

“Re-Forming” Women by Donne Hayden

Women’s issues have been presenting themselves to my awareness in the past few weeks. For instance, may I call your attention to an announcement in the bulletin regarding the re-establishment of the United Society of Friends Women at Cincinnati Friends, something I would like to encourage. Along with re-forming the Quaker Men’s group, perhaps.

Years ago, I read a study conducted by psychologists on what it takes for human beings to identify themselves as “happy.” They found four essential elements: 1) Physical needs met (i.e., food, water, shelter, etc.); 2) Love (romantic or familial); 3) Friends of the same gender; and 4) Belief in something greater than themselves, whether it be a Divine Being or an idea. These days, especially in conscientious groups, the need for friendship with our own gender may go unacknowledged for fear that dividing along those lines results in exclusion from group decision-making, etc. It doesn’t have to have that effect, and I’d like to encourage Friends to consider what benefits might be derived from revitalized USFW and/or Quaker Men groups.

Back to the subject of women, their formation and re-formation. Recently I have heard on the news the phrase “Christian feminist,” a fairly provocative term that some would argue, is an oxymoron. Is it *possible* to be both a Christian and a feminist? Yes, of course. Quakers have been doing it for centuries. Today I’m going to explore how women’s public role was *formed* by Christianity and how it was “re-formed” by the Religious Society of Friends.

Let’s be honest about this—Christianity in general has not been kind to women. Consider, for instance, three passages in the Old and New Testaments frequently offered

as proof that women are inferior and should be silent and submissive. In Genesis, there are two versions of the creation story, but the one cited most often is Gen. 2:21-23.

The LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken."

In this version, God made man first, and later, after most of creation was finished, almost as an afterthought, God created woman to be man's "helper."

Two other passages often quoted to keep woman in her "proper place" occur in the letters ascribed to Paul. First, in 2nd Timothy 2:11-15:

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

And 1 Corinthians 34-35:

As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

In 1898, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, reformer, abolitionist, supporter of women's right to vote, and good friend of Quaker Lucretia Mott, addressed the role of women as defined by Christianity and the Bible. She wrote:

The Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of Heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced. Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man's bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire on the vital questions of the hour, she was commanded to ask her husband at home. Here is the Bible position of woman briefly summed up.

. . . The unvarnished texts speak for themselves. The canon law, church ordinances and Scriptures, are homogeneous, and all reflect the same spirit and sentiments.¹

This “spirit and sentiments” defined woman’s role in traditional Christianity. From the beginning, however, Quakers took a different view of scriptures regarding women. For instance, George Fox and Margaret Fell preferred the version of the creation story which appears in Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” . . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Margaret Fell remarks that “Here God joins them together in his own Image, and makes no such distinctions and differences as men do.”² In George Fox’s understanding, the coming of Christ changed the relationship between men and women, reestablishing equity between them.

For man and woman were helpsmeet, in the image of God and in Righteousness and holiness, in the dominions [of God] before they fell; but, after the Fall, in the transgression, the man was to rule over his wife. But in the restoration by Christ into the image of God and His righteousness and holiness again, in that they are helpsmeet, man and woman, as they were before the Fall.”³

Margaret Fell and other Quaker women wrote long tracts dealing with the “instructions” in Paul’s letters, making persuasive arguments that Paul spoke only of certain women in the specific communities to which he sent the letter, not of women in general. In general, they argued, Paul speaks frequently of women prophesying along with men. And for every inhibiting Pauline verse, Quakers could find another that seemed to contradict such venomous restrictions. One of their favorite passages occurs in Paul’s letter to the Galatians 3:27-28, in which he says

¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *In Her Words*, edited by Amy Oden, pp. 315-16.)

² Margaret Fell, “Women Speaking,” online text.

³ Quoted in Larson, page 21.

. . . for you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves in Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

One of the strongest arguments Quakers made asserting that women were to be valued as equals among Christians was the way Jesus treated women. Citing story after story in which Jesus interacted with women, Margaret Fell concluded:

Thus we see that Jesus owned the Love and Grace that appeared in Women, and did not despise it: and by what is recorded in the Scriptures, he received as much Love, Kindness, Compassion, and tender Dealing towards him from Women, as he did from any others, both in his Life time, and also after they had exercised their Cruelty upon him . . . (“Women’s Speaking”)

Further, Fell argued, Christianity *wouldn’t even have happened* if it hadn’t been for women! Pointing out all the references to women being the first to see the risen Christ, she concludes:

Mark this, you that despise and oppose the Message of the Lord God that he sends by Women; What had become of the Redemption of the whole Body of Mankind, if they had not cause to believe the Message that the Lord Jesus sent by these Women, of and concerning his Resurrection? And if these Women had not thus, out of their Tenderness, and Bowels of Love, who had received Mercy, and Grace, and Forgiveness of Sins, and Vertue, and Healing from him; which many Men also had received the like, if their Hearts had not been so united and knit unto him in Love, that they could not depart as the Men did; but sat watching, and waiting, and weeping about the Sepulchre until the time of his Resurrection, and so were ready to carry his Message, as is manifested, else how should his Disciples have known, who were not there? (“Women’s Speaking”)

We all know that Quakers were among the first to permit women to speak with authority during worship; such equality is a source of pride and satisfaction for us, potentially troubling as that may be. From the beginning, women were acknowledged to have as much access to the Holy Spirit as men, and thus, in Quaker gatherings, women could speak with authority in “church,” something denied them throughout

Christendom, at least after the influence of Augustine, Tertullian and the boys in the 300s. Most contemporary Friends don't know, however, that early Friends did not agree that women were truly equal to men in all ways. When George Fox had the idea of establishing separate Women's Meetings for Business, he stirred up a controversy among Friends that led to one of the first divisions in the Society. The idea of women actually participating in the business of Meeting, women having and managing their own funds, women being consulted regarding approvals for marriage—all these innovations were too much for some early Quakers. While they could accept a woman might be filled with the Holy Spirit and thus transcend her gender during worship, they opposed establishment of separate women's meetings on the grounds of women's basic inferiority and "unsuitability" for positions of authority when they were "in the body," i.e., in their secular roles as women.⁴ In her book on Quaker women, *Daughters of Light*, Rebecca Larson gives as an example George Keith, a Friend who converted to Anglicanism. In 1674 he "argued that when neither men nor women were 'moved by the Lord,' only men still had the authority to speak." According to Larson, "Disputants especially believed that the men's meeting alone should grant permission to marry, since the Society's proposed marriage procedure obligated men to submit to the authority of women's meetings."⁵ Larson quotes another early Friend who wrote of women's meeting for business: "the world would laugh at it, as indeed well they might . . . having never heard before, that a meeting of women must be advised with, before marriage."⁶

⁴ Rebecca Larson, *Daughters of Light: Quaker Women*. University of North Carolina Press, 2000, page 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

Fortunately, Fox's vision prevailed, and Quaker women held their own Meetings for Business, separate from the Men's, until the mid-1800s when the practice faded out. Nowadays most of us would probably object if women's meetings were held separately—I know I would. But I made an odd discovery when I was researching the history of Elk Monthly Meeting in West Elkton, Ohio. From its founding in 1805 until about 1830, men and women held separate meetings for business, each group keeping its own minutes. During those 25 years of Meeting minutes, women's names, women's decisions, and women's voices emerged loud and clear—it was apparent who the strong, leading women were, what the women thought about various issues, and in what ways they influenced overall Meeting decisions. About 1830, the meetings were combined; in the minutes thereafter, the women's voices virtually disappeared. Their names might appear now and then, assigned to some committee, but what women thought was lost, swallowed up in the men's discussion, decision-making, and minute-taking, for always the Meeting Clerk and the Recording Clerk were men. Perhaps Friends were not as advanced in gender equality as we believed; certainly women don't seem to have asserted themselves in meeting for business in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Perhaps it was as Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote in 1898:

We have many women abundantly endowed with capabilities to understand and revise what men have thus far written. but they are all suffering from inherited ideas of their inferiority; they do not perceive it, yet such is the true explanation of their solicitude, lest they should seem to be too self-asserting. (p. 318)

In the past few decades, the secular view of women's capabilities has been "reformed" to more closely resemble what Friends have said all along. It is much easier these days to identify a "feminist" as a person who believes that women are as capable and valuable as men. It is more difficult to claim both feminism and embrace views of

women espoused in traditional Christian thought and dogma. (Just in passing, however, in this greatest and most progressive of democracies, we still have not passed an Equal Rights Amendment, and women still earn 77 cents for every dollar men earn.)