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# Brief Glimpses of Women in Ministry within Early Holiness Organizations and the Church of the Nazarene

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**Brief Glimpses of Women in Ministry within early holiness organizations and the Church of the Nazarene.**

**Robert Doyle Smith, Olivet Nazarene University.**

**[This is a revised paper edited to fit the format for Scholar Week presentations April 2013 at Olivet Nazarene University. The earlier longer draft had been presented in the Women's In Ministry Conference held at Glasgow University in May 2012. As a document delivered in a speaking context it does not include the normal documentation.**

**Reading the journals of the three primary groups that merged to form the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene (PCN) in 1907 and 1908 reveals the context that made possible the ordination of Olive Winchester and her early ministry within the PCN. This paper provides glimpses of women ministers through the journals of these early groups and later in the pages of the Herald of Holiness of the PCN.**

**One focus will be to examine how these three early groups argued for the inclusion of women in ordained ministry. Next, we will explore writings of Nazarene women ministers and laywomen and examine their specific contributions. While the pages of these journals tell the story of women finding opportunities within the Nazarene church we can also glimpse women being kept out of certain levels of leadership. The paper concludes by making application to the ministry of women today in the Church of the Nazarene.]**

**During the last decade I have focused my research on looking at the holiness movement through church magazines: the Beulah Christian published by the Association of Pentecostal Churches with congregations stretching from Washington D.C. up to New England, the Pentecostal Advocate produced by the Holiness Association of Texas, an interdenominational holiness organization, the Holiness Evangel, an official paper of the Holiness Church of Christ with local churches primarily in Texas and Arkansas, and the Nazarene Messenger the paper of the Church of the Nazarene with congregations originating in Southern California and later Chicago. These papers affirmed women ministers to readers in their day and provide glimpses of these women for us today. How they covered the issue of women ministers often reflected the approach each organization took in handling the issue.**

*The Beulah Christian, the holiness paper published in the East*

March 1892 marked a significant moment for holiness readers of the *Beulah Christian* as the magazine told the story of the ordination of Anna Hanscome. Capturing the emotion of those attending, the *Beulah Christian* shared that the congregation wept upon hearing her answers to questions concerning her Christian experience, views of Christian doctrine, and call to the ministry. The writer justified the ordination of a woman by pointing to her call: “the church ... had simply recognized and honored the call that was resting upon their chosen leader. It was evident that it was God, and what was man that he should withstand him.” Next, the writer described how a celebration broke out. “The benediction failed to close this service or at least failed to disperse the people, they remained while seemingly the whole audience filed up to shake hands with the candidate. The Holy Ghost fell in power, and this informal part of the service continued for some time while the people wept, and shouted, and praised the Lord with hymns of joy.” The *Beulah Christian* brought this special moment to its readers with its own interpretation that God had shown his approval of women ministers.

*The Pentecostal Advocate and Holiness Evangel Report Holiness to the South*

Southern women produced extensive works defending their Biblical right to minister. We find the *Pentecostal Advocate* advertizing two of them and publishing a third. In a 1903 sermon, “Woman’s Right to Preach,” Annie May Fisher explained her intent as not to take woman out of her sphere but “to prove ... from the bible that she has a part in the great work of God.” She offered a rebuttal to opponents who used I Timothy 2 and I Corinthians 14 against women. She claimed the former referred to man’s authority in the home, not the church. The latter addressed a problem peculiar to Corinth.

A year later Fannie McDowell Hunter wrote: **“Women Preachers: Who gave thee this authority?”** Her explanation for the subtitle suggested the reason for the formal defense: **“This is the question propounded by many when a woman enters the pulpit, takes a text and preaches a sermon.”** Similar to Fisher, her argument consisted of a study of the Bible, modern history, and answers to supposed biblical objections. Perhaps more importantly, she allowed nine women to plead their own case by testifying about their spiritual pilgrimage and divine call. For most of them, God revealed their call in a religious experience, especially entire sanctification. Five initially thought God had called them to foreign missions because, as Mrs. Sheeks explained, she could not **“think that a woman would be allowed to preach the Gospel here in Christian America.”** Mrs. Johnny Jernigan expressed her frustration with the double standard: **“I wondered why ... the Church would have a grand missionary rally on the return of a woman missionary from China and allow her freedom in the Churches to tell of her foreign work, but would refuse the pulpit to a woman of America to preach the Gospel.”**

In 1910, the Pentecostal Advocate published Mary Emily Ellyson’s five part series, **“Women’s Sphere in Gospel Service.”** Her arguments reflected the earlier works of Fisher and Hunter as well as the nineteenth century holiness minister, Phoebe Palmer. She explained that submission did not mean women should be barred from authority roles in the church because intellectually and morally men and women were the same. Only in brute strength could man be viewed as the superior. As equals women should possess the same privilege and opportunity as men to follow the call of God. She questioned why the church allowed this waste of talent when the world welcomed her. The many examples

where women succeeded in leadership lead her to suggest “prejudice” as the only reason women were barred from ministry

Why did the south produce more formal defenses? Could the answer lie in the numbers? The 1908 General Assembly Journal showed the South to have more ordained women than the other two areas of the church combined. Did the presence of more women preachers lead to stronger statements of support and more opportunities for service? Our answer begins in the December 12, 1899 minutes of the Churches of Christ with the note “The first question brought before the church was, ‘Is woman eligible to ordination.’” The discussion went on for some time but had to be tabled until the next day where we find this verdict: “it is the sense of the Church of Christ at this place; that she has the right to stand side by side with man in soul-saving work entitled to all the rights and privileges of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. For there is neither male nor female, but ye are all one in Christ Jesus....Hence she is eligible to ordination.” On the same day Sisters Harris (*later Cagle*) and Sheeks sought and received approval for ordination. The record of their ordination service the next morning noted they had been called by the Holy Ghost and reported “it was very evident to all that God put his seal upon this service.”

The Southern church formalized their practice of women ministers by adopting Manual statements. The 1900 New Testament Church of Christ Manual declared: “We believe that women have the same right to preach that men have.” Did these Manual statements result because women like Cagle and Hunter participated in the decision making process? Prior to joining with the Nazarenes, the HCC discussed the differences they had with the Nazarene Manual. The Pentecostal Advocate revealed they sent instructions with their delegates to present eight changes for consideration by the 1908

Assembly in Pilot Point, Texas. Change seven proposed: “We must have an article in the Manual declaring that we believe in licensing and ordaining women to preach the gospel and perform such duties as apply to said office.” The minutes confirmed that the Assembly assigned these proposals to the Manual revision committee. However, change seven did not make it into the Manual while most of the others did. Neither the Pentecostal Advocate nor The Holiness Evangel provided any clues as to why. Writing in 1930, James Chapman offered one explanation. “Sister Mary Lee Cagle ... had waged a long, hard fight in defense of “women’s right to preach” in her ministry, and she wanted a statement in the Manual asserting that we believe that God calls women to preach. But ... [General Superintendent] Bresee said, “The Church of the Nazarene is apostolic. It believes that matters like circumcision and sex are all brought to unity of right and privilege in the gospel. He went on to say that if we put a statement in the Manual saying we believe God calls women to preach we must also put in one saying we believe He calls men to preach, for unless we do both, the mention of the one weakens, rather than strengthens our position.” Why did Chapman’s memory attribute the proposed change to a personal request of Mary Lee Cagle? Did his remarks reveal the issue had only been presented because of the insistence of the women ministers? If so, does this speak to the importance of women participating where organizational decisions are made?

*The West Proclaims Holiness through the Nazarene Messenger*

What about Bresee’s position? In November 1895, he along with other leaders of the new Church of the Nazarene had drafted a general rule that read: “We recognize the equal right of both men and women to all offices of the Church, including the ministry.” While the first Manual in 1898 included the same statement, the second drafted in 1903 did

**not. What made Bresee change his mind? Did he believe legal safeguards were not necessary if one treated women the same as men? Did he believe Christian leaders would act properly, thus making mandated statements unnecessary? Certainly, the failure of the 1908 Assembly to appoint even one woman as a district superintendent suggests limitations in Bresee's practical application of gender equality. Furthermore, his failure to act showed his theological rationale did not always lead good religious people to treat men and women equally even in a holiness church.**

**In Bresee's defense he strongly supported the ordination of women as illustrated by Lucy Knott. She joined the Nazarenes as a charter member in 1895. By 1899 one often read Sunday school lessons and articles by or about Deaconess Knott. Four years later, Bresee ordained her. In contrast to the news story of Anna Hanscome's ordination by the Beulah Christian, the Nazarene Messenger recorded the moment with only a hint of its significance: "Sunday night at Mateo Street a memorable service was enjoyed....The pastor, Mrs. Lucy P. Knot, was then set apart by the ordination service to the office of an elder to which she had been elected. ... [I]n the solemn service there was evidently the presence of Him who alone sets apart and empowers His servants to minister to His glory." Still, this reference told more than the one line, 13 word sentence that informed Messenger readers' of Sister Wallace's ordination six months earlier; the first woman ordained by Bresee.**

**The Nazarene Messenger ran regular stories about Knott's church showing a woman carrying out the normal tasks of a pastor bringing people into the kingdom, preaching the gospel, serving communion and managing the relocation of the church from**

Mateo Street to Compton Avenue. In two special issues nearly full page articles on her church appeared along with pictures of Pastor Knott.

Yet, to see the full story one has to look ahead to how history plays out. By 1925, 114 women served as pastors in 1386 Nazarene churches. There were 209 women out of a total of 1150 ordained ministers. Yet, not one woman served as general superintendent, district superintendent or as a member of the Commission of Manual Revision, the Book Committee or on any department or major board except the Orphanage Board, the NYPS committee, and of course the Women's General Missionary council. Similar numbers exist today at least in terms of the number of women serving as general superintendents and district superintendents.

I believe the holiness groups from each of the three regions shared a common belief that women should be ordained to serve as senior pastors, but they differed on how to make it happen. Readers of each magazine encountered stories of women being ordained and serving in a wide variety of ministries. In effect, they saw women doing ministry and being accepted as pastors. The Beulah Christian, Pentecostal Advocate and Holiness Evangel went a step further than the Nazarene Messenger. They printed stories that informed their public about such concepts as "apostolic call." While Bresee acted upon this principle, he did not discuss it in the Nazarene Messenger. So, while each organization treated women like men when they recognized women experienced a divine call, the east and south felt a stronger need to educate their readers as to the theological justification for their actions. In the south, the Pentecostal Advocate and Holiness Evangel promoted and printed extensive defenses by women. Moreover, the Southern branch enacted legal statements in their Manuals and placed women in positions where they could participate in

decision making. Two pictures from the Chicago Assembly of 1907 convey the difference. The picture of the joint legislative commission comprised of delegates from the east and west showed only men, while the picture of the seven representatives from the south included one woman sitting in the front, Mrs. E. J. Sheeks.

We also learned that HCC delegates to the 1908 Assembly carried instructions advocating a Manual statement mandating a woman's right to minister. The future might have been different if the proposal had not been blocked by Bresee. However, having a Manual statement may not have been enough to insure progress in gender equality unless the same conditions existed that produced the original statements. Women served on the southern committees that approved them. History shows that belief in apostolic call alone did not translate into women becoming administrators. Eventually the concept would not even prevent the reduction of the number of women pastors so that by 2001 only 3% of Nazarene churches had women pastors.

Certainly, the concept of an apostolic call provided the theological justification for a church culture wanting to accept women pastors in the United States. One question in our enlightened age of increased rights for women is whether the church continues to view the call of God as the prime determiner of who should serve as ministers in the local church and in administrative roles. Another is how best to go forward to insure gender equality. Would we be better served to combine Bresee's theological concept of apostolic call with the southern churches recognition that women should be placed in administrative positions where decisions are being made on their futures? Or, does the world still value the leadership of women more than the church?