firm Foundation II* (August 1886) 4, quoted in Fred Bailey, "Women's Superiority in Disciple Thought, 1865-1900," *Restoration Quarterly* 23/1 (1980) 157; Clara Hale Babcock, "Woman in the Pulpit," *Christian Standard* (June 4, 1892) 482.

<sup>8</sup>Joseph Thomas, **The Life of the Pilgrim**, 15-23.

<sup>9</sup>Debra Hull, **Christian Church Women: Shapers of a Movement** (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1994) 52-55; Lorraine Lollis, **The Shape of Adam's Rib: A Lively History of Women's Work in the Christian Church** (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1970) 49.

<sup>10</sup>R. L. Roberts, "Three Dorcas: Clarke, Nelson, Rains," ACU Lectureship, 1995.

<sup>11</sup>P. S. Fall, "Female Education," **The Evangelist** (1838) 212. See Leonard Sweet, "The Female Seminary Movement and Woman's Mission in Antebellum America," **Church History** 54 (March 1985) 41-55.

<sup>12</sup>Alexander Campbell, "Education," **Millennial Harbinger** (June, 1837) 257.

<sup>13</sup>Gustine Courson Weaver, letter; McGarvey, "President's Annual Report," June 5, 1905, College of the Bible, Lexington; both quoted in Lollis, **Shape of Adam's Rib**, 12.

<sup>14</sup>Hull, **Christian Church Women**, 87-106; Michael Casey, "Annie Tuggle: Historian and Educator for the Black Churches of Christ," **Leaven**, vol 3/2, 47-48.

<sup>15</sup>See Richard Hughes, **Reviving the Ancient Faith**, 379, for a fuller account of Andrews.

<sup>16</sup>Walter Scott, no title, **The Evangelist** (1840) 72.

<sup>17</sup>Stephen Sandifer, **Deacons: Male and Female?** (Houston: by the author, 1989) 123.

<sup>18</sup>Gilbert McMaster, **An Essay in Defense of Some Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity; Including a Review of the Writings of Elias Smith and the Claims of His Female Preachers** (Schenectady, NY: Riggs and Stevens, 1815) 111.

<sup>19</sup>Carry A. Nation, **The Use and Need of the Life of Carry A. Nation** (Topeka: Stevens, 1909).

<sup>20</sup>Joseph Thomas, **Life of The Pilgrim**, 45, 74, 132. Isaac Jones, **The Travels and Gospel Labors**, 90, quoted in Richard Hughes, "Christians in the Early South: the Perspective of Joseph Thomas, the White Pilgrim," **Discipliana** 46 (Fall 1986) 36.

<sup>21</sup>**Centennial of Religious Journalism** (Dayton, OH: Christian Publishing Association, 1908) 501-2.

<sup>22</sup>**Christian Herald** (January 27, 1825), quoted in Louis Billington, "Female Laborers in the Church: Women Preachers in the Northeast United States, 1790-1840," **Journal of American Studies** 19 (1985) 383.

<sup>23</sup>Gilbert McMaster, **An Essay in Defense**, 98-100, 109-11.

<sup>24</sup>David Lipscomb, "Should Women Preach Publicly?" **Gospel Advocate** (August 5, 1891) 486.

<sup>25</sup>"Women Preachers," **Christian Standard**, (December 18, 1880) 482 and (January 15, 1881) 18.