
Nurtured in their Faith

Nonconformity as a Pathway to Women's Opportunity

William H. Brackney

One of the clearest contributions of Nonconformist English-speaking Christianity to itself and to the general culture was the long pilgrimage towards the emancipation of women. This was to be seen within specific denominations as well as in the public sphere where religion was influential. This pilgrimage began in 16th century Elizabethan English nonconforming conventicles and reached its apogee in the accomplishments of several nonconformist groups in Britain and North America at the head of the 20th century.¹

In this lecture I would like to address specifically the rise of women in the nonconformist traditions,² especially noting the opening of opportunities of service, both churchly and public, the changing ideas of roles, and the enhanced capacities of women. I shall also offer some suggestions as to how religion in general and theological ideas facilitated the emergence of women.

1. Prevailing Norms and Attitudes

In order to comprehend the role and status of women in Britain in the later 16th century, one looks first to the family. The family, lodged in the household, was the fundamental unit of society. The family was ruled by the father who exacted strict obedience from wives, servants, and children. As to external relations, the father's voice spoke for all. In religious matters the father was responsible to see that children were catechized and attended divine services. The father also conducted prayers and other services in the household. Fatherhood, stated contemporary Puritan exegete, Richard Sibbes, was the epitome of the Gospel: God himself was Father.³ Fathers were both kings and priests in their homes.

¹ For a counter argument to the thesis presented here, compare Keith Thomas, "Women and the Civil War Sects" in *Crisis in Europe 1560–1660*, edited by Trevor Aston (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1965), 339, who says "Nor does the sectarian insistence upon women's spiritual equality seem to have been of very great importance in the later history of female emancipation in general ... future feminist movements were to base their arguments less upon any renewed assertion of women's spiritual equality than upon natural right and a denial of any intellectual differences between the sexes."

² By nonconformist traditions, I mean in the 17th century: Separatists, Baptists (General and Particular), Congregationalists, Quakers, and Socinians; the 18th century: add the Methodists; the 19th century, add Salvation Army, the smaller Holiness traditions, and subtract the Socinians; in the past century, add the Pentecostals.

³ *Works of Richard Sibbes*, edited by A. B. Grosart (Edinburgh: 1862–64), Vol. V, 25.

Women's roles were determined largely by a universal belief in their inferiority based upon specific biblical commands in Genesis and the Pauline Epistles.⁴ What awaited a young woman was marriage and then multiple childbirths. Women would remain largely at home, they could own no property, and their function was to be obedient to their husbands. Women suffered from domestic violence, not the least of which was wife-beating.

2. The 17th Century

Radical changes were afoot in England from the 1560s.⁵ Elizabethan society bequeathed to the next century important social impulses. While it was expected that women did not engage in discussions of statecraft or divinity, publicly or privately on the advice of the Apostle Paul, it was a shame for a woman to speak in church.⁶ But new opportunities were at work. Richard Greaves has stressed a movement toward greater individuality, brought about by single women and widowhood. Widows could chart their future by executing their husband's wills, supervising estates and shops, and importantly, managing their husband's charitable and religious concerns.⁷ Further, among the early Puritans, there was a growing concern for the relief of the indigent that often involved women and carried religious overtones. Greaves further found that Elizabethan Puritan women were attracted to religious movements demanding heightened commitment, many exhibiting some form of real or induced spiritual neuroses. The domestic sphere, valued by the church, and the congregation, gave women an outlet for their energy and creativity.⁸

Separatism,⁹ with roots in Elizabethan Puritanism, was truly radical. Separatists demanded that congregations choose their ministers and maintain

⁴ Genesis 2: 22–24; I Corinthians 7: 2–5; 11: 2–16; Ephesians 5: 22–24; Colossians 3: 18–19.

⁵ Much scholarly attention has been given to the presence of women in Lollard communities in the 14th and 15th centuries as a foundation in English religious culture to the idea of women preachers. Women were certainly present in Lollard circles and sources indicate their service as preachers and teachers and ultimately as martyrs for the cause. See Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambleton Press, 1984), Shannon McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities, 1420–1530* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), and the useful collective footnote in Curtis W. Freeman, *A Company of Women Preachers: Baptist Prophetesses in Seventeenth-Century England: A Reader* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 2–3, n. 4. The thrust of this essay is on the 17th century forwards.

⁶ See especially here the advice of Richard Braithwait, *The English Gentlewoman, Drawne Out to the full Body: Expressing what Habilliments doe best attire her, and what Ornaments doe best adorne her, what Complements doe best accomplish her*. (London: Printed by B. Alsop and T. Fauucet, for Michaell Sparke, dwelling in Greene Arbor, 1631).

⁷ Richard L. Greaves, *Society and Religion in Elizabethan England* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 742.

⁸ Greaves, *Society and Religion*, 743.

⁹ In this context, I use the term Separatist to be synonymous with Brownists, Barrowists, and Independents, later known as Congregationalists.

them voluntarily. They challenged the monopoly of the Church on marriage and they inveighed against formality and hierarchy in worship and church government.¹⁰ The congregations were turning the Church inside out and the presence of women was central. It is known that many women left their husbands to go to Europe with Robert Browne and Robert Harrison and many of these were of limited literary capacity.¹¹ What troubled critics of emerging toleration of women in religious meetings was women's supposed talkativeness, what Lady Antonia Fraser called "the natural volubility of their tongues."¹² Women were characterized as praters or prattlers, sometimes even prosecuted in religious contexts as witches. John Vicars noted in 1645 of women in the village forum, they are "bold impudent huswives who prated an hour or more, and that most directly contrary to the Apostle's inhibition." About the same time, the gossipy Presbyterian Thomas Edwards described "whirligig spirits" among the Brownists who were popular lecturers.¹³ What this all amounted to was recognition, however halting, of an equality with men in terms of freedom of conscience. From the beginning of the Separatist movement, great emphasis was placed upon the spiritual equality of the sexes. If women possessed some inherently human qualities equal to men, what other freedoms might they also pursue? Proper relations in marriage and the family were at stake in the beginnings of women's emancipation, as well as modesty and respect for the Deity who was, of course, male.

Katherine Chidley exemplified a new spirit among Brownist women (and men).¹⁴ A member of the St. Pancras Independent church in London and connected to the Leveller movement in the first decades of the 17th century, she fought side by side with her son Samuel for the release of John Lilburne. She was articulate and forceful. Thomas Edwards called her "a brazen-faced audacious old woman, both talkative and clamorous."¹⁵ She knew of no theological teaching that gave men as such lordship over the consciences of anyone and she pointed out that St. Paul seemed to allow for believing spouses to be separated from unbelievers.¹⁶ She solely authored at least two pamphlets rejoicing issues of women's emancipation, *The Justification of the Independent Churches of Christ* (1641) and *A New Yeares Gift, Or A Brief Exhortation to Mr. Thomas Edwards* (1645) whom she challenged to a debate.¹⁷

¹⁰ Greaves, *Society and Religion*, 754.

¹¹ Thomas, "Women and the Civil War Sects," 321–322.

¹² Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel*, 276.

¹³ John Vicars, *The Schismatick Sifted: Or, A Picture of Independents Freshly and Fairly Washt over Again* (London: Printed for R. A. by S. W., 1646), 34, and Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena* (1645), 84.

¹⁴ On Chidley, see "Katherine Chidley (1616–1653)" in Freeman, *A Company of Women Preachers*, 43–45.

¹⁵ Edwards, *Gangraena*, 170.

¹⁶ Katherine Chidley, *The Justification of the Independent Churches of Christ* (London: 1641), 26.

¹⁷ She may also have co-authored with her son, *Good Counsell to the Petitioners for Presbyterian Government* (London: s. n., 1645) as well as *The Petition of Women* in 1649, becoming one of the leading women writers of the century.

In 1645 she vigorously opposed Independents meeting in former Anglican parish churches.

If preaching allowed women a public voice, prophesying gave women the role of interpreters of Scripture. The number of prophetesses in the English Civil War period rose dramatically. These women spoke with the authority of the Holy Spirit and through dreams and visions, they challenged authority in general, the existing social order, Parliament, the Army, the Council, and of course, the monarchy. The only caveat upon women prophetesses was that their heads be covered, like with a veil. Prophetesses were drawn especially to the eschatological and apocalyptic passages of the Bible, interpreting them in light of current events. Lady Eleanor Davies exemplified this preoccupation, signifying Oliver Cromwell as the round sun in contrast with Charles I who was signified by a sickly crescent moon. Her pamphlet, *The Restitution of Prophecy* (1651), was reprinted several times in the later 1650s. Another prophetess, Elizabeth Poole, wrote a paper against the impending execution of Charles I that was debated seriously by the Council. Anna Trapnel, a member of John Simpson's congregation at St. Botolph's, Boston, who frequently attended Baptist meetings, was to become a leading Fifth Monarchy prophetess. She claimed inspiration from Heaven, engaged in prayer meetings and singings, often falling into trances. In some of her recorded verses, she claimed to be the bride of Christ and had the power to forgive sins.¹⁸ With the closing of the era, the importance of and popularity of women preachers and prophetesses dwindled.

A significant branch of the Separatists coalesced around John Smyth of Gainsborough. This major stream of Separatists/Puritans evolved to constitute the early Baptist movement. The premier leader, John Smyth, declared that women were eligible to serve as deacons, as did his close confidant, Thomas Helwys.¹⁹ Among the earliest English Baptist congregations, women played a significant role in the fledgling communities. The roster of the Smyth/Helwys church in Amsterdam reveals of 43 members, 22 were women, among 8 adherents, 2 were women. Smyth advised that women admitted into full communion could give voice in elections, excommunications and other public affairs of the church. But, he said that while women might attend services of prophesying, women were not permitted to speak in the church in these events, needing to inquire of their husbands at home or another member of the church, if they were willing to learn.²⁰

In the Helwys congregation, of 6 members, there were 2 women.²¹ In the next generation, in Amsterdam, correspondence reveals Jane (Janneke)

¹⁸ On Trapnel, see Thomas, "Women and the Civil War Sects," 326–327, and "Anna Trapnel (fl. 1642–1660)" in Freeman, *A Company of Women Preachers*, 369–371.

¹⁹ John Smyth, "A Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles," para. 16; Thomas Helwys, "A Declaration of Faith of The English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland."

²⁰ John Smyth, *Principles and inferences*, in William T. Whitley, *Works of John Smyth*, Vol. 1, 256.

²¹ As reported in James R. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1991), 160–170.

Murton, widow of John, continued his identity and associations in Holland in the 1630s. Among the later Particular (Calvinistic) Baptist churches, women could speak in churches, confess their faith, witness to church discipline, and request baptism. Of the 12 founding members of the Calvinistic Baptist congregation at Bedford that John Bunyan served, eight were women.²² Presence and congregational membership eventually led to leadership.

Women in leadership among all Baptist groups were evident in the second and third decades of the 17th century.²³ Called “she-preachers,” they exhorted, prayed and even led congregations. Dorothy Hazzard of Bristol’s Broadmead Church, was among the most prominent. She was one of the first to practice “separation,” and provided a public witness for her faith from her shop window. Dorothy organized an immigrant hospital and other medical services for women. The first woman member of the Broadmead congregation, she also impeded Royalist assaults upon church worship services. Sisters Griffen and Nethway followed Dorothy’s example and Widow Mary West was elected a deaconess at Broadmead in 1662. In Thomas Lamb’s charismatic Bell Alley, London, congregation, Mrs. Attaway, a lace-maker, preached to overflowing crowds. Elizabeth Bunyan made an historic appearance before the justices in support of her husband’s freedom. She declared that Christ alone was the righteous judge.²⁴ The conversion of no less than Roger Williams, a Seeker/Separatist, to Baptist principles in 1638/39, is reported to have been brought about by Catherine Scott, a sister of the Antinomian Anne Hutchinson. Despite heroic episodes, major challenges to this emergence of women came from Presbyterian and Independent critics who charged that women in pastoral roles was not orthodox practice. The Baptists, seeking to be included in the Puritan/Orthodox circle of acceptability, allowed women to recede quietly from leadership roles as a result.²⁵

Likewise, the 17th century Quakers were a significant force in the gradual social empowerment of women. George Fox’s defense of the spiritual

²² *The Church Book of Bunyan Meeting, 1650–1821*, edited by G. B. Harrison (London: 1928), v.

²³ On the literary contributions of Baptist women ministers, see Keith R. Durso and Pamela E. Durso, *Hope and Courage: The Stories of Ten Baptist Women Ministers* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005) and Pamela R. Durso, “Zum Schweigen gebracht oder gehört. Die Stimmen baptistischer Frauen während der Kolonialzeit in Amerika,” in: *ZThG* 15 (2010), 197–220; and two geographically-focussed studies on women’s roles, William L. Lumpkin, “The Role of Women in 18th Century Virginia Baptist Life” *Baptist History and Heritage* 8/3 (July 1973): 158–167 and Janet Moore Lindman, “Wise Virgins and Pious Mothers: Spiritual Community among Baptist Women of the Delaware Valley” in *Women and Freedom in Early America*, edited by Larry D. Eldridge (New York: 1997): XX.

²⁴ For other examples of women in early Baptist life, see John Briggs, “She-Preachers, Widows, and Other Women: The Feminine Dimension in Baptist Life Since 1600” *BQ* 31/7 (July, 1986): 337–342. The transcript of Elizabeth’s appearance before the judges is republished in William H. Brackney, editor, *Baptist Life and Thought: A Sourcebook, Revised Edition* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1998), 75–77.

²⁵ Baptists continued to punish wayward and rebellious wives according to H. W. Robinson, “Baptist Church Discipline, Part II” *The Baptist Quarterly* 1/4 (1922): 184.

equality of women constituted what Friends call a testimony of equality that amounted to a statement of practice. Foxe believed that the spark of divine light was given to each man and woman from before the Fall.²⁶ He wrote in 1673,

“Man and woman were meet-helps (before they fell) and the image of God and holiness; and so they are to be again at the restoration by Jesus Christ ... That so all the family of God women as well as men, might know, possess, perform, and discharge their offices and services in the house of God, whereby the poor may be better looked after and the younger sort instructed, informed, and taught in the way of God; the loose and disorderly reprov'd and admonish'd in the fear of the Lord ...”²⁷

In fact, a principal differentiating point between the early General Baptists and the first Quakers was the role of women in the Quaker gatherings. In 1647, out of the shattered condition of a Nottingham General Baptist group, George Fox attracted one of his most ardent disciples, Elizabeth Hooten of Skegby near Mansfield.²⁸ Elizabeth had been a Baptist preacher who likely conducted baptisms before joining the Friends. She left her husband and children to become a Quaker preacher. Likewise, Margaret Fell, a wealthy Quaker widow who married George Fox, brought to the movement qualities of intellect and charm that lasted for generations to come. One writer has said, the female sex played so large a part among the Quakers that it was rumoured at first that the sect was confined to women alone.²⁹

About the same time, Quaker women were beginning to draw attention before civil magistrates for their ecstatic behavior.³⁰ Women like Isabel Buttery of Wakefield, Ruth Brown, and Ann Downer, frequently exhorted and were listed among the “publishers of truth.”³¹ In the next decade wives often carried on the work of imprisoned husbands. For instance, Ann Audland of Banbury remonstrated against the vicar and was charged with blasphemy.³² Her trial was a sensation, but the “prating woman” was not convicted. She refused bond and spent a miserable winter in prison. Women Quakers moved far and wide in spreading the Fox message. Elizabeth Leavens and her husband circulated in South Wales in 1654 in the footsteps of Alice

²⁶ “The light is the same in the male and female, which cometh from Christ”: George Fox, “The Woman Learning in Silence, or the Mystery of the Woman’s Subjection to Her Husband” (1656) in *The Works of George Fox* (Philadelphia, PA: 1831) Vol. 4: 108.

²⁷ *The Journal of George Fox*, edited by John L. Nickalls (London: Religious Society of Friends, 1952), 667–668; George Fox, *The woman learning in silence* (London: 1656), 1.

²⁸ *Journal of George Fox*, 25–27; 43–44.

²⁹ Thomas, “Women and the Civil War Sects,” 325.

³⁰ William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism, Second Edition revised by Henry J. Cadbury* (New York: William Sessions Ltd., 1981), 57. On women among the Friends, see the classic Mabel Brailsford, *Quaker Women 1650–1690* (London: Duckworth, 1915). Brailsford categorized early Quaker women as “bold,” “intelligent,” or “sentimental.”

³¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

³² *Ibid.*, 199.

Birkett of Kendal.³³ The Friends' community in London include powerful preachers like Ann Downer, Sarah Blackbury, Ann Gould, Mary Booth and Rebecca Travers. Their travels took them to Ireland and America.

The pioneering Quaker work in the Caribbean Islands and in Massachusetts was planted by Mary Fisher and Ann Austin in 1655–56. Judith Zinspetting, a Dutch Quaker, was so well-esteemed that the Collegiant ministers allowed her to address them in 1657.³⁴ Rebecca Larson has rightly observed that for early Quakers, social identities, gender attributes, and human appetites were superficial layers covering the Seed or Light in every person, thus inspired words from the Indwelling Spirit could come from women as well as men.³⁵ The Friends turned the meaning of Scripture on end, asserting that Satan had devised gender differences, the Apostle Paul's teachings were taken out of context, and that Christ had not despised but encouraged the ministry of women. As Margaret Fell understood it, women's preaching signaled that the end of the false church was near and the Prophet Joel's words justified women's activity.³⁶

Quakerism spread quickly to the American colonies.³⁷ One historian has identified 57 transatlantic women ministers from the late 17th to the 18th centuries.³⁸ Their occupations included housekeepers, soapmakers, cordwainers, teachers, farmers and merchants, as well as preaching in various Meetings. An important aspect of the acculturation of Quaker women was their presence and participation in the various meetings, monthly, quarterly, and yearly. Commencing with a women's meeting in the Colony of Maryland in 1677, women practiced piety and interaction, as well as a uniform polity, discipline, and process. One observer has characterized the monthly meetings as "training grounds for women who became strong in the ministry and the business of the Society of Friends, drawing strength from other independent and self-respecting Quaker women."³⁹ The larger connections thus provided self-identity and camaraderie.

In addition to preaching opportunities, some Quaker women broke the taboos of modesty in their witness: in the 1650s Quaker women in England "went naked" as a public sign. This involved streaming through local

³³ On Quaker women in Wales, see Christine Trevett, *Quaker Women Prophets in England and Wales 1650–1700* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000).

³⁴ Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, 402; 413.

³⁵ Rebecca Larson, *Daughters of Light: Quaker Women Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad, 1700–1775* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 18.

³⁶ Joel 2: 28–29.

³⁷ On Quaker women in the United States, see Margaret Hope Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1986); C. O. and J. Stoneburner, eds., *The Influence of Quaker Women in American History* (New York, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986); Elizabeth Potts Brown and Susan Mosher Stuard, eds., *Witnesses for Change: Quaker Women Over Three Centuries* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

³⁸ Larson, *Daughters of Light*, Appendix 1, 305–319.

³⁹ Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism*, 45.

worship services as well as riding or walking naked through the streets. “Going Naked” was part of their prophetic roles.⁴⁰ Another emancipative strategy of Quaker women was their traveling beyond their local villages to wider geographies. This provided them with an ever-widening understanding of their world, as well as gaining public reputations. Traveling was “planting the seed,” and involved preaching in public places, praying with families, enduring hardships (a gospel imperative), and channeling messages between God and humans.⁴¹ Such travelers became the “Mothers in Israel,” valued for their piety, integrity, and service. Related to women’s traveling was the “two by two” strategy where Quaker women traveled in couples, building strong cooperative relationships and co-dependencies.⁴² Finally, as the 18th century dawned, Quaker women had the added benefits of administrative responsibilities denied to other Englishwomen, and they both collected and distributed philanthropic assets. Through their own prison experiences, Quaker women developed a focus on the conditions of incarceration and the need for reforms. Their observation of human slavery led them to radical emancipatory social and political positions.

The Socinian or Unitarian movement had its origins in Europe, and had a growing impact among English-speaking Christians. In its first stages it was a minister’s movement that spread among lay people as well.⁴³ Women were drawn to Unitarianism because of its emphasis upon free expression, its applied or social concerns, its anti-Calvinist bent, and its liberal interpretation of the Scriptures. In the 17th century, modern Unitarians claim the Pilgrim emigrant Anne Bradstreet among their forbears because of her husband’s connection with the founding of Harvard College and the number of her descendants who populated Unitarian leadership. Anne found expression in writing poetry in which she critiqued traditional roles of women and spoke of the equality of the sexes. She was highly regarded as America’s first female published poet gaining notoriety far beyond hearth and family.

3. The 18th Century

Among nonconformist groups, social uplifting for women was evident from the 18th century. In the 18th century American colonies, women pushed forward in congregational affairs. For instance, women rose to prominence

⁴⁰ Trevett, *Quaker Women Prophets*, 28–29.

⁴¹ On traveling, see Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism*, 24–41. In order to be approved for traveling, the ministers of the various levels of meeting issued to a candidate a “traveling minute” to assure soundness of doctrine.

⁴² Trevett, *Quaker Women Prophets*, 89–94.

⁴³ On the movement in general, see Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England, and America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1952) and the more recent David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985).

among the Rogerenes in Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Long Island, “gifted by the Spirit, their women were encouraged to take part in their meetings and displays of activism.”⁴⁴ Rachel Scammon was primarily responsible for the Baptist evangelization of New Hampshire Colony, owing to the strategic use of her late husband’s estate.⁴⁵ Most important of all the female preachers in the South was Martha Stearns Marshall, sister of Shubael Stearns and wife of Daniel Marshall. Martha was a powerful Separate preacher in the Piedmont region of Carolina and Virginia and responsible for planting a number of New Light congregations. Of her it was said, “Mrs. Marshall was a lady of good sense, singular piety, and surprising elocution [who] has, in countless instances, melted a whole concourse into tears by her prayers and exhortations.”⁴⁶ Susan Juster has observed that in the early to mid-18th century Baptist women along with men participated in all the major decisions of collective governance, asserting themselves theologically in often fractious debates over conversion and church membership.⁴⁷

American Freewill Baptists, later called Free Baptists, gave much occasion to women spiritual leaders. These were followers of Benjamin Randall, the quintessential dissenter from New England Congregationalist and Baptist Calvinism. Their annual reports are replete with notices of women preachers and evangelists. That number dramatically increased across the 19th century to the point where the first fully-credentialed American Baptist minister by virtue of her ordination in the Yearly Meeting of the Free Baptists, soon to merge with the Northern Baptists, Libby Cilley Griffin, made history.

The Great Awakenings of the 18th century unleashed yet another powerful force that gradually enhanced the role and opportunity for women. John Wesley had been deeply influenced by his mother, Susannah, and she continued to be a moral compass for his life and symbol of strong female leadership. What Susannah meant to John was a lodgpole spiritual force in the home and a commitment to nurture her children in the faith. When John organized the Methodist movement within the Church of England, his key strategy was the weekly class meeting. There were meetings for men and for women on a segregated basis. By 1742 there were 47 women class leaders in comparison with 19 for men. Wesley chose carefully his leaders according to their gifts and he developed a wide circle of women adherents and supporters. On the gifts of women in the Methodist connection, he

⁴⁴ Ellen Starr Brinton, “The Rogerenes” *New England Quarterly* 63/1 (March 1943): 3–19, esp. 11–12. Rogerenes were a sect related to both Quakers and Baptists, followers of John Rogers of New London, Connecticut.

⁴⁵ Mrs. Scammon purchased copies of John Norcott’s *Baptisme discovered faithfully and plainly according to the Word of God* (1694) and distributed them among the pastors of the Colony in the 1720s. See David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World*. (New York: Lewis Colby and Company, 1848), 497.

⁴⁶ Robert B. Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of Baptists in Virginia* (Richmond, VA: John O’Lynch, 1810), 375.

⁴⁷ Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 3–13, esp. n. 22.

wrote in 1773 to Elizabeth Bennis in Ireland: “You are not sent to Waterford to be useless. Stir up the gift of God which is in you; gather together those that have been scattered abroad and make up a band, if not a class or two.”⁴⁸

Recent historians have shown that Methodism was a religion of enthusiasm, to use the term in its 18th century context. Methodism was preponderantly a movement of women with a high proportion of single and widowed women, and in the American colonies this rose to 71 % among the urban meetings.⁴⁹ The women found among Mr. Wesley’s following had opportunities to be purveyors of hospitality, deaconesses, visitors, evangelists, prayers, exhorters, testifiers, class members, and preachers. Because Methodist theology emphasized experience, spiritual egalitarianism, and direct empowerment from God, women could not be prevented by social conventions or female modesty. The feminization of Methodism in the United States moved Diane Lobody to observe that Methodism was a women’s church, speaking a woman’s language of tender and uncontrollable emotionalism. Many Methodist women naturally “wept, trembled, groaned, melted, and sank into God.”⁵⁰ John Wesley had bequeathed a vocabulary and a grammatical structure that validated women’s religious experience.⁵¹

In the 18th century, three Unitarian women stand out. Judith Sargent Murray was a poet and essayist, widely read and circulated because of her marriage to the famous John Murray, a prominent Universalist. Judith’s essay, “On the Equality of the Sexes,” written in 1779 and published in 1790, marked her as an ardent feminist and advocate of women’s education. Mary Wollstonecraft was a British Unitarian essayist who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published in 1792. It was her belief that women were not created inferior to men, but lacked education to achieve parity.⁵² Mary Moody Emerson, while not widely published, was said to be the most important influence on her nephew, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the formation of the American Transcendentalist movement. These three women were well-positioned among the intellectual elite to become icons of women’s literary and social achievements.

Nonconformity at the margins of Christianity also benefitted women. Such was the case with two American communal groups. Mother Ann Lee who as a young woman in England joined a sect called the Wardleys,

⁴⁸ John Wesley, *Letters*, 18 January 1774.

⁴⁹ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 137.

⁵⁰ Diane H. Lobody, “That Language May Be Given Me?: Women’s Experience in Early Methodism” *Perspectives in American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*, edited by Russell E. Richey, Kenneth Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 127.

⁵¹ Hempton, *Methodism*, 140; 248, n. 25. See also the citation of Phyllis Mack’s lecture, “Does Gender Matter? Salvation and Selfhood in Eighteenth Century Methodism.” Mack points out that the very pain women experience in childbirth and visitation of the sick, was positively identified in Methodist experiential theology

⁵² Her daughter was the famed author Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley, who won acclaim for her novel, *Dracula*.

reaped a sense of prophetic call to follow the Spirit. In 1774 she emigrated to America and settled at Niskayuna, New York, where she founded the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming. Because of their ecstatic utterances and their seeming to "shake", they were popularly known as Shakers. Throughout the next century the Shaker Colonies would move with the frontier, living in communes and crafting fine furniture and wood products. They are also remembered for their musical compositions. The writings of Mother Ann remained prominent in their female hierarchy. A similar female dominant sect grew up in the Finger Lakes region of New York, organized by Jemima Wilkinson. Jemima was a Baptist and then a Quaker who preached a strict ethical life; in Rhode Island she formed a visionary community to practice her beliefs, but found much opposition. Eventually she broke with the Quakers and formed her own group known as the "Universal Publick Friend", locating on the shores of Seneca Lake.

4. The Great Century of Emerging Christian Womanhood

The 19th century was a period of recovery of gains from the colonial era that had been limited in the Revolutionary era. As one historian has argued, women in the more "radical" groups found greater opportunities than among traditional evangelicals who became strangely masculinized in the early Republic.⁵³ Radical sects, Regular and Freewill Baptists, Methodists, and Unitarian women found leadership roles and service that often led to public opportunities.

Baptists in the United States took their place in the vanguard of women's improvement. The first indication of concerted effort occurred in the Boston Baptist community in 1800. In Second Baptist Church, Boston, an invalid lady, Mary Webb, organized volunteers in support of missions. Two years later, an interdenominational body was formed to broaden the interest mostly in domestic missions. It would lead to national women's American Baptist home and foreign mission societies.

The saga of the wives of Adoniram Judson became a relentless popular crusade for evangelical women. Those who were barred from leadership in their congregations or on denominational boards, found in foreign missions a doorway to realized selfhood and service. At first, mission boards did not appoint single women, but required that overseas missionaries be married. Adoniram Judson, first American missionary to the East⁵⁴, created a cycle of opportunity for three women who served nobly with him in overseas service. He was married three times and in each case the spouses led exemplary

⁵³ Juster, *Disorderly Women*, 209–217, speaks of setbacks for women in the Revolutionary era, the resurgence of a patriarchy that was only slightly modulated among evangelicals well into the 19th century.

⁵⁴ Judson was a Congregationalist who converted to Baptist principles during his voyage to India in 1813.

lives, well-narrated in popular literature. Ann Hasseltine, his first wife, was the model of affection and devoted service through severe trials. Her story was serially published in denominational and evangelical magazines and her life story was published as John Dowling's *The Judson Offering* (1846).

Sarah Hall Boardman, a missionary widow and Judson's second wife, was a scholar-translator who ordered the life of the family in Burmah and worked side-by-side in the translations. Her death caused a sensation of sacrifice among young women in America. Finally, Emily Chubbock, the third spouse, used her literary expertise to memorialize her predecessor, Sarah, and turn the Judson story into a posthumous classic work. What the Judson story did biographically for Christian women was to show their rigour, demonstrate their administrative gifts, and validate their evangelical testimonies.

Beyond the exemplary nature of women as missionary wives, there was what one author has called an "apostolate of women."⁵⁵ Ann Judson wrote about the elevated moral status of women in Christendom that compelled sending churches to want the same improved status for benighted heathen women in foreign lands. She pointed out that women in Burmah could not read and this was at the foundation of their social oppression. Missionary efforts among women were thus focused upon literacy, access to the bible in translation, writing and printing tracts, and establishment of schools. Ann declared that "the Savior died equally for them as for us... we must meliorate the situation, instructing, enlightening and saving females in the Eastern world."

Of equal importance to evangelical women at home and abroad was autonomy for women and a developing assertiveness of character. Ann Judson was granted a significant level of social autonomy out of sheer desperation during her husband's brutal captivity. She learned how to connive the Burmese political situation and stave off Adoniram's execution. According to Sarah Josepha Hale in *Sketches of American Character* (1833), what was not opportune in Europe or North America, was realized through adversity in the missionary context. Women often had to make decisions pertaining to their own survival and this invested them with new prerogatives. The requirements in mission inevitably led to a home base of training opportunities in bible societies, temperance, moral reform, work with orphans and widows, antislavery and public education.⁵⁶

Eventually, even women among Southern Baptists (traditionally a male-dominant culture) in the United States made quiet progress toward leadership. The fountainhead was Charlotte Moon of Albemarle, Virginia, who rose to be a prominent woman missionary in South China, the first single Southern Baptist woman missionary appointed. Following her reports from China, the national Women's Missionary Union of the Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1888. By 1900, American Free[will],

⁵⁵ Brumberg, *Mission for Life*, 79–106.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

Seventh Day, German, Swedish, and Danish-Norwegian Baptist women had organized as well. Gradually, the result was a feminine bureaucracy of administrators, program and personnel managers, and clerical staffs dedicated to female missions. Added to this bureaucracy were women's training schools in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Louisville.⁵⁷

English Baptist experience mirrored that of the Americans. There are numerous examples of missionary wives like Hannah Marshman who did much for the survival of the Serampore Mission, and Marianne Lewis who was tireless in her efforts at educating Indian women. Historian John Briggs has shown how the home enterprise engaged women in administration and philanthropy; however, English Baptists were more ready to employ women overseas than at home.⁵⁸ The latter part of the century witnessed the first women platform speakers, and annual published lists of deaconesses and church secretaries. The capstone of social achievement for women among British Baptists came in 1923 when Regent's Park College admitted its first female students, Edith Gates, Maria Living-Taylor, and Violet Hedger, all three of whom served pastorates in the Union.⁵⁹

If any nonconformist group outdistanced the Baptists in advocating women's elevation, it was the Unitarians/Universalists. The roster of emerging Unitarian/Universalist women in this era reads like a "Who's Who" of the modern woman's movement. Of particular note were Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Peabody, Dorothea Dix, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Julia Ward Howe, and Susan B. Anthony. Antoinette Blackwell of Henrietta, New York, took degrees in arts and theology at Oberlin College and was the first ordained woman in the United States, ultimately serving a Unitarian congregation in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Harriet Martineau was a lecturer, writer, and social theorist, much acclaimed for her book, *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832). Her essays, which broke with female propriety on the relations between men and women, and provided a new kind of social analysis, won awards from the Unitarian Association. She is considered the mother of American sociology. Elizabeth Peabody was a close associate of William Ellery Channing in Boston and provided a gathering place for Transcendentalists, founded the kindergarten movement in New England, and advocated numerous social reforms pertaining to women. Dorothea Dix, raised a Methodist, became enamored of William E. Channing and she joined the Unitarians. She led a national reform movement among prisons and insane asylums. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, long an

⁵⁷ The most prominent were the Baptist Missionary Training School in Chicago, Baptist Institute in Philadelphia, Colby-Sawyer College in New Hampshire, and Keuka College in upstate New York, plus Greenville Women's College in South Carolina, and Meredith College in North Carolina. For the full development of women's post-secondary education in North America see, William H. Brackney, *Congregation and Campus: North American Baptists in Higher Education* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 140–164.

⁵⁸ Briggs, "She Preachers," 344.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 345–348.

advocate of free religion, temperance, and abolition, became the leading female suffragist of the later 19th century. Stanton represented the U/U Association at the World's Parliament of Religions in 1892 and authored the *Woman's Bible* in 1895. It was her "Declaration of Sentiments" presented to the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 that marked the official beginning of the American women's rights movement. The Declaration read as a parody on the U.S. Declaration of Independence and illustrated a new understanding of human creation:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness ... The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpation on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world."

Julia Ward Howe was a Unitarian homemaker and author who adopted the cause of antislavery and women's suffrage. She lectured widely and edited the *Woman's Journal*. Unitarian Lydia Maria Child called attention to the most abhorred practice of *suttee* that missionaries to that country sought to end by the 1840s.⁶⁰ Susan B. Anthony was raised a Quaker, but transferred to membership in the Unitarian Church in Rochester, New York. She was involved in antislavery, women's rights, and the suffrage movement, a close confidante of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Because of her organizing genius, particularly with the National American Woman Suffrage Association, the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution is often called the "Susan B. Anthony Amendment."

A significant story of women in Christian leadership can be seen in the life and vocation of the Grimke sisters of Charleston, South Carolina. These sisters acculturated in the plantation system of South Carolina and the southern Episcopal Church, traveled north in 1827 and joined the Philadelphia Quakers, where they became ardent abolitionists. The sisters were much influenced by William Lloyd Garrison, a leading advocate of women's rights and antislavery, and Angelina married Theodore Dwight Weld, the second in prominence in the abolitionist movement. The Quaker Grimkes were among the most sought-after platform speakers on social reform of the antebellum period.⁶¹

Although John Wesley encouraged some women to preach in the previous century, 19th century Methodism in England and North America was not generally open to women preachers at large, because it violated social

⁶⁰ Lydia Maria Child, *The History of the Condition of Women In Various Ages and Nations* (Boston, MA: 1835), 111; Brumberg, *Mission for Life*, 92. *Suttee* was the burning of wives following the deaths of their husbands.

⁶¹ On the Grimkes, see Gerda Lerner, *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Women's Rights and Abolition* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971) and Pamela R. Durso, *The Power of Woman: The Life and Writings of Sarah Moore Grimke* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003).

conventions. Yet, there were noteworthy exceptions. Elizabeth Dart in the 1820s and Ann Copp Gordon in the 1870s were exceptions among the mainstream Wesleyan Methodists. Mrs. Gordon exhibited an experiential reason behind her preaching, namely the release felt upon forgiveness of sin and the accompanying joy that could not be contained. Several women preachers found in come-outer Methodism in Canada greater openness to their message. The American Methodist Episcopalian Ellen Bangs Gatchell was described as “a streak of red hot lightning” in the Niagara region in 1810. Jane Woodell Wilson in the 1840s was considered a superior preacher in the Toronto region among the Primitive Methodists, and Mary Ann Lyle spoke at many special occasions in the same era, first in England among the Bible Christian Church and later the Primitive Methodists in Canada. In the United States, Methodist women fared far better in this era, achieving equal rights with men in two conferences and by 1866 the American Methodist Protestants (a break-away group from the 1820s) ordained Helanor M. Davidson and the Methodist Episcopalians granted a preacher’s license to Margaret Newton Van Cott in 1870.⁶²

Some Methodist women carried their spirituality to national attention. As it turned out, the peculiar idea of the doctrine of entire sanctification among Methodists gave rise to highly-reputed evangelists. Phoebe Palmer, a Methodist lay revivalist in the 1850s-60s, codified a morphology of a second work of grace (called “altar theology”) that produced a national schedule of meetings in the 1857 Revivals, as well as ongoing expressions in the Church of the Nazarene in the U.S. and the Keswick Movement in Great Britain. Likewise, Francis Willard, a Methodist lay preacher, successively united the temperance and suffragist movements, in the 1870s travelling 30,000 miles a year and giving a hundred lectures annually. Francis has sometimes been called the mother of the women’s right to vote in the United States.

Closely related to the Methodists were the Salvation Army and the second phase of the Adventist movement. The “Hallelujah” or Salvation Army was founded by a Methodist preacher, William Booth, in England in 1852. He attracted both men and women to his ranks across Britain, preaching to the poor and meeting the needs of the indigent. In 1879, Lt. Eliza Shirley emigrated to Philadelphia and began the first meeting of the Army in America. Within a year, there were seven women present and commissioned to the work in New York City. Of a different outcome was a woman’s pilgrimage from within American Methodism to the Advent movement. In the 1840s Ellen G. White was attracted to the eschatological lectures of the great Adventist leader, William Miller. After his prophecies failed to materialize in a timely way, Mrs. White joined the movement and contributed her visions, ecstatic experiences, and revised prophecies, plus a dietary regimen and

⁶² Elizabeth Gillan Muir, “Beyond the Bounds of Acceptable Behaviour: Methodist Women Preachers in the Early Nineteenth Century” in *Changing Roles of Women Within the Christian Church in Canada*, edited by Elizabeth Gillan Muir and Marilyn Färdig Whitely (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 167–178.

Sabbath-keeping to the mix. Between 1850–1870 Ellen’s writings gained national attention and she singlehandedly renewed the Adventist movement through forty published works translated into 140 languages. It was under her auspices that the movement became a recognized church in 1863.

A fascinating offshoot of the Congregationalist denomination in the second half of the 19th century was the emergence of the Christian Scientists. Raised a New England Congregationalist with serious health issues, Mary Baker Eddy of New Hampshire moved beyond her Congregationalist roots and founded the Christian Science movement in 1875. She wrote extensively on topics relating to religion and health. Her own spiritual experiences, not unlike those of earlier prophetesses, formed a core spiritual character for her following. Mary wrote several commentaries on the meaning of the Scriptures with respect to health. By the late 1880s, Mrs. Eddy was a nationally-renowned writer and platform speaker, introducing yet another “nonconforming” idea of the Christian life.

5. The 20th Century

The past century witnessed the capstones of achievements wrought by women through the opportunities afforded by their churches. There were also new nonconformist denominations that provided increased opportunities for women.

A great high water mark among Baptist women in leadership came in 1920 when biblical scholar and missionary leader, Helen Barrett Montgomery of Rochester, New York, was elected president of the Northern Baptist Convention, becoming the first elected woman executive of any American Protestant denomination.⁶³ Mrs. Montgomery, the soul of grace and decorum, presided over the NBC session that declared the New Testament as the sole authority of faith and practice in the denomination, nullifying a surge of fundamentalist confessional influence on the convention floor. Mrs. Montgomery will also be remembered for creating the World Day of Prayer, in conjunction with her Baptist traveling companion in the Far East, Mrs. Lucy Waterbury Peabody.

American Baptists followed a pattern of ever-increasing recognition of women in pastoral, mission, executive and ecumenical roles. More and more women candidates entered seminaries in the 1980s and upon being ordained, served churches across the denomination. Suzanne D. Johnson Cook was called in 1983 to historic Mariner’s Temple Church in New York City, and recently in 2014, Amy K. Butler accepted the call to be senior minister of The Riverside Church in New York City, a premier congregation among American Baptists. The Women’s American Baptist

⁶³ Mrs. Montgomery translated and edited the *Centenary Edition of the New Testament*, widely used among women’s groups and still in print.

Home and Foreign Mission Societies annually appointed scores of women to posts of service from India to Europe to Africa, plus city and ethnic ministries in the continental United States. The denominational offices by the 1980s boasted of women heading agencies like American Baptist Women, the Commission on the Ministry, the American Baptist Historical Society, and the Division of Christian Higher Education in the Board of Educational Ministries, as well as senior positions in the Foreign and Home Mission agencies. Women candidates were added to the rotation of presidents of the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. In 2004 Dr. Molly T. Marshall, a former Southern Baptist, became the first woman president of any Baptist theological school, Central Baptist Theological Seminary (American Baptist-related) in Kansas City, Kansas. In the 1980s Joan Brown Campbell, dually affiliated with American Baptists and Disciples of Christ, served as the first woman elected as executive director of the National Council of Churches in the U.S. and the first woman to be the American Secretary of the World Council of Churches. In terms of international recognition among the churches, few women have approached Campbell's influence.

The era from 1860 to 1920 witnessed a "come-outer" impulse among the ecclesiastical children of John Wesley. Called by many the "Holiness Movement" in the U.S., Canada, and Britain, because of their common adherence to the practical doctrine of entire sanctification, the Free Methodists, the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion, (later the Wesleyan Church), the Church of the Nazarene, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Reformed Baptists, and the Pilgrim Holiness Churches all gave increasing empowerment to women as preachers, pastors, class leaders, and congregational lay leaders. This greater acceptance of female leadership, amounting to as much as 25% of registered ministers, would provide an important reference point for the burgeoning movement.⁶⁴

5.1. Congregationalist women forged ahead in their tradition

Two examples of new "nonconformist" denominations that gave great opportunity to women were the Pentecostal Churches and the Foursquare Gospel Church. Among the various branches of the Pentecostal movement, the Assemblies of God, and the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada and Newfoundland, women in key roles have played important parts. William J. Seymour, one of the founders of the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles where the modern Pentecostal revival broke out, from the beginning associated himself with three key women, Lucy Farrow, a local pastor, Julia Hutchins, and Neely Terry as his close associates. Early Pentecostalism has been described as a pioneering interracial movement that recognized

⁶⁴ Here see Susie Cunningham Stanley, *Feminist Pillar of Fire: The Life of Amie White* (Cleveland, TN: Pilgrim Press, 1993).

the equality of women and men. In the Canadian context, Alice B. Garrison, a New Hampshire schoolteacher, experienced a personal call to take Pentecostalism to Newfoundland and in 1911 she established the Bethesda Mission, now the epicenter of the strongest Protestant Evangelical denomination in Newfoundland.

From roots in the Salvation Army and the Pentecostal churches came Aimee Semple McPherson. Aimee had extraordinary communications gifts and she was a promotionalist. In the 1920s, finding little opportunity in her Episcopalian and Salvationist backgrounds, she went out on her own to form a church and a movement. The result was the International Four-square Gospel Church at Angelus Temple, Los Angeles. McPherson became one of the leading religious figures of the 1920s, crowds at her crusades outdistancing those of Billy Sunday plus her being the pastoral figure for the Temple, covered generously in the press.

6. At Length

Christianity, and in particular, nonconformist varieties, were an open door to the advance of women. There are several reasons for this. By its very nature, nonconformity broke down tradition and norms and created new mazes. Nonconformists uniformly referred to the Holy Spirit as their guide. The Bible was another dynamic factor. The Scriptures provided inspiration for spiritual gifts, examples of prominent women (Ruth and Esther), and the affirmation of Jesus of Nazareth. Nonconformist meetings were small, interactive, and egalitarian; many met in the home, the woman's sphere of activity. As opportunities for women increased, publicity, both positive and negative occurred, enlarging public perceptions. Because of the networks created among the churches, women travelled and earned reputations. An entire theology of egalitarian spiritual gifts arose to enlarge the understanding of the church and ministry. By the 19th century, what women were accomplishing within congregations was experimented with in education and reform organizations. American, British, Canadian, and Australian women's missionary groups energetically exported education and social transformation to large populations of women in Asia, China, Africa, and Latin America. By the 1980s the formerly exclusive women's auxiliary societies and women's departments were folded into the main mission and denominational agencies, thus achieving a structural permanence for women. Collectively, the trends that began within churches, became larger cultural breakthroughs in citizenship, suffrage, and employment in the United States in the 1920s.

Gradually Christian men noticed, accepted, and fostered the contributions of Christian women. The famed prophet of the Social Gospel, Walter Rauschenbusch, was a bellwether in recognizing the sweep of cultural change that benefitted Christian women. Writing in 1913 he said,

“Women have arrived – in industry, in education, in politics. They pervade all domains of life, not passively as adjuncts, but with a sense of equal rights and a feeling of new-found destiny ... We are far too deeply immersed in these currents of change to see clearly whither they will carry us. God knows. Plainly women are here as our equals in religion, in intellectual life, in industry, and in the life of our commonwealths. When a thing is both right and inevitable, we might as well accept it and go ahead ...”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Walter Rauschenbusch, “Some Moral Aspects of the Woman Movement” originally in *Biblical World* 42 (1913): 195–196, excerpted in *Baptist Life and Thought, A Sourcebook (Revised Edition)* edited by William H. Brackney (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1998), 275–276.