



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Female Preaching in Early Nineteenth-Century America
(*Women and the Church*, pp. 20-29)

Suggested Articles

📖 Women in Ministry: Beyond the Impasse
(*Women and the Church*, pp. 77-87)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2009 The Center for Christian Ethics

Female Preaching in Early Nineteenth-Century America

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

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 2:1-21

Meditation†

God has been moving against the bias of gender for all of time, and carefully reading Acts 2:17 in its original context of the book of the prophet Joel is indeed a monumental example of this breaking through....

The greatest news of all human history is the coming of Jesus Christ. What Peter and Joel are saying is awesomely close to this fact, if not equally important to it. It is that the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is coming also. This coming has not received anywhere near its rightful emphasis. We have a church season called *Pentecost*, but even in the liturgical churches, the true significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit “on all flesh” is far from adequately presented.

Ella Pearson Mitchell (1917-2008)

Reflection

While “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,” Catherine Brekus writes. “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.”

She briefly traces the story of evangelicals – especially Freewill Baptists, Christian Connection, northern Methodists, African Methodists, and Millerites – who allowed women to preach.

- ▶ *Practical motivations.* As their revivals spread and new congregations quickly formed, the evangelicals did not have enough male ministers. And, frankly, it was difficult to control what happened during the emotional camp meetings.
- ▶ *Theological reasons.* Fearing the colonies’ established churches had “quenched the spirit” by requiring college education for ministers, evangelicals said “God could communicate directly with people through dreams, visions, and voices,” Brekus notes. They appealed to Joel’s promise (quoted by Peter at Pentecost) to invest “female preaching with transcendent significance. Whenever a woman stood in the pulpit, she was a visible reminder that Christ might soon return to earth.”
- ▶ *Distinctive feminism.* Just by speaking in public, these women seemed dangerously radical. Yet influenced by the wider culture, they did not think the Bible sanctioned their equality with men in Church, home, or political life. Rather than seeking ordination



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2009 The Center for Christian Ethics

and settled pastorates, they remained itinerate evangelists. So, these biblical feminists were caught between two worlds—too radical to be accepted by evangelicals, but too conservative to be accepted by women’s rights activists.

- ▶ *Later restrictions.* As the small evangelical sects grew to flourishing denominations by the 1830s and 1840s, writes Brekus, “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.”

“Despite ridicule, harassment, and their own fears of appearing radical or ‘unfeminine,’ they devoted their lives to proclaiming God’s grace,” Brekus concludes. “Someday, they prayed, female preachers would no longer feel like ‘strangers and pilgrims’ in the evangelical churches that had inspired them.”

Study Questions

1. “In their early years [evangelicals] had protested against the established churches,” Catherine Brekus observes, “but by the 1840s they had *become* the establishment.” Discuss how this influenced their perspective on women preachers.
2. What lessons should we learn from the lives of these early nineteenth-century female preachers in America?
3. In “Women in Ministry,” Gretchen Ziegenhals urges evangelicals to embrace “a thoughtful Christian feminism.” What makes it distinctive from other forms of feminism today?

Departing Hymn: “The Women’s Hymn” (vv. 1, 3, and 4)

Come, women, wide proclaim
life through your Savior slain;
sing evermore.
Christ, God’s effulgence bright,
Christ, who arose in might,
Christ, who crowns you with light,
praise and adore.

Work with your courage high,
sing of the daybreak nigh,
your love outpour.
Stars shall your brow adorn,
your heart leap with the morn,
and, by his love upborne,
hope and adore.

Then when the garnered field
shall to our Master yield
a bounteous store,
Christ, hope of all the meek,
Christ, whom all the earth shall seek,
Christ your reward shall speak,
joy evermore.

Fannie E. S. Heck (1913)

Tune: ITALIAN HYMN

† Ella Pearson Mitchell, “All Flesh,” *The African American Pulpit* (Spring 1998).

Female Preaching in Early Nineteenth Century America

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

- 1, To sketch the story of evangelical women preachers during the Second Great Awakening.
- 2, To consider how the wider culture has influenced how Christians interpret Scripture in regard to the role of women in ministry.
3. To outline a thoughtful Christian feminism that is consistent with biblical authority for the life of discipleship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Women and the Church (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "The Women's Hymn" locate the familiar tune ITALIAN HYMN in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

"Some argued that Harriet Livermore was 'bold and shameless,' a disgrace to her family and to the evangelical movement," Catherine Brekus notes. "Others insisted that she was the 'instrument of God,' a humble woman who had given up everything for Christ.

"...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....

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.... 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." (*Women and the Church*, 20 and 28-29).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for discernment regarding the role of Christian women in ministry today.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 2:1-21 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This discussion recalls the ministry of women preachers during what scholars call “the Second Great Awakening,” a period of Christian revivals that spread from New England through the Midwest and South between 1790 and the 1840s. In this era after the American Revolution, evangelical religious groups flourished as state legislatures disestablished the colonial churches and people migrated from the original colonies into the western territories. Enhance this study with stories about these amazing women in Catherine Brekus’ article, “Female Preaching in the Early Nineteenth-Century,” or her book, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

As Gretchen Ziegenhals explains in “Women in Ministry: Beyond the Impasse,” many evangelicals continue to debate whether certain leadership roles are off-limits to women. Encourage members to relate the story of these early women preachers to the contemporary debate between “complementarians” (who believe that men and women have different, complementary, God-ordained roles in the Church and home) and “egalitarians” (who believe men and women have been equally gifted for leadership roles).

Study Questions

1. Catherine Brekus notes that as evangelical churches became part of “the establishment” (not in the technical sense of being supported by government funds, but in the *de facto* manner of being the gathering place of social “insiders,” having more institutional prestige, and exercising greater public influence), they began to adopt the gender relationships in the educational, political, and economic systems of the society. That is, the churches took on the ethos of the wider American society, and were less separate and distinctive communities. Gradually, the evangelicals’ educational systems, church organizations, and worship styles became more like those of churches that had been established and wealthy in the colonial era.
2. Discuss why evangelical churches encouraged women preachers during the revival era, but shut them out later. This history was repeated in the twentieth century. Early in the century, holiness churches (descended from Methodism) and other evangelicals encouraged women preachers. Yet, Gretchen Ziegenhals notes, “while evangelical churches historically were committed to women in ministry at a time when more theologically liberal churches were not, in the last sixty years that trend has been reversed. ...[Among] the reasons for this reversal [are] the cultural tendency in the 1950s to restrict women to the private sphere, the evangelical reaction to First Wave Feminism, and a shift in how biblical evidence is weighed.”
3. Gretchen Ziegenhals writes that Christian feminists (in the words of Lynn Japinga) are committed “to the humanity, dignity, and equality of all persons. They seek equal rights for women, but their ultimate goal is a social order in which women and men of all races and classes can live together in justice and harmony.” Christian feminists depart from other forms of feminism in two ways: (1) they ground their commitment in “the theological assertion that all people are created in God’s image and therefore are valuable, gifted, free, and responsible,” and (2) their motivation is not to gain personal power, but to help the Church be true to the spirit of egalitarianism that Christ embodies.

Christian feminists do not reject scriptural authority, but read the Bible in light of women’s experience. “We can look to texts about women in the Bible to understand the lives of women today, and we can look at our lives today to fill in the gaps about the experiences of biblical women,” Ziegenhals notes. “I understand more about the bent-over woman in Luke 13:10-17 and the nature of what might have oppressed her, when I consider the experiences of my grandmother, a hardworking immigrant who was bent over from years of hard work, which included hunching over a sewing machine to earn a living for her family.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.