

# Female Preaching in Early Nineteenth-Century America

BY CATHERINE A. BREKUS

**In the Second Great Awakening more than one hundred women crisscrossed the country as itinerant preachers, holding meetings in barns, schools, or outside in fields. They were the first group of women to speak publicly in America. Why have virtually all of them been forgotten?**

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Some argued that she was “bold and shameless,” a disgrace to her family and to the evangelical movement. Others insisted that she was the “instrument of God,” a humble woman who had given up everything for Christ.

Few women in early nineteenth-century America provoked more admiration, criticism, and controversy than Harriet Livermore. She was the daughter of a congressman and the grand-daughter of a senator, but after an emotional conversion experience, she renounced her privileged life in order to become a female preacher. Reputed to be a gifted evangelist who was also a beautiful singer, she became so popular that she was allowed to preach in front of Congress four times between 1827 and 1844, each time to huge crowds. According to a Washington newspaper, more than a thousand people assembled in the Hall of Representatives to hear her preach in 1827, and hundreds more gathered outside to catch a glimpse of her. President John Quincy Adams had to sit on the steps leading up to her feet because he could not find a free chair.

Harriet Livermore was the best-known female preacher of her day, but she was part of a larger community of evangelical women, both white and African-American, who claimed to have been divinely inspired to preach

the gospel. Between 1790 and 1845, during the revivals that historians have identified as the “Second Great Awakening,” more than one hundred women crisscrossed the country as itinerant preachers. Holding meetings in barns, schools, or outside in fields when they were barred from churches, they were the first group of women to speak publicly in America.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their fame in the early nineteenth century, virtually all of these remarkable women have been forgotten. Who were they? Why did some evangelical churches welcome them into the pulpit? And why have they disappeared from historical memory?



Harriet Livermore was raised in an affluent family, but most female preachers belonged to the lower or lower-middle classes, and few had been formally educated. Quoting a passage from the Gospel of Matthew, “So the last shall be first, and the first last,” they claimed that God had called them to proclaim the gospel despite their poverty, their lack of education, and their sex (Matthew 20:16). All of them insisted that they had not wanted to take up the “cross” of preaching, but when they had tried to deny their calls, God had overcome their fears by promising to guide and protect them. Portraying themselves as “instruments” of God, “pens in his hand,” or “clay in the hands of the potter,” they claimed that he had made the same promise to them that he had once made to the prophet Jeremiah: “Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth” (Jeremiah 1:9, KJV). They insisted that when they stood in the pulpit, they did not speak their own words, but God’s.

Most Protestant churches in the early nineteenth century opposed female preaching on the grounds that it violated the Pauline injunction to “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law” (1 Corinthians 14:34-35, KJV). They also cited two other Pauline texts: “the head of the woman is the man” (1 Corinthians 11:3b, KJV), and “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” (1 Timothy 2:11-12, KJV). As the General Assembly of the Presbyterians declared in 1832, “to teach and exhort, or to lead in prayer, in public and promiscuous assemblies, is clearly forbidden to women in the Holy Oracles.”<sup>2</sup> In the nineteenth century, the word “promiscuous” was often used to describe mixed audiences of men and women, but the word also suggested sexual immorality and licentiousness. Many ministers argued that Christian women who invited men to stare at them in public, even to proclaim the gospel, were no better than prostitutes. Although women could teach Sunday School, serve as foreign missionaries, and even exhort others to repent, they could not violate the rules of female modesty – or usurp male authority – by standing in the masculine space of the pulpit.

Yet even though the largest, most influential churches in the early nineteenth century forbade women to preach, particularly the Congregationalists, the Presbyterians, and the Episcopalians, a small number of new, dissenting sects challenged the restrictions on women's religious speech. After the First Amendment declared that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion," state legislatures disestablished the

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colonial churches, stripping them of the power to collect taxes for their support. (Before the American Revolution, almost every state had an established church that was financially supported by the government.) In this new, free marketplace of religion, churches had to rely on persuasion rather than coercion to attract members, and the formerly established

churches faced stiff competition from upstart religious groups who had been inspired by the populist rhetoric of the American Revolution. Anti-authoritarian, anti-intellectual, and often visionary, they deliberately set themselves apart from the "worldliness" of established churches by insisting that God could choose anyone—even the poor, uneducated, enslaved, or female—to spread the gospel. Nothing better symbolized their countercultural identity than their willingness to allow large numbers of women into the pulpit.

The evangelicals that allowed women to preach—the Freewill Baptists, the Christian Connection, the northern Methodists, the African Methodists, and the Millerites (the predecessors of the Seventh-day Adventists)—were motivated by both practical and theological considerations. On the practical level, all of these sects lacked enough male ministers to keep pace with their spectacular growth in the early nineteenth century, and desperate for help, they relied on women as well as men to lead meetings and to organize new churches. They also found it difficult to control what happened during emotional camp meetings, where converts often cried out for mercy, begged God for forgiveness, and even fainted to the ground. In one of the most famous camp meetings in American history, held in Cane Ridge, Kentucky in 1801, converts not only swooned and "jerked" uncontrollably, but even growled and barked like dogs. In this tumultuous atmosphere, anything seemed possible—even female preaching.

These sects also supported female preaching for deeper theological reasons. They believed that religious authority came from heartfelt religious

experience, not from formal education, and they feared that established churches had “quenched the spirit” by requiring ministers to be college-educated. Insisting that ordinary people could read and interpret the Bible for themselves, they argued that a farmer or a blacksmith could be as much of a biblical expert as a Harvard-educated minister. In addition, because of their conviction that God could communicate directly with people through dreams, visions, and voices, they argued that it was possible for God to inspire women as well as men to proclaim the gospel. Education, wealth, social position, gender – all of these were meaningless to God.

Since many members of these sects feared that the apocalypse might be imminent, they also sanctioned female preaching as a sign of the approaching millennium. According to the Millerites – who took their name from William Miller (1782-1849), a farmer who became famous for his millennial predictions – the world was destined to end in 1844. Disdaining the faith in human progress, they believed that they were living at the end of human history, and they urged every convert, whether male or female, to spread the gospel before it was too late. Influenced by Joel’s promise that at the end of the world, “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Joel 2:28), they invested female preaching with transcendent significance. Whenever a woman stood in the pulpit, she was a visible reminder that Christ might soon return to earth.

Evangelicals not only cited Joel’s words, but many other biblical texts that authorized female preaching. When they read the Bible for themselves, they discovered that instead of keeping silence, biblical heroines like Mary Magdalene, Philip’s four daughters, Priscilla, and Phoebe (or “Phebe” in the KJV) had spread the good news of Christ’s resurrection as witnesses and evangelists. According to Rebecca Miller, for example, a popular preacher for the Christian Connection, Phoebe had been the first recorded female preacher. Despite Paul’s description of her as a “servant” of the church, she had not been simply a maid or a housekeeper, but an evangelist (Romans 16:1). Quoting other passages in the Bible, she illustrated that the word “servant” was typically used in the Bible as a synonym for minister. Miller also argued that Paul’s warning to “keep silence in the churches” had been directed only at the disorderly women of Corinth, not at all Christian women. Pointing out the inconsistencies in his words, she argued that if he had meant to forbid female preaching, he would not have also instructed women to cover their heads when “praying or prophesying” in public (1 Corinthians 11:5).<sup>3</sup>



Women like Rebecca Miller caused controversy because of their spirited defense of female evangelism, but they also became immensely popular within their own sects. Abigail Roberts, for example, a well-known

Christian Connection preacher, often spoke outdoors because such throngs of people gathered to hear her sermons. Although it seems likely that some of her listeners were attracted by the sheer novelty of seeing a woman in the pulpit, others reported being genuinely moved by her passionate, heartfelt sermons. "Many thousands have listened with breathless attention to the heavenly story, as it fell from her lips," a male minister wrote, "and many hundreds will date their religious experience from the time they heard her preach."<sup>4</sup>

Since female preachers prided themselves on speaking extemporaneously, we do not have any copies of their sermons, but based on newspaper reports, spectators' accounts, and their own letters and memoirs, we know that they usually preached on the traditional evangelical themes of repentance, conversion, and salvation. Indeed, a favorite text was "Ye must be born again" (John 3:3). Although some of their listeners may have expected them to preach a distinctly "feminine" or sentimental message (the early nineteenth century was the great age of the sentimental novel), they mixed soothing words of comfort with fiery warnings to repent. On one hand, they were particularly attracted to biblical passages that described God as a mother as well as a father, and they insisted that women, like men, had been created in the image of God. Salome Lincoln, for example, a Freewill Baptist, preached on a passage from Deuteronomy that describes God as an eagle who "stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings" (Deuteronomy 32:11-12, KJV).<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, female preachers did not hesitate to portray God as angry, vengeful, and all-powerful. During a devastating cholera epidemic in 1832, Nancy Towle preached a hellfire sermon on a text from Ezekiel, "Go ye after him through the city and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity: Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women" (Ezekiel 9:5b-6a, KJV). According to her memoir, her listeners responded by crying out in fear.<sup>6</sup>

By the very fact of speaking in public, female preachers appeared dangerously radical, but they shared little with the women who supported the early women's rights movement. With the notable exception of Sojourner Truth, who was both a feminist and an abolitionist, none of them participated in the first Woman's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls in 1848. Although they used the Bible to defend their essential dignity and humanity, they did not challenge the fundamental sexual inequalities within their churches. Even Zilpha Elaw, an African Methodist who disobeyed her husband's commands to stop preaching, claimed that her act of defiance was justified only because of her marriage to an "unbeliever." In general, as she explained, "Woman is dependent on and subject to man. Man is not created for the woman, but the woman for the man."<sup>7</sup> Most female preachers were single when they began their careers, and those who decided to marry usually left

the pulpit unless their husbands supported them. (Several female preachers married clergymen who encouraged them to serve as “helpmates” in their ministry.)

Influenced by a culture that did not allow women to vote, hold political office, or own their own property if they were married, female preachers found it difficult to imagine that God wanted them to be the full equals of men. Insisting that they were not “radicals” or “jezebels,” they denied that they wanted to subvert male authority in either the home or the church. As “biblical” rather than secular feminists, they based their defense of female preaching on biblical revelation rather than natural rights, and most did not believe that the Bible sanctioned women’s political, legal, or economic equality to men. (Women’s rights activists like Sarah Grimke and her sister Angelina vehemently disagreed.) Even though they brought hundreds of new converts into evangelical churches, they never asked for permission to baptize them or to give them the Lord’s Supper. Nor did they broach the forbidden topic of women’s ordination. Deborah Peirce, a Christian Connection preacher, published an entire book defending women’s right to “spread the good news of salvation,” but she also argued that only men had the right to “rule and go forward.”<sup>8</sup>

Without the authority of ordination, female preachers served as itinerants rather than as settled pastors. Like male circuit riders, they traveled by horseback, stagecoach, or on foot to small towns and rural villages across the country, with some even sailing across the Atlantic Ocean to preach in England and Ireland. Three African-American women—Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Elizabeth (whose last name is unknown)—courageously traveled to Virginia and Maryland in order to evangelize slaves. Although none of them were physically

harmed, they could have been whipped, imprisoned, or even enslaved. Since most southern states allowed free blacks to be sold into slavery if they did not have legal certificates proving their status, these women knew that they literally risked their freedom by traveling to the South, but they felt called to “proclaim liberty to the captives” (Isaiah 61:1).

Female preachers made many sacrifices for their faith. Because they were not paid even the meager salaries of men, they depended on the generosity of their audiences to pay their expenses, but many were so poor that they had to resort to sewing, housecleaning, or washing clothes to make

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*FEMALE PREACHERS*

*Clockwise from top left: Harriett Livermore (1788-1868), Salome Lincoln (1807-1841), Abigail Roberts (1791-1841).*

ends meet. They also endured constant criticism and harassment. They were locked out of meetinghouses, booed by angry spectators, labeled as shrews or prostitutes, and even physically threatened. Because African-American female preachers challenged racial as well as sexual stereotypes, they faced even greater hostility than white women, and on one particularly frightening occasion, Zilpha Elaw preached in front of a group of angry white men who stood listening to her with their hands full of stones. If not for her confidence in God's protection, she never would have found the courage to keep preaching.



Female preachers found it difficult to cope with the hostility and aggression that they faced from their opponents, but they were far more troubled by the shifting tide of opinion within their own sects during the 1830s and 1840s. As the Freewill Baptists, Christian Connection, Methodists, and African Methodists grew larger and more powerful, they deliberately turned away from the radicalism that had marked their early histories. In the early nineteenth century, most of the members of these sects had been poor farmers, laborers, and artisans, but inspired by the Protestant work ethic, they worked hard, saved their money, and tried to build a better future for their children. The transformation happened gradually over the course of more than forty years, but by the 1830s and 1840s, these small, persecuted sects had grown into flourishing denominations. They built seminaries to educate young men for the ministry, discouraged visionary "enthusiasm," urged converts to behave with greater restraint at camp meetings, toned down their millennial language, and perhaps not surprisingly, abandoned their earlier support for female preaching. In their early years they had protested against the established churches, but by the 1840s they had *become* the establishment. By 1844, for example, the Methodists had become the largest single denomination in the United States, numbering more than one million members.

During the 1830s and 1840s female preachers faced growing restrictions on their speech. Many churches that had once been open to them were now closed, and male ministers urged them to find other ways to serve God. In a dramatic church trial in Cherry Valley, New York in 1830, the Methodist hierarchy excommunicated Sally Thompson when she refused to stop holding meetings. They did not even allow her to testify in her own defense.<sup>9</sup>

Female preachers were not only excluded from the pulpit, but from the pages of church record books and clerical memoirs. Embarrassed by their early support of female preaching, many evangelicals deliberately tried to erase these women from historical memory. For example, when David Marks published the first edition of his memoir in 1831, he mentioned meeting some of the most popular female preachers of his time, including Susan

Humes, Clarissa Danforth, Almira Bullock, Dolly Quinby, and “Sister” Wiard. Yet in 1846, when his wife, Marilla, published a posthumous edition of his memoirs, she removed all the references – no matter how small – to the women her husband had once defended. Because she wanted to protect her dead husband’s reputation, she presented a new, sanitized version of his career – one in which female preachers simply did not exist.<sup>10</sup> By the late nineteenth century, these women had been almost completely forgotten by their own denominations. If not for manuscript church records, early nineteenth-century religious periodicals, and their own memoirs, we would know almost nothing about their remarkable lives.

If female preachers had allied themselves with women’s rights activists, they might have been remembered by the liberal reformers who demanded women’s full political, economic, and legal equality to men. But sadly, the two groups of women saw little in each other to admire. On one hand, female preachers did not want to be associated with controversial women like Fanny Wright, a well-known platform speaker in the 1820s and 1830s who was christened the “Red Harlot of Infidelity” because of her advocacy of women’s rights, divorce, and birth control. On the other hand, women’s rights activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were equally reluctant to claim “sisterhood” with evangelical women. Although feminists often used religious rhetoric to defend female equality, they condemned the institutional church for standing in the way of women’s progress. Deeply frustrated by evangelicals’ biblical conservatism, they could not understand why female preachers did not devote their lives to the cause of women’s rights.

Despite their popularity in the early nineteenth century, female preachers were eventually forgotten because no one wanted to preserve their memory. As biblical feminists, they were caught between two worlds. Revolutionary in their defense of female preaching, yet traditional in their theology, they had been too radical to be accepted by evangelicals, but too conservative to be accepted by women’s rights activists. Scorned by the two communities that might have embraced them, they disappeared into the silence of the past.



As if she knew that she would be forgotten one day, Harriet Livermore described herself as a “stranger and a pilgrim,” an outsider in a culture that failed to recognize women as the religious equals of men. “These all died in faith,” the Apostle Paul wrote about Noah, Abraham, and Sarah, “not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13, KJV). Although Livermore never lost her faith that she and other evangelical women would someday “receive the

promises,” she also knew that the Christian life was filled with sacrifice and suffering. In 1868, at the age of eighty, she died alone and penniless in an almshouse in Pennsylvania, and in accordance with her wishes, she was buried in an unmarked grave.

Harriet Livermore and scores of other evangelical women in the early nineteenth century devoted their lives to creating a lasting tradition of female preaching, but tragically, they failed. Yet even though they were eventually forgotten by their denominations, their lives bear eloquent testimony to their faith in God. Despite ridicule, harassment, and their own fears of appearing radical or “unfeminine,” they devoted their lives to proclaiming God’s grace. Someday, they prayed, female preachers would no longer feel like “strangers and pilgrims” in the evangelical churches that had inspired them.

## NOTES

1 For more on Harriet Livermore and other female preachers, see Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

2 *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (1832), 378.

3 Rebecca Miller, “Duty of Females,” *Christian Palladium* 10, no. 2 (May 15, 1841), 21-22, and Rebecca Miller, “Female Improvement,” *Christian Palladium* 10, no. 3 (June 1, 1841), 35-36.

4 *Christian Palladium* 10, no. 9 (September 1, 1841), 144.

5 Almond H. Davis, *The Female Preacher, or Memoir of Salome Lincoln* (Providence, 1843; reprinted New York: Arno Press, 1972), 65.

6 Nancy Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated, in the Experience of Nancy Towle, in Europe and America*, second edition (Portsmouth, NH: John Caldwell, 1833), 186, 225.

7 Zilpha Elaw, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw* (1846), reprinted in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, edited by William L. Andrews (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 61-62.

8 Deborah Peirce, *A Scriptural Vindication of Female Preaching* (Carmel, NY: E. Burroughs, 1820), 13.

9 Sally Thompson, *Trial and Defence of Mrs. Sally Thompson, On a Complaint of Insubordination to the Rules of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Evil Speaking and Immorality* (West Troy, NY: W. Hollands, 1857).

10 Compare David Marks, *The Life of David Marks* (Limerick, ME: Morning Star Office, 1831), 291, to Marilla Marks, *Memoirs of the Life of David Marks, Minister of the Gospel* (Dover, NH: William Burr, 1846), 202.



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