

“The Spirit is Poured Upon all Flesh” Quaker Beliefs on Women’s Equality in Preaching and Prophesying

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Quakers were a radical religious group that formed in rural England in the 1600s as an offshoot of the Protestant Anabaptists. An aspect of Quaker thought deemed radical, was their acceptance of the role of women in the Christian community. What set apart the Quakers from the rest of English society in their approach to women? How were their views regarding gender norms different from the rest of society? This paper argues that although Quaker views were radical, Quakers believed men and women were equal in God’s eyes and that women could preach and prophesize freely. This argument is justified by examining the fundamental ideas of the Quakers, considering arguments for and against women preaching, and the analysis of Quaker teaching in personal publications from preaching female Quakers.

Fundamental Quaker ideas were radical in comparison to those of traditional English society, specifically, in terms of their approach to gender norms. Quakers believed men and women were equal and that their spiritual characteristics were interchangeable.¹ Their goal for society was to deconstruct the ideas of one’s self, and eliminate concepts of gender, status, and intelligence.² Men and women were believed to be equal because they had stripped off their outer selves and instead focused on their spiritual selves, relying on God’s light within them to give them authority to speak. This “inner light” was given equally to all who believed.³ Because of these ideas, Quakers were receptive to the idea of women preaching and prophesying, even allowing women to be missionaries.⁴ Phyllis Mack’s book, *Visionary Women*, highlights the significance of the Quaker idea of equality: “Thus, religious practice

¹ Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1992), 9.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

³ Robert Bucholz and Newton Key, *Early Modern England 1485-1714* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 266.

⁴ Mack, *Visionary Women*, 1.

offered the individual moments of social as well as spiritual liberation, allowing the worshiper to express a sensibility and authority that was largely inaccessible to him or her in secular life."⁵ This understanding does not single out women; instead, it comments on how Quaker beliefs brought equality and accessibility to all, regardless of gender and status. Quakers allowed for freedom of expression and provided a platform for both men and women to speak, sharing Scripture and visions. They were no longer men and women, but spirits who could express both male and female qualities, bringing equality to all Quakers.⁶ For example, according to contemporary societal beliefs, women portrayed emotions and men were public speakers. Quakers expressed both qualities, regardless of their gender.⁷ They expressed emotion in their devotion to God, and women were often seen in town squares preaching and prophesying. This was considered radical by early modern English society who had clearly defined gender roles and characteristics assigned to men and women. Quaker beliefs stepped outside of these distinctions, creating a radical idea of inner equality between men and women.

Quaker beliefs were not widely accepted in seventeenth century English society, especially regarding the Quaker interpretation of gender norms. Many believed these women were disrupting society by speaking and preaching, using arguments for women's ability to preach counterintuitively. Scripture was referenced to support female prophesy, but it was also used to discourage women from preaching and prophesying. An example is found in a documented dialogue between two men, published in 1699; One, a Christian, argues against women preaching, the other, a Quaker, argues that women should be able to express themselves spiritually. Both men used scripture to support their arguments, believing it to be the ultimate authority in the matter. In comparison, the Christian is literal in his interpretation of Scripture, while the Quaker allows room for interpretation.

The Christian's argument begins in 1 Corinthians, where Paul says, "Let your Women keep silence in the Churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak; ...for it is a shame for Women to speak in the

⁵ Mack, *Visionary Women*, 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 237-38.

Church.”⁸ The Apostle Paul was a spiritual authority to both the Quaker and the Christian; using Paul’s words gives authority and strength to the Christian’s argument. He believes Paul commanded all women to remain silent in churches and they should not preach and prophesize. Following the Quaker’s rebuttal, the Christian reiterates that women should not speak in the Church or ask questions to increase their knowledge. Therefore, they should also not teach others.⁹ The Christian acknowledges that they have a different idea of what prophesying is and he defines it to make the meaning clearer stating that prophesying can mean foretelling, which the Christian acknowledges is something women can participate in.¹⁰ The third definition refers to praising God, which the Christian points out is a part of the Christian liturgy in which women can participate.¹¹ However, the second definition refers to interpreting, which he claims is something done explicitly by men.¹² He outlines these definitions to argue against the Quaker’s use of Scripture that supports women preaching, noting that the Quaker’s example which states prophesying refers to praising God, and not preaching.¹³ He uses Scripture to back up these distinctions, reaffirming that women are not allowed to interpret and teach, but can foretell and praise. He concludes his argument: “But *Womens Preaching* is contrary to the Scriptures, (as I have before shewn unto thee) and they pretend to Preach by the Spirit.... Therefore, *Womens Preaching* is to be reckoned and accounted a *Delusion* of the Devil.”¹⁴ The Christian remains unchanged in his argument and perspective due to his use of scripture, despite the Quaker’s attempt to argue against him. Furthermore, the Christian’s main argument is that women preaching goes against scripture and is the work of the Devil. He provides evidence from the Apostle Paul and defines prophecy to show what is allowed and what is not for women. This dialogue provides insight into the arguments against women preaching.

⁸ Anonymous, “A Friendly Dialogue between Two Country-Men, the one a Christian, and the other a Quaker, Concerning Womens Preaching,” *Early English Books Online* (1699): 1, accessed March 18, 2019, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:767839708.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Anon., “A Friendly Dialogue,” 2.

Despite English society being resistant to women preaching, Quaker men stood up for women and provided evidence in support of their preaching. This gave credibility to those women as it was not generally acceptable for them to speak out with authority. Having the support of men shows that women were encouraged to step out and preach. The conversation between the Christian and the Quaker shows a Quaker man who is willing to argue in support of women. Similar sources, such as scripture, can lead to different conclusions based on individual perspectives. Looking at the Quaker's argument, he uses the same verses to come to a different conclusion. He finally concludes that if women cannot preach, men should refrain from preaching as well, thereby demonstrating the Quaker commitment to their understanding of equality between genders.¹⁵ Believing all were equal, if one was to be removed from speaking, all should be removed. Yet, he provides evidence using scripture of women preaching and prophesying. These Scripture references reinforce Quaker ideas of equality with a focus on changing contemporary ideas about women's position in society.

The Quaker in the above stated dialogue focuses on clarifying scripture to provide evidence supporting women preaching. His interpretation of the sources, mostly from the Apostle Paul, shows his bias towards religious beliefs. Nevertheless, they still hold up the argument. In referencing 1 Corinthians 11:5, the Quaker notes that Paul comments on how women should act when preaching. He believes this would be an irrelevant message if women were not allowed to preach as they would not be able to follow Paul's instructions.¹⁶ The Quaker acknowledges that women have a place in the church and points out women in the New Testament who worked alongside Paul.¹⁷ This provides strength to his belief that women have a place in the church. To back up his argument that women can prophecy, the Quaker references Joel 2:28, "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy..."¹⁸ The Quaker points out that Scripture explicitly says both men and women will prophecy. These verses provide evidence supporting the Quaker belief that women could preach and prophesize. By engaging

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Anon., "A Friendly Dialogue," 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸ Joel 2:28 KJV.

in discussions such as the example given, Quaker ideas were circulated throughout society. Quaker men advocated for women because they believed all were equal, giving women the confidence to share their visions. The biggest advocate for Quaker women preaching were the women themselves as many published their prophecies and circulated them throughout England and the world. These publications offer insight into the beliefs of women who were deemed radical by the rest of early modern English society. They highlight Quaker ideas of equality and are a primary example of the sermons and visions shared by women. One example of these radical women is Margaret Fell Fox, who married George Fox. He was an influential Quaker leader who travelled throughout England preaching, and was charged with blasphemy in 1650.¹⁹ Margaret Fox's home became a focal point in the Quakers' ministry in northern England, and she became an influential advocate for Quaker beliefs.²⁰ In 1666, she published her pamphlet *Women's Speaking Justified*, which addresses arguments against women speaking in church and presents evidence as to why they are allowed to preach and prophesize. Much of her evidence is the same section of scripture used in the conversation between the Quaker man and the Christian; however, she expands on these verses and examines others to provide a well justified and rational argument. Specifically, Fox considers arguments used against her and justifies her position. Her first piece of evidence comes from Genesis. She argues that when men and women were created by God, they were made equally and without distinction; they were created in the image of God and are therefore the same.²¹ The perfectness of Creation meant there were no differences between men and women, as they were never intended to be distinct beings.

Fox also looks at the argument that women are weaker, demonstrated by Eve eating the fruit from the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden. She claims this argument is inaccurate as Adam also ate the fruit, both being tempted equally.²² Eve eating the fruit first does not

¹⁹ David Booy, *Autobiographical Writings by Early Quaker Women* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), 3.

²⁰ Booy, *Early Quaker Women*, 147.

²¹ Margaret Fell Fox, "Womens Speaking Justified," *Early English Books Online* (1666): 3, accessed March 28, 2019, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:99889736.

²² *Ibid.*

make her weaker than Adam because he ate it as well. Continuing to examine Genesis, Margaret argues for women speaking by looking at God's punishment for Eve after the Fall. She claims that by prohibiting women from speaking, the Serpent speaks.²³ The Serpent represents evil and Fox argues that women and men are called to speak out against this evil. Descendants of Eve, both men and women, must speak out so descendants of the Serpent cannot.

Fox also addresses the argument used against women in 1 Corinthians. Just like the Quaker man in the dialogue discussed, Fox explains the context of this passage and provides an interpretation as to what Paul refers to when he claims women must be silent in churches. She argues that Paul refers to women under the 'Law'. She acknowledges that to be under the 'Law' was to be in sin as Eve had been.²⁴ Women who had come to recognize God's forgiveness were freed from the 'Law' and this command does not apply to them. Rather, it applies to women who are still in sin. They should not speak because of sin. She notes, "*Let all Things be done to Edifying*. Here there is no Edifying, but Confusion speaking together."²⁵ She again clarifies that Paul refers to women still under the 'Law' and in sin:

He did not say, that such Women should not Prophesie as had the Revelation and Spirit of God poured upon them: But their Women that were under the Law, and in the Transgression, and were in Strife, Confusion and Malice; for if he had stop'd Womens Praying or Prophesying, why doth he say, *Every Man Praying or Prophesying, having his Head covered, dishonoureth his Head; but every Women that Prayeth or Prophesieth with her Head uncovered dishonoureth her Head*?²⁶

Fox argues that if women were not allowed to preach and prophesize, this command is irrelevant. Therefore, women can speak the truth if they have discovered the light within them, as men and women were created equally, and God has given them both the ability to preach and prophesize to fight evil. Fox's pamphlet provides justification for women to preach and prophesy and demonstrates their spiritual equality with men. Thus, her writing provided women with the freedom to speak in churches.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁴ Fox, "Womens Speaking Justified," 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

The beliefs of the Quakers were considered radical in seventeenth century English society, especially their views of equality between men and women. They focused on Christ's light within them as an equalizing force that broke down societal barriers such as gender and status. Although, Quakers faced opposition from other members of society who used scripture to argue against women preaching, they refuted arguments by providing their own interpretation of scripture to explain that women could preach and prophesize. Both male and female Quakers argued for women and advocated for their beliefs. As Margaret Fell Fox concludes, "[the] Spirit is poured upon all Flesh, both Sons and Daughters.... [So] let all Mouths be stopt that would limit him, whose Power and Spirit is infinite, who is pouring it upon all Flesh."²⁷ Thus, Quakers believed women were equal with men by God's power and therefore should be allowed to preach and prophesize.

²⁷ Fox, "Womens Speaking Justified," 12.

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