

Women of the Restoration Movement

Auditorium Bible Class; Sunday February 14, 2010

Even before the union of Stone and Campbell, widely differing practices existed regarding the roles of women in the church. The recognition of women ministers and evangelists may seem to us like a recent phenomenon, but our early leaders discussed the subject endlessly, passionately debating hard-to-interpret biblical passages. Though we rarely hear their stories, women in the earliest years of the tradition preached, exhorted, taught, and testified, especially among those Churches of Christ associated with Barton Stone.

Nancy Towle, a young New Hampshire schoolteacher, was such a woman of faith. Without support from either family or friends, in 1821 she set out as an itinerant evangelist, traveling over 10,000 miles in fourteen years of preaching. “I have ever believed that in Christ Jesus they are one, both male and female,” she explained, “and that according to both the Old and New Testaments, holy women, as well as holy men of God, were wont to speak as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” Toward the end of her ministry, Towle reflected on the “growing evils” in the world, one of which she saw as the “excluding of female gifts from the Church of God, which I view as an occasion of great provocation and immense loss to the Church of the Lord Jesus throughout.”

Nancy Cram, originally a missionary among the Oneida Indians, became a successful and well-known “female preacher” of her day. At least seven of her male converts went on to become respected preachers in the Stone Movement. **Abigail Roberts**, a convert of Nancy Cram, began her own preaching ministry in 1816. She preached in out-of-the-way places, often every day for weeks at a time, sometimes against bitter opposition. Once a woman became so angry with her that the woman urged her husband to seize the “female preacher” and gag her, so that she might be tarred and feathered.

Nancy Mulkey, the daughter of Kentucky preacher, John Mulkey, joined the Stone Movement shortly after the turn of the 19th century. Nancy served as an exhorter in her father’s congregation but soon became well known for her own powerful sermons. Isaac Jones described how, “she would arise with zeal in her countenance and fire in her eyes, and with a pathos that showed the depth of her soul and would pour forth an exhortation which neither father nor brother could equal.” In 1810 Joseph Thomas also witnessed her powerful preaching and declared it to be “surely by the power of the Holy Ghost.”

Mary Graft, **Mary Morrison**, and **Mary Ogle**, known lovingly as “The Three Marys,” also hold a respected place in Stone-Campbell history. Soon after the three women were baptized, they resolved “to make the Word of God their only rule of life and faith.” They began meeting together regularly for prayer, singing, and the study of Scripture. Following a visit from **Thomas Campbell** in 1828, they adopted the name “Disciples of Christ” and set out to evangelize their community of Somerset, Pennsylvania. Devoting themselves to preaching the gospel and baptizing converts, they established the Somerset Christian Church which grew to over 500 members by 1840.

Alexander Campbell, himself, opposed female preaching, but reluctantly agreed that women did have a role in “*the ancient order*” of the church. In 1835 he wrote, “From Romans 16:1 and I Timothy 3:11, it appears that females constituted deaconesses in the primitive church.” It followed, then that they should have a place in the *restored* church. Campbell’s editorial associate, W.K. Pendleton, wrote in 1848 that it was “generally regarded, among our brethren, as an essential element in the restoration of primitive order, to ordain, in every church, both deacons and deaconesses.” Deaconesses were also included in John R. Howard’s list of “original marks” of the true Church of Christ. In addition to serving as deaconesses, women also participated in the worship service of some of the early Campbell churches. Alexander Campbell’s own “Model for Worship,” directs the *presider* to call on either a “brother” or a “sister” at the appropriate time to lead congregational prayer or give the scripture reading.