The First Female Public Speakers in America (1630-1840): Searching for Egalitarian Christian Primitivism

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Overlooked female exhorters and preachers established a two-hundred-year-old tradition of female oratory before the nineteenth-century secular reformers emerged. Through primitivist beliefs, this tradition of female public speaking was established in four ways. One, female preachers claimed to be prophets who received authority to speak directly from God. The prophetic persona undercut the traditional authority of male preachers that was based on ecclesiastical power. Second, they defended their right to speak using biblical precedents of women leaders and speakers. Third, they attacked the oppressive practices of patriarchy and racism. Fourth, they established a vernacular preaching that emphasized orality in contrast to literate preaching rooted in classical rhetoric. Keywords: female speakers, preaching, primitivism, Mircea Eliade, orality, prophetic role.

In January 1827, more than a year before Frances Wright became “the first orator among women to appear before the American public,” Harriet Livermore, who had been preaching for several
years, preached to Congress (Yoakim 157; Cmiel 70; O'Connor 4; Brekus, "Harriet" 389). Twenty-one years before Livermore's address, Dorothy Ripley, with Thomas Jefferson's approval, spoke to Congress (Brekus, Female 18, 350). In 1808, thirteen years before Maria Stewart became "the first black woman to speak in public," a black woman named Elizabeth, whose last name is unknown, began her preaching career in Maryland, finally retiring in 1853 (Anderson, xii; Humez, "Documents" 317).1 Forty-three years before Deborah Sampson Gannett lectured in Massachusetts in 1802, Sarah Townsend preached regularly for the New Light Baptist church at Oyster Bay, Long Island, New York from 1759 to 1773.2 During the 125 years preceding Ms. Mason's defense of a woman's right to speak in her 1787 speech at the commencement of the Philadelphia Female Academy, various female Quaker preachers or Public Friends preached to mixed audiences throughout the American colonies championing the right of women to speak in public (Campbell, "Gender" 479-95; Campbell, "Introduction" xi).3 The standard scholarship in the communication field that identifies the first females to speak publicly in America is therefore generally erroneous.

When the first important American female secular speakers emerged, they were stepping into an almost two-hundred-year-old tradition of female oratory. This tradition was established in four specific ways. First, female preachers created their authority to speak by taking the role of a prophet who received authority to speak from God, not man. Second, female preachers defended their right to speak from the Bible using biblical precedents of women leaders and speakers. Third, they attacked the oppressive practices of patriarchy and racism. Fourth, these female preachers (using the prophetic role) helped establish a vernacular preaching emphasizing orality in contrast to literate preaching rooted in classical rhetoric. "Oral preaching" best describes this tradition which saw preaching as being "inspired," with thoughts and ideas being provided as one spoke, rather than prepared ahead of time by study and the rhetorical process (Schneider; Miller).4 The female preachers opposed classical rhetoric as part of the male elite domain. Men were allowed access to classical rhetoric
through the traditional educational system for preachers in colleges and seminaries where women were banned. Women were not able to receive the training necessary for literate written sermons. The orality of the new rhetoric allowed women to bypass the male-dominated educational system needed by traditional public speakers.

This essay uses Mircea Eliade’s theory of primordial time to show four ways the female preachers established the radical and egalitarian tradition of female speaking. These pioneering female public speakers sought to reestablish the perceived egalitarianism of the primitive Christian Church based on an interpretation of the New Testament. Directly challenging the authority of the established churches and their male leadership, female speakers believed that church history reflected a pattern of “man-made” corruption that had enslaved and limited women. These women believed that history had all but erased the memory of a primitive golden age in which there were no gender, racial, or class distinctions among Christian believers. Contemporary Christianity had misinterpreted Pauline passages I Corinthians 14:34-5 and I Timothy 2:11-14 to perpetuate false male-dominated Christianity. The female rallying cry was from Paul’s letter to the Galatians, “For there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female; but we are all one in Christ Jesus” which took precedence over other Pauline passages. A paradigmatic story was Acts 2, in which the establishment of the primitive church is told. In the story the Holy Spirit filled the Apostles and 120 other persons present. These men and women began to speak in tongues. The author of Acts quoted the Old Testament prophet Joel, “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and daughters shall prophesy.” The American female preachers believed the Holy Spirit would move again among men and women, calling persons to preach regardless of their gender, thereby repeating the actions and female prophetic role found in the New Testament. They wanted to overthrow male corruption of Christianity and restore the perfect, divine, and egalitarian standards set by God.
Primitivist Rhetoric: Restoring the Prophetic Role for Women

Mircea Eliade argues that primitive societies recreated or reenacted the sacred Great Time through rituals or ceremonies. Any human act may become transformed by recreating the pure and perfect Great Time; that is, by “reproducing a primordial act, of repeating a mythic example” (4). These acts, words or symbols acquire meaning or transcendent reality solely to the extent which they repeat “a primordial act” (5).

Eliade explains further that human behaviors and symbols that fall outside of the primordial are profane acts “which have no mythical meaning, that is [they] lack exemplary models” (28). All profane time is “chaos” or totally meaningless. The return to the primordial is a means of escaping or transforming “chaos” into sacred space or time. Profane time is suspended or abolished by sacred time when it emerges, therefore the primitive person is “real” only when primordial time is repeated or reenacted (35). For traditional societies “all the important acts of life were revealed ab origine by gods or heroes. Men [sic] only repeat these exemplary and paradigmatic gestures ad infinitum” (32).

The enthusiasts, Quakers, and revivalists all believed they were turning back to the pure primordial time found in the Bible, especially the New Testament and restoring it in the present time. By reenacting, restoring or repeating the roles, precedents, and practices of the lost golden age of the Bible, they were reproducing the perfect Christianity that God intended to be practiced throughout history. According to this school of thought, primitive Christianity (Christianity practiced by Christians during New Testament times) was superior to Christianity of any other time period. Primitive Christianity, the only Christianity that had real meaning, had been lost for most of church history and therefore was simply “chaos” or profane time. Believers could transcend the “chaos” of profane Christianity and restore primitive Christianity by going back to the roles, examples, and practices found in the Bible. The acts and
beliefs of the Bible restored in the present recreated sacred time and drove away the “chaos” or corruptions of profane Christianity. To use Eliadean, terms the women preachers believed they were recreating a mythic world of egalitarian Christianity and driving out the profane corrupt Christianity that did not allow a place for women to speak in public.

While a variety of primitivist appeals existed in colonial America, women preachers were a particular type. Their primitivism was a pentecostal primitivism: they believed they were restoring and repeating the gifts of the Holy Spirit found in the apostolic church. They believed God spoke directly to them, authorizing their preaching as they claimed He did with New Testament preachers and prophets.

Anne Hutchinson, the First Female Public Speaker in America

The first female to speak in public in America was probably Anne Hutchinson, who deliberately used the prophetic persona in her defense at her heresy trial—her only published speech (Ditmore). Starting in 1636, Hutchinson held bi-weekly meetings in her Massachusetts Bay Colony home during which she commented on the previous Sunday’s sermon. At first, only women attended her meetings, but gradually men began to frequent. Accused of preaching to promiscuous audiences, Hutchinson justified her right to speak by appealing to the example of a woman who preached in Britain (Hall 380). After being banished to Rhode Island in 1638, Hutchinson and other women—who followed her example—began to preach openly to mixed audiences at church services. One hostile male observer reported, “there were some of the female sexe who (deeming the Apostle Paul to be too strict in not permitting a roome [woman] to preach in the publique Congregation) taught notwithstanding ... having their call to this office from an ardent desire of being famous.” Hutchinson, “the grand Mistresse of them all ... ordinarily prated every Sabbath day, till others, who thirsted after honour in the same way with her selfe, drew away her Auditors” (Jameson, 186). For the rest of the century, women preached to
mixed audiences in public in Rhode Island and the number of women preachers multiplied (Koehler, “Case” 75; Koehler, Search 324-8).

Hutchinson emerged from the Puritan tradition and agreed with many of its fundamental premises. Puritans wanted to purify the Anglican Church of all human corruption and go back to the purity found in the New Testament church (Spaulding 54). The Puritans thought that the simplicity of worship, dress, and church order found in the New Testament was superior to the corruption and complexities of Catholic and Anglican worship. The primordial world of the Bible was perfect and provided the pattern or example for them to follow. This sacred pattern was closed and immutable and the focus of Puritan epistemology was to clarify and discern that pattern in scripture (Bozeman 16-7).

Hutchinson tried to defend her practices subversively on primitivist grounds at her trial. She argued that her meetings with women to discuss Sunday sermons were authorized by the rule or command in Titus 2: 3-5 “that the elder women should instruct the younger” so she “must have a time wherein” she “must do it.” She also asserted that the rule was “meant for some publick times.” If her accusers would show her “that it is no rule” she would “yield” or they could change her action “If you have a rule for it from God’s word....”(Hall 315-6). She clearly distrusted the human interpretations of her male accusers and preferred the primitive purity of God’s word: “I desire to hear God speak this and not man. Shew me where thear is any Scripture to prove that it speaks soe” (Hall 355). However, Hutchinson’s primitivism differed from the Puritans, as she turned away from the idea of a closed canon to direct revelation from God. Hutchinson, taking on the persona of a prophet, believed that God revealed to her the true meaning of scripture:

The Lord knows that I could not open scripture; he must by his prophetical office open it unto me ... the Lord was pleased to bring this scripture out of the Hebrews [9:16]. He that denies the testament denies the testator, and in this did open unto me and give
me to see that those which did not teach the new covenant had the spirit of the antichrist.... Since that time I confess I have been more choice and he hath let me to distinguish between the voice of my beloved and the voice of Moses, the voice of John the Baptist and the voice of the antichrist, for all these voices are spoken of in scripture. Now if you condemn me for speaking what my conscience I know to be the truth I must commit myself unto the Lord (Hall 336-7).

When the Puritan authorities asked Hutchinson how she knew it was God’s spirit that spoke to her, she replied following the prophetic role: “So to me by an immediate revelation.” They pressed her on how she knew it was a revelation and she said, “By the voice of his own spirit to my soul.” And she added, appealing to the prophet Jeremiah, “I will give you another scripture, Jer. 46.27, 28—out of which the Lord shewed me what he would do for me and the rest of my servants” (Hall 337). If God continued to reveal sacred knowledge through prophets, the divine pattern might not be closed within scripture, a view that potentially undermined the Puritan system. Her Puritan accusers recognized that her prophetic persona threatened their clerical authority. Puritan minister Hugh Peters snarled, “you have stepped out of your place, you have rather bine a Husband than a wife and a preacher rather than a Hearer; and a Magistrate than a Subject” (Hall 383). Governor John Winthrop accused Hutchinson of “the utter subversion both of Churches and civill state” (Hall 382).

Unfortunately, none of Hutchinson’s sermon texts from Rhode Island survive, and the surviving text of her testimony at her heresy trial has been corrupted. Whether Hutchinson continued to develop and use a prophetic persona is simply unknown. However, women in various primitivist groups soon followed Hutchinson in prophesying and preaching, widening vernacular orality in public speaking as the primitivist impulse “in the Puritan and Nonconformist tradition was not only shared but extended and amplified by
Baptists and Quakers" (Underwood 7). Sarah Keayne was excommunicated from the Boston church in 1646 for "irregular prophesying in mixed assemblies" (Koehler, "Case" 70). Mary Dyer, one of Hutchinson's followers, left New England, converted to Quakerism, and returned twenty-two years later to preach as a Quaker until the Boston authorities hanged her in 1661 (Lovejoy 127-9). Quakers clearly used the precedent of lay preaching and Puritan prophesying to develop female preachers (Nuttall 88-9). From 1656 to 1663, of the 59 Quaker preachers or Public Friends who had traveled to America, 26 were females (Tolles 35-38). Soon Quaker women living in the colonies began to develop as preachers. The colonies gradually became more tolerant of female preachers. In 1704 females won the legal right to preach in Massachusetts, stopping the punishments but hardly the prejudice (Jenson 147). In the eighteenth century, indigenous American Quaker women preachers went back to England or toured the colonies (Jenson 150-1).

Quaker female preachers or Public Friends took on the prophetic role when they spoke expressing the divine inward light i.e., when God's Spirit moved them to speak. Quakers believed "that they were the New Testament church" (Underwood 4). While they believed that the Bible supported their positions completely, Quakers argued that since the early Christians had direct authority from Christ before the Bible was written, they now had direct revelation from Christ. William Penn summarized the Quaker primitivism nicely via the pamphlet title: *Primitive Christianity Revived, in the Faith and Practice of the People Called Quakers*. Penn thought the Quakers alone "declare this Primitive Message ... That God is Light" (qtd. in Underwood 6).

In 1666 Margaret Fell wrote the first Quaker book defending the right for women to speak: *Women's Speaking, Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures*. She converted to the Friends after hearing George Fox "preach his message of the Seed of Christ within and the need to return to a primitive Christianity in which Christ himself taught the people" (M. Bacon 15). Citing the quotation of Joel in Acts 2, Fell argued that women had prophetic roles in both
the Old and New Testaments and were the first to proclaim the resurrection (Fell). Her argument was cast in primitivist terms appealing to biblical models of women. She also said that the opposition to women speaking had “risen out of the bottomless Pit, and Spirit of Darkness that hath spoken for these many hundreds of years together in this night of Apostacy, since the Revelations have ceased and been hid....” (10). Now, “the night of apostacy” drew to an end “and the true light now shines” (11). The Quaker women preachers were a sign that the Quakers restored the true Christianity of the New Testament. As T. L. Underwood states, “Further exhibiting their close identification with the New Testament church was the Quaker appeal to the fulfillment in the primitive church (Acts 2:17-18) of Joel’s prophecy (Joel 2:28) that the Spirit would be poured out on all flesh and that daughters as well as sons would prophecy” (92).

The prophetic role continued to be used by female preachers in the early nineteenth century. Nancy Towle claimed that the Bible said “women, as well as ‘holy men of God, ’ were wont to speak, as they were moved by the HOLY GHOST, which amounts to none other, more or less, than the preaching of the gospel” (26-7). When critics argued that prophecy was limited to “the foretelling of future events” Towle replied there were Old Testament prophetesses who preached and New Testament passages (Revelation 19:10 I Cor. 14:3) that indicated prophecy included “any mode of public instruction ... in the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (27).

Some of the nineteenth-century religious traditions encouraged the development of the prophetic persona and pressed women into speaking even when they were reluctant to speak. For example, Ellen Stewart, who had exhibited eloquence and piety in the Methodist class meetings, was encouraged by her local circuit rider, “Does not the Holy Spirit press you to speak in public?” (14). At first she tried to evade the issue; then in a short while, when another preacher came, she “began to feel after the old fashion, a conviction of duty to speak after him.” He then gave an invitation for an exhortation: “There is liberty, if any brother or sister have a word to say.” She concluded, “Of its being my duty to speak as the Holy Spirit led me
I could no longer doubt ...(15-16). Stewart stood to speak and began her preaching career.

Primitivist Rhetoric: Defending The Right To Speak From Biblical Precedent

Women grounded their authority to preach in Christ, scripture, and the models of primitive Christianity. The female preachers believed they were repeating the perfect examples found in the primordial time of the Bible. Males clearly dominated preaching, but new developments in preaching created more opportunities for females to develop their speaking skills. These developments were encouraged by petition to biblical precedent. A key innovator for appealing to biblical precedent to allow female preaching was George Whitefield during the First Great Awakening.

Shut out of the Anglican churches for his emotional extemporaneous preaching, Whitefield bypassed the established churches in "scandalous" fashion and preached to miners in the fields. Whitefield's preaching in the open, with its novelty and new dramatic style, drew crowds (Stout, "Whitefield"). Under attack from the established churches, Whitefield predictably turned to primitivist arguments. He looked to the New Testament and found that Christ and the Apostles preached in the streets and fields and spoke extemporaneously under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit, in contrast to ministers in established churches who spoke in buildings and delivered manuscript sermons (Stout, "Ideological" 528-29). Whitefield claimed to speak under the direct influence of the Spirit and Whitefield's listeners accepted the primitivist interpretation. Nathan Cole, a Connecticut farmer, thought he spoke "like one of the old apostels" (qtd. in Bormann 70).

Since the churches withdrew their support for Whitefield's preaching, it is no surprise that Whitefield believed his preaching came directly from God and the Holy Spirit. James Davenport radicalized Whitefield's idea further, insisting that converts exhibit spiritual gifts. Davenport preached sometimes as long as twelve hours at a time and
over four to five days. After exhausting his audiences, unexpected spiritual gifts would emerge which included, according to one observer, "crying out, falling down, twitching and convulsive motions, foamings and frothings, trances, visions and revelations" (Frothingham 152). On occasion near riots broke out, and persons burned the various symbols of worldliness—clothes, jewelry and even theological books deemed written by heretics (Frothingham 18).

By undercutting the authority of the church, Whitefield let the genie out of the bottle—now anyone, who felt called by God, could preach even if any and all churches disagreed. Hundreds of lay preachers or exhorters sprang up, each believing he or she had a direct call from God to preach. Technically the exhorters were not "preaching"; rather, they were inexperienced speakers who urged persons to respond to the gospel message. As exhortation became more formalized, enthusiasts traveled around in pairs. The older, experienced men preached; the younger inexperienced man or woman issued an emotional appeal. However, the practice was rarely so neatly carried out and the line between exhortation and preaching was often blurred.

Established ministers opposed to the revivals voiced their displeasure with this egalitarianism: "Enthusiasts ... strole about haranguing the admiring Vulgar in extempore nonsense, nor is it confined to these only, for Men, Women, Children, Servants, and Nigros are now become (as they phrase it) Exhorters" (Brockwell 65). Many conservative ministers rightly saw the democratization of preaching as a threat to the social order. One minister protested that Moravian, Quaker, and Separate Baptist women wanted to be "Queens for Life" (qtd. in Brekus, "Revolution" 7). As Catherine Brekus notes, "Because women in these sects were allowed to organize separate female meetings, participate in disciplinary hearings and speak publicly, he saw them as an alarming threat to political as well as religious stability" (7). This preacher complained they wanted to "instruct and govern Men" and were covertly scheming to reduce husbands and fathers to a state of "tame Subjection" and "abject
Submission" (qtd. in Brekus, "Revolution," 7). James Fish, pastor at North Stonington, Connecticut 1732-81, believed exhorters were a threat to traditional churches because they used "authoritative public discourse" normally reserved for ordained ministers (Goen 29). The exhorters were "raw and unskillful" in their preaching and soon the "ignorant" preferred them to the "letter-learned rabbis scribes and pharisees and unconverted ministers" (Fish qtd. by Goen 29).

Not surprisingly, the defenders of the revivals used the primitivist argument of biblical precedent to undermine the opposition. They claimed that the various manifestations of the Spirit, including exhorting, were simply "no more than what Scriptures inform us did happen in the apostolick times" (Gilbert Tennent, qtd. in Lovejoy 18).

After the Revolutionary War, when the Second Great Awakening encouraged many of the same revivalistic rhetorical practices, the number of prominent women preachers increased. Harriet Livermore, probably the best known nineteenth-century woman preacher, continued the appeals to biblical precedent. She was born in 1788 in Concord, New Hampshire, into a wealthy and distinguished family. Her father was a US congressman who also served on the New Hampshire Supreme Court. After a conversion experience at 23, she examined many different traditions before deciding to become a "pilgrim stranger" and not join any group. She sought the simplicity of the faith of the primitive church. In 1821 she claimed to receive a call to preach and began exhorting in Freewill Baptist and Christian Movement churches; however, she soon began preaching across denominational barriers. Because of her family connections, she knew John Quincy Adams and other prominent politicians who helped her secure four preaching appointments before Congress in 1827, 1832, 1838 and 1843. An effective speaker, she attracted large crowds at the height of her popularity in the 1820s and 1830s (Breakus, "Livermore" 389-403; Hoxie; Jurrison). Her first book, Scriptural Evidence in Favor of Female Testimony in Meetings for the Worship of God, was a defense of female preaching and was filled
with primitivist arguments. She said that all Christians were “called to imitate, even to perfection” the example of Christ (Some 120). Christ never made “a single intimation of inequality between the sexes in his church . . .” (Scriptural 78). She claimed that she made no assertions except “upon sacred authority ... who is my Saviour, my Redeemer, my law-giver, Shepherd, and everlasting Judge!” (Harp 180). She implied that those who opposed female preaching were following their own, man-made, authority rather than the primordial authority of Christ. While men oppressed, Christ liberated women.

Primordial forms and examples could metamorphose the “chaos” of the ordinary existence. Speaking of the Lord’s Prayer, Livermore said, “It is a Divine Model. It is a form, and it is perfect form, invested with Power that can bring heaven to earth, and translate earth to heaven” (Some 14). The gifts of the Holy Spirit found in the New Testament were also a perfect model and the Holy Spirit brought divine power to women. Livermore and the other female preachers sought the transforming egalitarian forms of primitive Christianity to counter the man-made restrictions of their day. The primary primordial examples they sought were the females found in the New Testament. Mary Magdalen, who was in Christ’s inner circle, was viewed as a female Apostle and the first female preacher. Livermore, in her poem “Mary Magdalen” (Some 148) said:

As the female Apostle of God’s Holy One,
To announce His ascension to heaven’s high throne,
Unto Peter, the penitent mourner restored,
And the ten that had never denied the Lord.

By focusing on her being the first to preach Christ’s resurrection and having as her audience the Apostles, Livermore argued that Mary Magdalen was equal to and probably even in a sense superior to her male counterparts among Christ’s disciples. In her defense of female preaching Livermore cited Mary Magdalen’s example of preaching “a risen Jesus” and concluded, “My dear sister, when I read the Twenty-First chapter of St. John’s Gospel, I am not at a loss concerning the calling of females to speak in praise of him who died to receive their souls . . .” (Scriptural 84).
Primitivist Rhetoric: Attacking Patriarchy and Oppression

Claiming the higher authority of the Holy Spirit, the female preachers rejected any male who tried to silence them. Stewart, for example, said, "if the same Holy Spirit teaches the same gospel to females, and teaches them that they must preach it, who is [the Apostle] Paul, or any other man, that they shall not" (18)? Fanny Newell justified her preaching by asserting that "Whatever may be said against a female speaking, or praying in public, I care not; for when I feel confident that the Lord calls me to speak, I dare not refuse" (135). Zilpha Elaw, an African-American preacher, received her call to preach from "the voice of an invisible and heavenly personage sent from God," and not from "mortal man." When a Methodist bishop asked her if she would stop preaching to appease those who opposed female preaching, she replied:

the special appointment of God had put me into the ministry and there I had no option in the matter; and as to such Christians as take up ignorant and prejudiced objections against my labors; men whose whims are law, who walk after the imagination of their own hearts, and to whom the cause of God is a toy; I could not for a moment study their gratification at the sacrifice of duty (82, 136).

All of these women pushed for liberation of women and grounded their "feminism" in their primitivist Christianity. Stewart believed that Christ came to liberate the oppressed; therefore women owed their "elevation from the most abject slavery and vassalage to Christianity; where it has most shed its light and influence ... and nowhere more than the United States." But she wanted to press for more: "Yet even here [women find] that both the church and state still hold her bound in chains; which duty to herself, her offspring and society at large, require that she should burst asunder and assert her liberty, equality and individuality" (138). Nancy Towle, paraphrasing
the Apostle Paul’s egalitarian text in Galatians, urged that “in Christ Jesus” Christians “were one, both male and female.” Towle wanted God to “raise up a host of female warriors” to “provoke the opposite party from their indolence and ... unlawful traffic, of the Word of God” (13). She saw her preaching career as a means to help liberate women from male oppression: “I wish to deliver up my life a sacrifice for one, toward remedying these evils;—and seal up my testimony, as with my blood, in vindication of the rights of woman!” (253). Many of these women believed that the return to egalitarian primitive Christianity would be consummated by the return of Christ at the end of time. Women would have a special place when Christ returned to rule, as Livermore declared: “How long, O Lord, how long ere woman be clothed with the Sun, walk upon the moon, and be crowned with Apostolick [sic] glory?” (Narration 13).

Livermore, and others, transformed the Apostle Paul into “a strong advocate for female liberty in the church of Christ” (Scriptural 98). She interpreted Paul’s silencing of women in I. Corinthians 14, a potential prohibition of women’s speaking in public, into an irrelevance. Never married, Livermore said, “The Apostle does not address me for I never had a husband. ... These words of the apostle’s, are to me a very strong proof, that his prohibition reached only to church meetings for business” (93-94). Livermore also reinterpreted the Edenic story in an egalitarian fashion. About God’s creation of woman she asked: was she “a servant, to sit at the feet of the man, and do him homage? or a slave to perform all his tasks ...?” Livermore answered, “No—I will make, saith God, a help meet for him ... an equal—a partner—a companion—an assistant” (25). She rejected the undemocratic and male-dominant biblical interpretation in favor of a feminist and egalitarian one. Her interpretation undercut views of male authority prevalent in ante-bellum churches, especially the views of mainstream Protestant denominations.

These female preachers, unlike most of their male counterparts, remained independent of denominational structures that they often viewed as a man-made, profane, corruption of the pure primitive church. Livermore and Towle, at times, associated with the egalitarian
and primitivist Christian movement but they wanted to remain free of human chaotic organizations. Livermore said, “I dare not be connected with any denomination. And in every other way, I am sacredly separate unto God” (Harp 4). By being separate, Livermore could draw more purely from the primordial and egalitarian scripture: “I am striving to shun the unscriptural tenets of partially-enlightened mortals, and aim to draw from the sacred Word of God my ideas and opinions concerning the sublime subjects connected with the word RELIGION” (qtd. in S. Livermore 51-52). Ellen Stewart had “little change” in her preaching and “enjoyed the same fellowship with Christians, wherever I found them” after leaving her denomination (98). Towle believed that eventually all human religious organizations would disappear in the millennium: “Sects and parties all must fall, And Jesus Christ be all, in all. All party names and human creeds, shall then be extinct—Thank the Lord, and His people, shall be one people; and their name one, throughout all the earth” (234). By being independent of man-made organizations, she believed she was closer to primitive purity.

Many of the female preachers opposed racial oppression along with patriarchy. Ellen Stewart said, “Christ laid the foundation of emancipation for all the oppressed, and all who are gathered into Him shall be free indeed” (132). She became uneasy when she discovered that the Protestant Methodists with whom she associated would not pass anti-slavery resolutions at the annual conference, so “she remained out of all churches” for a while (98). Lydia Sexton often preached against slavery in her sermons believing that God protected the oppressed (348). Female preachers openly preached to African-Americans and to racially mixed audiences. Zilpha Elaw toured the South, where she was threatened with enslavement despite being free. Elaw opposed slavery and attended abolitionist meetings (Andrews 2-4, 7-9). Often black male and white female preachers became natural allies as they faced prejudiced white audiences who despised them. Charles Bowles, a black minister, converted Clarissa Danforth, a white woman, and they often traveled and preached together, creating a “novel spectacle” (Lewis 31). Female and African-
American preachers' belief in a call from God and in biblical egalitarianism made them defiant of social customs they believed to be wrong. Elizabeth, the black evangelist, was challenged in Virginia. She recalled:

The people there could not believe that a colored woman could preach. And moreover, as she had no learning, they strove to imprison me because I spoke against slavery; and being brought up, they asked by what authority I spoke? and if I had been ordained? I answered, not by the commission of men's hands; if the Lord had ordained me, I needed nothing better (10).

Many of the female preachers became pioneer abolitionists, believing that racial equality was a part of the perfect Biblical primordial time (Billington 383).

Primitivist Rhetoric: Oral Preaching and the Attack on Classical Rhetoric

Primitivism also involved going back to the pure Great Time by destroying the man-made corruption of human history. Primitivism pitted the pure ancient past against the present. For the spirit-led Christians and female preachers this involved a rejection of formal education and traditional classical rhetoric. Early Quakers distrusted formal education, as did most early “enthusiasts” (Lovejoy 132, 41). Elizabeth Hooten said, “You do not read in all the Holy Scriptures, that any of the Holy men of God were Cambridge or Oxford Schollers” (qtd. in Underwood 90). Methodist Lorenzo Dow best captured this sentiment:

What I insist upon my brethren and sisters, is this: larnin isn’t religion, and eddication don’t give a man the power of the Spirit. It is grace and gifts that furnish the real live coals from off the altar. St. Peter was a fisherman—do you think he ever went to Yale College? No, no beloved brethren and sisters. When the Lord
wanted to blow down the walls of Jericho, he didn't take a brass trumpet, or a polished French horn: no such thing; he took a ram's horn—a plain, natural ram's horn—just as it grew. And so when he wants to blow down the walls of spiritual Jericho, my beloved brethren and sisters, he don't take one of your smooth, polite college larnt gentleman, but a plain natural ram's horn sort of man like me. (qtd. by Hatch, *Democratization* 20).

According to Dow, education created a barrier against female preaching: "*Female preaching* is by many through a prejudice founded in education—thought to be improper—and hence condemned by them. But why a *female* should not be as accountable to God for her talents and ministration as the opposite gender I know not" (Dow 16). Harriet Livermore complained that formal education led her away from preaching and made her feel inferior to males: "I was beguiled from the simplicity of Christ, by aspiring after head know-
edge ... I had an inclination to 'study divinity', as it was termed, lamenting at the same time the grand hindrance in my way to preaching the Gospel. 'Ah, I thought if I was a man, I'd range the world...’" (*Narration* 60). Education was part of the profane corrupted present. Enthusiasts preferred the sacred illumination of God.

The roots of this suspicion of formal religious education in America go back to Anne Hutchinson's time. Hutchinson distrusted human speech and rational language. Hutchinson remained in the older oral culture "where all truths are already given and merely reworked and rephrased in cyclical story and song" (Caldwell 363). She could accurately recall biblical verses from the populist Geneva Bible (the Puritans preferred the Authorized Version that upheld their hierarchical covenant theology) and phrases from sermons she heard.  

In contrast, Puritan epistemology saw the rational word as a critical part of the primitivist package. Puritan theology was built upon intricate analysis of the original biblical languages. Puritan sermons were constructed with long logical analyses of doctrine based on understandable human words. In short the Puritans were part of the
emerging literate culture. Puritans believed that "form controls matter" so Patricia Caldwell concludes that, "Mrs. Hutchinson's loosening of the form of language ... must have seemed a threat to the very foundation of things" (359). Unable to tolerate her affirmation of new knowledge, egalitarian gender roles, and subversive oral speech, the Boston authorities deported Hutchinson.

Quaker preachers exhibited the traits of oral culture, as did Hutchinson in her speaking, by speaking impromptu and rejecting detailed exegesis and doctrinal analyses found in literate Puritan preaching. William Penn believed that Quakers were reviving the primitive preaching of the New Testament era: "Christian Ministers are to minister what they receive ... so that we are not only not to steal from our neighbors, but we are not to study nor to speak our own words.... We are to minister, as the oracles of God; if so, then we must receive from Christ, God's great oracle, what we are to minister" (qtd. in Graves 364).9 Quaker preachers believed their speech was divine and not human, inasmuch as they were repeating the divine words given to them by God.

For women who had limited or no opportunity for formal education, spiritual experience, or God speaking directly to them through revelation, became their divine education. Shaker preacher Rebecca Jackson strikingly said, "There was no mortal that I could go to and gain instruction, so it pleased God in His love and mercy to teach me in dreams and visions and revelations and gifts" (Humez, Gifts 96.) With formal education creating parvenu barriers, the orality of female preaching democratized women and demolished this elitism.

As a result, primitivists disdained the literate preaching prevalent in the more respectable denominations. Livermore wrote: "Written discourses, stated salaries, black coats, surplice and bands, ungodly singers in the gallery and professors of religion arrayed in Babylonish vesture in the pews below, disturbed my mind ..." (Narration 83-4). Literate preaching and signs of wealth were part of the profane that needed to be discarded as lacking any New Testament example. In contrast, egalitarian primitive Christianity found in the Bible was filled with examples of illiterate, impecunious followers of Christ preaching extemporaneously.
Classical rhetoric became part of the profane, “man-made” formal education that needed to be eliminated. Traditional rhetoric with all its strengths “perpetuated inequalities by restricting entry to the ‘refined’” (Cmiel 31). The practice of rhetoric was a badge of aristocratic class; in egalitarian primitivist churches this was simply another part of profane society and not part of the sacred first times. The Puritans mastered the literate sermon with its “doctrines and uses” section that was based in classical rhetoric. Puritan rhetoric set the stage for the use of Blair and Campbell’s rhetoric in almost every American college. As Kenneth Cmiel notes, Scottish rhetoric focused even more on writing (as opposed to speaking) paying “little attention to the common people” as it “taught refined gentlemen and ladies how to communicate to each other” (35). Quakers with the inward light and later Whitefield and the revivalists revolted against this pattern for an extemporaneous rhetoric based in orality. “I love to study,” said Whitefield, “and delight to meditate … and yet would go into the Pulpit by no Means depending on my Study and Meditation, but the blessed Spirit of God” (qtd. in Lovejoy 42).

Unfortunately, because of the orality of the preaching of these women, it is very difficult to find texts and examples of their sermons. However, there is no question that many people responded to their preaching. Common people, especially women, flocked to this new primitivist rhetoric. Hannah Heaton, a separatist exhorter during the Great Awakening, found the rational and literate preaching of the established clergy boring, repetitious, and insipid. She preferred the new preaching of the Awakening. Methodist circuit evangelist Peter Cartwright advised a young Presbyterian to stop reading his sermons and learn to speak extemporaneously or “the Methodists would set the whole Western world on fire before he would light his match” (qtd. in Borman 130 and Hatch 138). Believed to be filled with divine illumination, extemporaneous speech was dramatic and interwoven with biblical texts and immediate application to the audience (Lacey 153-4). According to the primitivist preachers, the primordial would eventually overwhelm the profane, especially in preaching, and for many years it nearly did.
The Spread of Early Female Preaching

The new rhetorical practices of the revivals of the Great Awakening spread across New England and down into the other American colonies creating a division between traditional literate preaching based on classical rhetoric and the newer oral rhetoric (Stout, *New England* 218-220; Lacey). The Revolutionary War further fueled the urge for true egalitarianism in all walks of life where the values of American society were turned upside down by what Gordon S. Wood has called a “democratization of mind.” Wood argued, “Language, whether spoken or written, was to be deliberately and adroitly used for effect, and since that effect depended on the intellectual leader’s conception of his audience, any perceived change in that audience could alter drastically the style and content of what was said or written” (Wood 70). The rhetoric of revolution was filled with populist appeals and emotional language; parvenu literate classical appeals and arguments disappeared as the American leaders attacked royalist authority and elitism. While Federalists and other elites used the promise of liberty as a rhetorical tool to get the common people to support the revolution, the common people wanted actual freedom or equal rights (Wood).

Following the Revolutionary War, the Christian Movement sprang up in New England under the leadership of Elias Smith, in North Carolina under the leadership of James O’Kelly, and in Kentucky under the leadership of Barton W. Stone. Largely a product of revivalism of the Second Great Awakening, this movement rejected creeds, clerical authority, and “denominational” names and distinctions. They preferred the primitive purity of the New Testament and the liberty of the gospel (Hatch, “Christian”). Clearly co-opting the egalitarian cry for liberty from the Revolutionary War, the Christian Movement became one of the leading indicators of the rapid democratization of American culture through primitivist rhetoric. Other churches, including Baptists and Methodists, followed suit. With disestablishment, America became a competitive religious market where, according to Richard Hughes and Leonard Allen, “those
churches that prospered in the westward moving, primordial nation were those churches that depicted most vividly the ancient primordium to a primordial people" (21). Each sect competed with others for members and each made the primitivist appeal that it was "a reproduction of the ancient, apostolic order" and the "one true church while others were merely historic, tradition laden, and therefore false" (22).

Many of these primitivist groups in the Second Great Awakening argued for primitivist egalitarianism allowing women to preach. From 1790 to 1840 among the Christian Movement, Free-will Baptists, and Methodists, hundreds of women, usually called "female laborers," preached an egalitarian gospel, pressing the implications of both the Revolutionary War and the Bible (Billington 369-94). The first secular women orators recognized the contributions made by these women preachers. Priscilla Mason in her extant 1787 speech acknowledged that the Christian Movement and the Quakers had already opened up the public platform: "Besides several churches of lesser importance, a most numerous and respectable society has displayed its impartiality. ... They look to the soul, and allow all to teach who are capable, be they male or female" (qtd. in Campbell, "Gender," 483). Forty years later, in 1837, Angelina Grimke wrote, "If it is wrong for woman to lecture or preach then let the Quakers give up their false views, and let other sects refuse to hear their women, but if it is right then let all women have gifts, 'mind their calling' and enjoy the 'liberty wherewith Christ had made them free', in that declaration of Paul, 'in Christ there is neither male nor female'" (qtd. in Campbell, Man 31-2).

Conclusion

The religious women of colonial and ante-bellum America, who spoke in public, predate the ante-bellum secular women orators. Basing their preaching on the belief that the church found in the Bible was perfect and egalitarian, they constructed a place for women to speak publicly. By using a prophetic persona, arguing for the right to speak based on biblical models, attacking patriarchal and racial
oppression, and using oral-based preaching which undercut literate preaching based on classical rhetoric, these preachers set the stage for the rhetorical practice of the better known nineteenth-century women reformers. Not surprisingly, Maria Stewart, the Grimke sisters, Sojourner Truth, and other well-known women speakers also used the prophetic persona, biblical precedent, oral-based public speaking, and attacked patriarchal beliefs (Campbell, *Man* 20-35; Japp; J. Bacon 10-20). Their rhetorical practices are much older than previously thought.

This review of the first American female public speakers is only a beginning. As the history of religious women is incorporated into the history of American women, scholars of American public address need to add the voices of these early American females. Individual early religious speakers need more examination. Many of the well-known women, Anne Hutchinson for example, have not received adequate rhetorical analysis. Other lesser known but equally important speakers such as Harriet Livermore, Nancy Towle, Zilpha Elaw, Ellen Stewart (and others) deserve scholarly attention by rhetorical critics. The rhetoric of these women preachers needs to be incorporated into the canon of American public address.

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Notes

1 Other black female preachers predated Stewart. See Humez, “My”; Andrews; Dodson.

2 The best sources on Sampson are Hiltner; Brookey; Elmes-Crahall; Campbell, *Man* 17. The best source for Townsend is Horne 11, 13, 16, 22, 34, 41, 43, 64.
The best accounts of these early Quaker preachers can be found in Jenson 145-66 and M. Bacon 24-41.

Much of this orality in colonial and 19th century preaching was similar to primary orality described by Ong.

Unfortunately scholars have not identified Hutchinson’s example, the mysterious female preacher of the Isle of Ely.

Scholars wish they knew more about this phase of Hutchinson’s career and the identity of the Rhode Island female preachers but this aspect of Rhode Island’s history is not well documented.

Pestina (26) gives an account of a Salem, Massachusetts women, Provided Southwick, who was free to preach in the Salem Quaker meeting in 1658.

For details on how the Geneva Bible was more populist than the King James Version see Stout, “Word.”

Graves is quoting William Penn, Primitive Christianity Revived ..., (Philadelphia, 1877) 71-2. Penn’s work was first published in 1696.


The term “Christian Movement” refers to a specific group within American Christianity (rather than designating Protestant Christianity in general). Some of the Christian Movement churches formed the Christian Connexion denomination that eventually merged with the United Church of Christ. Other congregations eventually became part of the Disciples of Christ.

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