

This is Our Story

Free Church Women's

Ministry

Edited by

Janet Wootton

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Chapter 3 Worship and Preaching

John Drane & Olive M Fleming Drane

Women in worship and preaching may appear to be a relatively uncontentious subject – and fifty years ago, it would have been. It might also have turned out to be one of the shortest chapters of the entire book. Though the picture is very uneven, women’s participation in church leadership is generally less controversial today than it once was – but now preaching and worship are both hotly contested categories. What exactly is ‘worship’? Historically, it was assumed to be the same thing as a church service, but today it is not uncommon for ‘a time of worship’ to consist of the singing of choruses or modern (never ancient) hymns. Identical questions are being raised in relation to preaching: is ‘preaching’ the same thing as a sermon – and if not, what is it? Other chapters in this book raise these questions through the medium of personal story. Pauline Webb wonders whether her ministry within the apparently secular world of radio constituted preaching, while Kate Cotterill’s account of her encounter with Danny and Tracey provokes a similar question. Our own experience in ministry regularly highlights the same issues. When Olive ministers as a clown – whether in informal settings of storytelling, or more prescribed contexts such as Eucharistic celebrations – how does that connect with what John was taught about either worship or preaching in his rather more traditional theological education?¹ This is more than just a theoretical question for the two of us, not only in relational terms as we work at ministry alongside one another, but also in missional terms, for it is beyond dispute that Olive’s creative, visual, tactile style of celebrating and sharing the Gospel speaks far more powerfully to the unchurched masses of Britain than the more ‘normal’ format of Sunday services, especially within the Free Church tradition with its inherited emphasis on the educational (if not intellectual) nature of faith, and the accompanying suspicion of anything artistic and intuitional. Moreover, empirical research is suggesting that growing numbers of people now give up on their churches, not as a result of jettisoning their faith, but because they want it to be more authentic and can find no connection between that aspiration and the sort of things that they experience in worship and hear in sermons.²

There is a whole book in here, not just a single chapter!³ Talk about women, preaching and worship brings into focus some of the major challenges facing all churches today,

¹ On clowning as ministry, see Olive M Fleming Drane, *Clowns, Storytellers, Disciples* (Oxford: BRF 2002).

² Cf Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith* (London: SPCK 2002). For a personal story, see Andrew Strom, *The ‘Out-of-Church’ Christians*, at <http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/~revival/00-Out-Of-Church.html>

³ Many books have of course been written that impinge on this subject. Those we have found most useful include the following: Barbara J MacHaffie, *Her Story: women in Christian tradition*, 2nd ed (Minneapolis: Fortress 2006); Eunjoon Mary Kim, *Women Preaching: theology and practice through the ages* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press 2004); Paul W Chilcote, *She Offered them Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon 1993); Linda L Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2000); Dan Doriani, *Women and Ministry* (Wheaton: Crossway 2003); Anne Jensen, *God’s self-confident Daughters: early Christianity and the liberation of women* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1996); Lynn Japinga, *Feminism and Christianity: an essential guide* (Nashville: Abingdon 1999); and not least, David Scholer’s collection of *Selected Articles on Hermeneutics and Women in Ministry in the New Testament*, published as a reader for his course on *Women, the Bible, and the Church* at Fuller Seminary, Pasadena, California.

especially the Free Churches. In order to put it in context, we have adopted a largely historical approach to unpacking these issues, beginning with the New Testament, followed by an all too brief overview of some significant issues in the ensuing centuries, before considering the part played by women preachers in the emergence of the Free Church tradition. Finally, we identify some important questions that these churches will need to address if they are to survive far into the 21st century, illustrated by reference to our own experience in shared ministry. In this process, we have interwoven themes from many different sources, some of which will no doubt overlap with other chapters in this book. We have, however, deliberately limited the discussion here to *preaching* and *worship*, so that even if we do cover similar ground to other chapters in this book we might do it in a more focused way, by excluding institutional arguments about topics such as women's ordination or participation in church life more generally.⁴ In the event, it turns out that we have said very little about worship *per se*, though in doing so we are merely reflecting the tendency of the Free Church tradition to regard sermons as the central aspect of 'worship', with other liturgical elements being regularly described as 'the preliminaries' in a service of worship. No wonder that Fleur Houston asks not only 'what does one do in an act of worship?' but more importantly, 'what does an act of worship do?'⁵ There are many questions to be asked about what constitutes 'an act of worship' that would be relevant here, but would take us far beyond our main subject.

One of the curiosities of British theological education is that, though the churches regard preaching as supremely important, homiletics virtually never features in the formal training of ministers. An exhaustive search has come up with only two British theological colleges that appear to offer a fully accredited course in either the study or the practice of preaching, and both of these are at postgraduate level rather than being part of initial theological education.⁶ This is in sharp contrast to American seminaries, where it would be impossible to obtain the MDiv degree (the basic clergy qualification) without undertaking the formal study of homiletics. As a result, even full-time ministers rarely pause to reflect on what they might be doing as preachers, still less why they might be doing it the way they do. One widely accepted view among Free Churches is that Christian preaching was rooted in the post-exilic Jewish synagogues, as typified by the example of Ezra who stood on a raised platform reading and expounding the scriptures 'while the people remained in their places' as passive hearers (Nehemiah 8:1-8). This, of course, represents a very narrow view of the life of ancient synagogues, but it has had a

⁴ Though it is worth noting that ordination itself is becoming another contested subject in many Free Churches, partly as a result of the shortage of full-time ministers but its relevance is also being questioned in relation to core underlying theological values of freedom and equality. The Baptist Union of Victoria (Australia) has described it as 'the catholic fly in the Baptist ointment', and abandoned it as a formality (while still recognizing the importance of full-time ministry). The New Church streams in the UK (arguably the most successful Free Churches today) also generally sit lightly to notions of ordination in a formal sense. Though this is not the place to explore the topic, discussion of it raises similar issues to those identified here with respect to preaching, as the inherited sense of the word implies a status that is quite different from Biblical norms or expectations.

⁵ Reference her story xxxxxxxx

⁶ We may have missed something, and if we have readers will no doubt be quick to tell us. The courses we have identified are Master's degrees at International Christian College in Glasgow (http://www.icc.ac.uk/courses_desc.php?course_id=26) and Spurgeon's College in London (http://www.spurgeons.ac.uk/site/pages/ui_courses_masters.aspx).

far-reaching effect on the format of both preaching and worship in many Free Church circles.⁷ Other scholarship has not only highlighted the diversity within synagogue life⁸, but has also suggested that perhaps this was not the major influence in the life of the early church. Several studies have instead proposed a formative connection between the first Christians and the traditions of Greco-Roman rhetoric, suggesting that this style of public speaking was actually the original model for Christian preaching.⁹ There can be no question that this tradition deeply influenced the likes of Augustine (354-430), and came to be the dominant form of scholastic preaching in the Middle Ages. It is still one of the most widely adopted models for preaching, with its emphasis on analysis, themes, point-making, and so on. Its usefulness in past generations cannot be denied. But the one thing we can say for certain is that it was not the most original form of Christian preaching.

It is actually anachronistic to apply the term ‘preaching’ to any activity described in the Bible. The Greek verb most often translated as ‘preaching’ (*kērussō*) referred to the announcing of a message on behalf of someone else (usually a sovereign or other significant person). To identify a Biblical model, therefore, it makes most sense to ask: ‘how is God’s will made known and communicated?’ Three themes emerge that can inform our subsequent discussion here:

- Throughout the Bible, God’s voice is communicated through a variety of media: poems, prophetic oracles, songs, dance, drama, stories, along with dreams and other personal experiences. While the exposition of scripture is not excluded, it is by no means the primary medium for the divine message. On the contrary, the messenger’s own personal spirituality is the main channel through which God’s will for the community is both revealed and communicated. This was as true for St Paul, whose Damascus road experience was the touchstone of all else that he wrote and thought,¹⁰ as it had been for all the Hebrew prophets before him.¹¹

⁷ R P Martin offers a classic account of worship along these lines, with his claim that it consisted of ‘praise ... prayers ... instruction’ (*Worship in the Early Church*, London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott 1964, 24-27). Other classic treatments of the topic from the same generation took a similar line: cf C F D Moule, *Worship in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press 1961); G Delling, *Worship in the New Testament* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 1962); Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (London: SCM Press 1953) – all of them offering detailed accounts of worship ‘services’ with a confidence that is not justified by the evidence. For a more nuanced account, see Paul F Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press 1992).

⁸ Ancient synagogues evolved in the post-exilic period out of the need to create community centres for the preservation and celebration of traditional Hebrew culture as Jewish people moved away from their traditional homelands, and the sort of Biblical exposition frequently identified as the main activity of the synagogues was in fact only one aspect of their operations. Cf Isaac Levy, *The Synagogue: its History and Function* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell & Co Ltd. 1963); Azriel Eisenberg, *The Synagogue through the Ages* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company 1974).

⁹ See, for example, Burton L Mack, *Rhetoric and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1990); Duane A Litfin, *St Paul’s theology of proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Greco-Roman Rhetoric* (New York: CUP 1994); Carl Joachim Classen, *Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2000).

¹⁰ For a spirited presentation of this opinion see Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) and, more recently, *Paul and the New Perspective: second thoughts on the origins of Paul’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

- Somewhat surprisingly, the New Testament contains only one narrative account of what might be regarded as a regular meeting of the church, namely the story of Paul's final visit with the church in Troas (Acts 20:6-12),¹² during which the unfortunate Eutychus dozed off and fell from the window. Because we read scripture through our own experience, we tend to conjure up a scene in which Paul spoke in boring monologue style for an exceedingly long time. A careful reading of the text, however, tells a different story. For one thing, the terminology used to describe Eutychus could as easily be applied to a toddler as to a teenager or young adult (which would explain how he fitted on the window sill in the first place, as well as shedding light on why he might have been asleep). More significant still is the way Luke describes the speaking: Paul, he records, engaged in a dialogue with them until midnight (Gk *dielegeto* = NRSV 'holding a discussion'), after which they 'continued to converse' until dawn (NRSV = Gk *homilēsas*, the word from which 'homiletics' is derived). In other words, in a typical church gathering the apostolic preaching was interactive, first in a semi-structured way (dialogue), then more informally (conversation). This matches what is implied elsewhere about the nature of worship as an interactive experience of the whole community,¹³ and has important consequences for definitions of preaching in relation to the contributions that women have historically made to the life of the church.
- The third indisputable characteristic of New Testament preaching is its kerygmatic nature. C H Dodd (1884-1973), himself a Free Church minister, drew attention to this more than seventy years ago. His somewhat artificial distinction between what he regarded as *kerygma* ('preaching') and *didache* ('teaching') never found wide acceptance.¹⁴ But his insistence that the heart of apostolic preaching was to be found in the declaration of God's actions in Christ, culminating in the resurrection and gift of the Spirit, and accompanied by an invitation to others to the spiritual journey of Christian discipleship, was well founded.

By these definitions of preaching, women were actually the very first preachers of all, for despite differences of detail each of the four gospels insists that the risen Christ himself commissioned women to communicate the good news of the resurrection.¹⁵ Olive has a distinct childhood memory of being part of a church where women were officially silenced, and wondering how that made sense in light of these passages. What she did not know at the time was that the women's communication of the resurrection message followed the Biblical pattern just outlined: it was kerygmatic (they declared the truth of what God was accomplishing), experiential (incorporating a report of their own encounters with the risen Christ), and interactive (shared with the other disciples, to

¹¹ The emphasis on personal divine encounter is so widespread in the Hebrew prophets that this claim scarcely needs any justification. But see, among many others, Amos 1:1, 7:1-9; Isaiah 6:1-13; Jeremiah 1:1-19; Ezekiel 1:1-3:11.

¹² There are of course many other references to church life in the NT, but all of them are correcting aberrations of one sort or another rather than describing a typical gathering.

¹³ Cf Acts 1:43-47; 1 Corinthians 14:26-33.

¹⁴ C H Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1936).

¹⁵ Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 23:55-24:10; John 20:11-18.

become a topic of further conversation). Nor was she aware that this realization had encouraged Hippolytus of Rome (170-235) to bestow on Mary Magdalene the title of ‘apostolorum apostola’, or that Robert de Sorbon (1201-1274), priest and founder of the famous Sorbonne college in Paris, had defended the Beguines, a group of religious women, by reminding their critics that Mary Magdalene was the first preacher of the resurrection.¹⁶ These were lone voices, though, for women’s contribution as preachers had been marginalized centuries before that. The New Testament itself gives out mixed messages on the subject, with prohibitions on women’s speaking alongside clear evidence of their doing just that – and, in one instance, both permission and prohibition appear in the very same context.¹⁷ Since most gatherings of the early church took place in the relative privacy of Greco-Roman homes, it would be surprising if there had been a universally applicable rule of silence on anyone who was part of the family and its wider networks, whether women or men, children or servants – an assumption that finds further support in some catacomb inscriptions that depict women praying, prophesying, and preaching, as well as apparently celebrating the Eucharist.¹⁸ The real change came when Christianity emerged from the relatively obscure world of private devotion to become part of the civic life of the Roman empire. In this patriarchal context, the masculinization of the church was inevitable. The Council of Laodicea (352) banned women from leading churches, and the Council of Carthage (398) subsequently prohibited them from preaching – though the very fact that these topics had to be discussed at all (and the acrimony which it provoked) is itself indicative of the likelihood that from the beginning women had engaged in these roles.

The practices of the medieval church are of little direct relevance for any discussion of the experiences of today’s Free Churches – with one significant exception. For this was when preaching was first given a clear definition, by Alain of Lille (1125-1203), who understood it to be ‘an open and public instruction in faith and behavior, whose purpose is the forming of men; it derives from the path of reason and from the fountainhead of the “authorities” [scripture].’¹⁹ This understanding merely reflected the prevailing pattern of preaching, influenced by Aristotelian rhetorical art, but its codification in this way influenced all subsequent definitions of preaching in a way that impinged directly on the ministry of women. It marginalized the homily, a more discursive and homely style of speaking, as being less than acceptable, but more significantly it ensured that ‘proper preaching’ could only be practiced by an intellectual élite who were familiar with the Greek and Roman classics. This had the further consequence of creating a gulf between educated clerical culture and the ruder understandings of popular culture. With no access to education, women would never be a part of this cultural élite, and could therefore

¹⁶ R W Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (New York: Viking 1970), 309; Marygrace Peters, ‘The Beguines: feminine piety derailed’, in *Spirituality Today* 43 (1991/1), 36-52 (available at <http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/91431peters.html>)

¹⁷ Contrast 1 Corinthians 11:5, where women are encouraged to ‘prophesy’, with 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35, where they are forbidden to speak in any capacity.

¹⁸ Cf Karen Jo Torjesen, ‘The early Christian *Orans*: an artistic representation of women’s liturgical prayer and prophecy’, in Beverly Mayne Kienzle & Pamela J Walker (eds), *Women Preachers and Prophets through two millennia of Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1998), 42-56.

¹⁹ Cf Richard Lischer, *Theories of Preaching: selected readings in the homiletical tradition* (Durham NC: Labyrinth Press 1987), 10.

never be preachers. Even in those days, some were prepared to bend the rules a little, and Henry of Ghent (c.1290) distinguished between teaching that was 'ex officio' (and prohibited for women) and private teaching that was 'ex beneficio' (and allowed, with appropriate controls by ecclesiastical authorities). He also accepted 'prophesying' as being allowable for women because (unlike 'preaching') it was not regarded as a rational process, and therefore did not challenge the prevailing opinion that women were by definition intellectually inferior to men. As we shall see below, these distinctions had consequences in some unlikely places, not least in the formation of John Wesley's opinions on women preachers, and continue to be influential in some circles even today. Perversely, none of them noticed that Paul identified 'prophecy' as the most desirable charism of all (1 Corinthians 14:3)!²⁰

It has been observed that very little happened at the Reformation, except that the altar was upended to become a pulpit.²¹ Though the logic of belief in the priesthood of all believers implied a more egalitarian form of church, it was still only men who gained access to the inner sanctum of preaching. Calvin recognized that those New Testament passages prohibiting women from speaking were contextually determined, but neatly avoided addressing the matter by arguing that the citizens of 16th century Geneva would be as easily scandalized as their counterparts in first century Corinth by women who crossed conventional cultural boundaries.²² Luther, meanwhile, was a thoroughly unreformed misogynist on this issue, describing women as having 'lots of filth and little wisdom' and 'created for no other purpose than to serve men'.²³ In any case, to gain state approval the reformed churches had to support the patriarchal and hierarchical attitudes of the day. In the process, church itself was defined as 'Word preached, sacraments administered, and discipline applied', something that (like the Roman understanding that the Reformation claimed to displace) still required a professional caste of clergy. Since most of the pre-Reformation priestly functions had been done away with in relation to worship, the sermon came to be all important. Alain of Lille's ecclesiology might have been rejected, but his definition of a sermon was not only welcomed, but redefined in an even more narrowly intellectual way than had previously been the case. No longer able to wear the priestly garb of the past which (at least in theory) was said to be a reflection of the divine sphere, Protestant clergy eagerly adopted academic gowns as their preferred attire, thereby drawing attention to their own intellectual prowess and implying that anyone who was not entitled to wear such garb could never be a real preacher. The construction of large towering pulpits with their thinly-disguised phallic imagery only served to reinforce the domineering masculine nature of preaching.

This was the sort of preaching that provoked Samuel Johnson's (1709-84) oft-quoted comment that 'a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.'²⁴ Some groups had already

²⁰ David M Scholer, 'Women in Ministry', in *The Covenant Companion* (January 1, 1984), 13.

²¹ Gordon Donaldson, *The Faith of the Scots* (London: Batsford 1990), 65.

²² On Calvin's egalitarian tendencies, see Jane Dempsey Douglass, *Women, Freedom, and Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1985).

²³ See Ann Loades (ed), *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (London: SPCK 1990), 123.

²⁴ James Boswell, *Life of Dr Samuel Johnson*, vol 1 (entry for July 31 1763).

questioned whether it needed to be done by either men or women. Separatists such as the Amish, Mennonites, Quakers, Moravians and Baptists had no concern for the approval of the state, and followed through the logic of reformed theology by emphasizing the believer's personal experience of divine grace as the basic qualification for a preacher, rather than the educational attainments (or for that matter, ordination) of a select few. By the mid-17th century, the renowned 'tub preacher' Mrs Attaway was preaching weekly at the General (or Arminian) Baptist Church in Bell Alley, London, to crowds that were large enough to attract the widespread disapproval of both civic and church authorities.²⁵ The General Baptists are credited with articulating the notion of an 'inner light of Christ' that was subsequently elaborated by George Fox (1624-1691) and the Quakers, and it was among them that women preachers initially found most acceptance. Fox insisted that since the 'inner light' was intrinsic to being human, and not conditional upon either position or gender, then any individual – male or female – must have the potential of being a preacher, since this skill depended only on a person's spiritual attentiveness. This challenged the notion that special training in Biblical interpretation might be necessary, because conventional understandings of the scriptures could be set aside under the influence of the direct guidance of the Spirit – a view that surfaced again at the beginning of the 20th century with the rise of the Holiness and Pentecostal movements. A refusal to acknowledge the sacraments likewise ensured that Quakers were able to side-step the assumptions or expectations of other groups with regard to questions about the proper conduct of worship: Quaker worship simply defined itself in relation to the God-given intuitions of the worshippers. Contrary to the claims of their opponents, such apparent openness to the Spirit did not lead to a free-for-all, as certain individuals came to be recognized as possessing talents for preaching, and they became in effect official spokespersons for the movement. They included women, the most notable being Fox's colleague Margaret Fell (1614-1702) who wrote a pamphlet entitled *Womens' Speaking Justified* (1666) explaining why women should be allowed to speak in church. Predictably, this right was not universally appreciated, and Elizabeth Hooten (1600-72), one of the earliest Quaker converts, was imprisoned four times in England for such speaking, and later fell foul of the authorities in Boston when she went to the American colonies as a missionary.²⁶ One of the reasons adduced for denying women the right to preach was that they were 'bold impudent housewives, without all womanly modesty'²⁷ – or worse, that they were mentally unbalanced, if not dangerous witches. It is certainly the case that the activities of some self-styled prophetesses did nothing to enhance the cause of women's preaching – and even the generally tolerant Quakers ended up rejecting groups such as the Shakers, Philadelphians, and Millenarians, all of which grew from within the Society of Friends, and all of them led by women.

By the 18th century, a major source of debate among the various non-conformist groupings was the tension between the perceived need for order and discipline (which

²⁵ Richard L Greaves, 'The Role of Women in Early English Nonconformity', in *Church History* 52/3 (1983), 299-311.

²⁶ Paul W Chilcote, *She offered them Christ: the legacy of women preachers in early Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1993), 14; Barbara J MacHaffie, *Her Story: women in Christian tradition*, 2nd ed (Minneapolis: Fortress 2006), 141-145.

²⁷ John Vickers, *The Schismatick Sifted*, quoted in Julia O'Faolain & Laurel Martines (eds), *Not in God's Image: women in history from the Greeks to the Victorians* (New York: Harper & Row 1973), 264.

tended to exclude women) and belief in direct inspiration by the Spirit (which tended to include them). Early Methodism provides the most extensive evidence of this because of the very many documents which survive from the ministry of John Wesley. It is widely agreed that Wesley himself was deeply influenced in his thinking on the subject of women and preaching by his mother Susannah, who emerged as the *de facto* pastor of her husband's (Anglican) parish in Epworth during his extended absences at the parliament in London. She was not formally recognized, of course, but whereas the curate who was officially left in charge of affairs could attract only a handful of people to his services, hundreds turned out for the regular devotions that Susannah ostensibly held for the benefit only of her own family. This pattern of informal meetings became the model for the Societies and class meetings that Wesley established to complement the more formal aspects of church life, thereby attempting to unite the institutionalism of groups like the Presbyterians and the spontaneous spirituality of the Quakers. Right from the start, Wesley evidently had no problem with women taking a leading role in his Societies, and he was often criticized because of the prominence he allowed to women. William Bowman was typical, insisting that 'A Third Mark of Imposture propagated by these mad Devotionalists is their teaching, that it is lawful and expedient for mere laymen, for women ... to minister in the Church of Christ, to preach ... and to offer up the prayers of the congregation in the public assemblies.'²⁸ Wesley initially sought to avoid unnecessary conflict with Anglicanism, and claimed that such activities were not really 'preaching', nor (because of their informal nature) did women's leadership of such groups constitute the exercise of authority over men, because in the context of what was in effect an extended family 'You do not act as a superior, but an equal; and it is an act of friendship and brotherly [*sic!*] love.'²⁹ There is a remarkable similarity between this and the nostrums of Henry of Ghent which we have already noticed, and such arguments are still used by those who wish to preserve a patriarchal hierarchy within their church structures while not appearing to deny the logic of their own theology of freedom and equality.

Wesley was unable to hide behind this subterfuge for long, and once the role of lay preaching was formally recognized it was inevitable that the question of women preachers would return. He was still resistant, though it could be argued that in the social circumstances of his day, the pragmatic approach advocated by Wesley was a wise one, for by insisting that the women in his Societies were operating as prophets and evangelists, and not pastors or priests, he avoided traditional arguments about authority and formal accreditation. Women, he claimed, engaged in prayer, testimony, and exhortation, but were not preachers because the speaking ministries in which they engaged did not technically correspond to the proper definition of a sermon – another distinction with its origins in the medieval church. A crucial difference between the 'exhorters' and the 'preachers' was that the latter began with a Biblical text that was expounded, whereas the former grounded their messages in their own personal experience.

²⁸ William Bowman, *The Imposture of Methodism Display'd* (London: Joseph Lord 1740), 27.

²⁹ John Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press 1931), vol 2, 233.

But just as no-one is a leader unless others follow them, so with preaching: no-one is a preacher unless others listen. The fact that women were being listened to – often by large numbers of people – highlighted the nonsensical distinctions that were being made between different forms of public speaking, and when in the early 1760s Sarah Crosby (1729-1804) wondered if she was transgressing by addressing large and eager crowds in Derby, Wesley effectively said that she was doing no wrong, just so long as she never called it ‘preaching’. In a later letter, he advised that ‘you may properly enough intermix short exhortations with prayer; but keep as far from what is called preaching as you can: therefore never take a text; never speak in a continued discourse without some break, about four or five minutes.’³⁰ Wesley did eventually accept that women’s speaking could be real ‘preaching’, and at the Manchester Conference of 1787 Sarah Mallet (1764-1846) was formally recognized as a preacher. It was, however, a short-lived victory and within a decade of Wesley’s death women’s preaching was restricted, and then banned, which is where matters rested in British Methodism until the third decade of the 20th century.

Meanwhile, the influence of Wesleyan theology was developing in new ways within what came to be the Holiness movement, with its roots in the Second Great Awakening in early 19th century America – so-called because of obvious similarities to the (first) Great Awakening of the 1720s-40s.³¹ George Whitefield (1714-70, a leader in the first Awakening), had denounced preaching that was ‘in the manner of a prepared essay rather than a living speech’ as being ‘a deficiency in faith’, a view shared by others at the time, and one that began to open the door to the possibility that uneducated women might have something to say.³² A century later, evangelist Charles Finney (1792-1875) regularly invited women to speak at his many revivalist meetings,³³ and justified the practice by insisting that the work of Christ not only reversed the consequences of the Fall, but that those who were truly sanctified by the Spirit were free from all sin – including, crucially, any inferiority that women might be supposed to have inherited as a consequence of the primeval actions of Eve. By the middle of the 19th century, denominations influenced by these revivalist movements were giving official sanction to women preachers, one of whom (Phoebe Palmer, 1807-74) published a book entitled *The Promise of the Father*, in which she defended women as preachers, while describing what they did as ‘talking to’ or ‘addressing’ congregations rather than ‘preaching’, because she regarded that word as irredeemably connected to the arid intellectualism and personal pomposity of male preachers.³⁴ When she visited Britain, she was defended in the face of her critics by another woman whose influence, if anything, was to be even more extensive: Catherine Booth (1829-90) who, though originally unsure whether women could be preachers, was

³⁰ Letter of March 18, 1769: John Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press 1931), vol 5, 130.

³¹ For a detailed account of the activities of women in this movement, along with biographical information on the leading individuals, see Susie C Stanley, *Holy Boldness: women preachers’ autobiographies and the sanctified self* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press 2002).

³² Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: preaching and religious culture in colonial New England* (New York: OUP 1986), 192.

³³ Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Women Preaching: theology and practice through the ages* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press 2004), 88-99.

³⁴ Barbara J MacHaffie, *Her Story: women in Christian tradition*, 2nd ed (Minneapolis: Fortress 2006), 199.

won over by the Holiness message that since sin was no longer a present reality in the life of the believer, women could never be regarded as second-class Christians on account of the actions of Eve. When the mission she co-founded with her husband William was formally constituted as the Salvation Army, she ensured that women were recognized from the outset as equal with men in all respects, including preaching.

By the beginning of the 20th century, women preachers were highly visible in groups influenced by the Holiness movement, represented in Britain by the Calvary Holiness Church and the Church of the Nazarene, but most especially in the many independent Holiness missions that sprang up spontaneously among working people in industrial centres such as Glasgow and Liverpool. The precise relationship between these movements and the rise of Pentecostalism is the subject of much discussion, but there can be no doubt that all the key players in the events of Azusa Street, Los Angeles, in 1906 (widely regarded as the origins of modern Pentecostalism) had previous connections with Holiness preachers.³⁵ One of the much vaunted hallmarks of the early Pentecostal movement was that the experience of the Spirit created a level playing-field in which the only qualification for ministry was a person's own direct experience of God. True to this promise, one major Pentecostal denomination was founded by a woman – the flamboyant Aimee Semple MacPherson (1890-1944), whose Angelus Temple near downtown Los Angeles is still packed every Sunday, and from where in 1922 she preached what is claimed to be the first ever sermon to be broadcast (on radio). At the time of her death, 67% of all the ordained clergy in her International Church of the Foursquare Gospel were women, though the number has consistently diminished ever since. While Pentecostal women are naturally concerned about this,³⁶ by the end of the 20th century more than 50% of all the women who had ever been ordained in any church anywhere in the world were Pentecostal.³⁷ It was only with the rise of the charismatic movement that questions about women preachers began to be asked, under the influence of individuals from fundamentalist evangelical churches who brought their own hermeneutical baggage with them.

So far, we have restricted this discussion to a consideration of the role of women as preachers in more or less formal situations within the life of the churches. But if we adopt a slightly wider perspective, there is a good deal more than can be said in relation to the part played by women preachers in the wider Free Church tradition. For example, if instead of focusing on the formal recognition of women's contributions as preachers, and instead reflect on the Biblical pattern of communicating God's will, it is arguable that preachers are not the only ones to have done this, but may not be the most important either. For many congregants, the major source of their understanding of God has come

³⁵ For a recent accessible account, see Cecil M Robeck, *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival: the birth of the global Pentecostal movement* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson 2006). Also Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: the rise of Pentecostal spirituality and the reshaping of religion in the twenty-first century* (Reading MA: Addison-Wesley 1995).

³⁶ Cf Sheri R Benvenuti, 'Pentecostal Women in Ministry: Where Do We Go From Here?', in *Cyber Journal for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research*, 1 (January 1997), accessed at <http://www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyber1.html>

³⁷ Rosemary Skinner Keller & Rosemary Radford Ruether (eds), *In our own Voices: four centuries of American women's religious writing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1995).

not through sermons, but through hymns – often to the dismay of theological purists, who dislike what they regard as the over-simplification of the message. In the Victorian and Edwardian eras especially, many women found an unexpected way into the hearts and minds of Christian people by becoming hymn-writers. In the Free Churches in particular, this could become an especially influential role, as the singing of hymns compensated for the absence of visual and tactile symbols of the divine, and offered some possibility of interaction with other worshipper in churches that had rejected the natural responsiveness of traditional ancient liturgies. In many Free Churches today, the place of singing has been elevated to even greater liturgical importance, with the widespread adoption of an extended ‘time of worship’ that consists of nothing but singing, largely under the influence of the charismatic movement though not restricted to such congregations. While this often tends towards a dumbing-down of ‘worship’, with the singing of individualistic banalities rather than the praise of God, at its best such worship can be the liturgical equivalent of a traditional choral eucharist. Even today, many women are still ‘preaching’ to chauvinistic congregations through the words of their songs.

Women have also made significant contributions in terms of outreach ministries to other women. Throughout the twentieth century, Free Churches in particular had a tradition of vibrant mid-week meetings for women who were ostensibly ‘unchurched’, but for whom such meetings actually were their church – and again, women played a significant part as preachers in such contexts. Women also had a huge influence in the Protestant missionary movement, often accomplishing much more than men ever did, and exercising ministries of all kinds, whether officially approved or not. There have been many attempts to understand why women were allowed to do overseas what they were forbidden to do at home. Sometimes it was just a matter of ‘out of sight, out of mind’. But tolerance of their activities may also have been underwritten by imperialism and patriarchy, for in a world where non-white people were regularly regarded as not fully human it could seem perfectly natural that other second-class humans should minister to them. Such thinking certainly operated in Britain, where the teaching of the young in Sunday Schools was mostly regarded as women’s work. Being a child was also regarded as a less than fully human state, as evidenced by the way in which children were not fully included in the household of God until attaining ‘years of discretion’ – at which stage only men would teach them. Even in these days of supposed equality, women still find themselves on the margins and a much higher proportion of women than men end up working with congregations in poor circumstances. A key to understanding some of this undoubtedly lies in the way in which singleness was also regarded as the ideal for women who were involved in Christian work.³⁸ Male fear of female sexuality is definitely a sub-text here – and is not just yesterday’s problem, for it surfaces in one way or another in more than one of the personal stories recounted elsewhere in this book.

Much more could be said on all these subjects. In conclusion, though, we identify several key questions that have emerged which are of some importance for the future practice of the Free Churches. One obvious question is how to acknowledge the value of rigorous theological study while also affirming the faith experiences of those who have not had

³⁸ Cf Philip B Wilson, *Being Single: insights for tomorrow’s church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2005).

access to such education. A huge amount of harm has been inflicted on gifted women, who have not only been baffled by the highly intellectualized nature of much preaching, but have also been taught to believe that their own understandings of God are so simplistic that even talented communicators of the Gospel can feel obliged to insist that, 'I'm not really a preacher, of course'. It is also the case, however, that women with theological education can find themselves put down by male clergy who pride themselves in their own ignorance by disdaining any form of intellectual endeavour. The two of us frequently find ourselves faced with both these reactions, especially when we minister among the Free Churches.³⁹ As we write, we have on our desks an invitation to lead weekend workshops on mission issues from just such a church, with the hope that John will do 'serious' sessions on the changing nature of our culture in relation to Gospel issues, and for Olive to run sessions on storytelling. In our case, there is no empirical reason at all why churches should pigeonhole us in that way, as we both have postgraduate degrees in theology and both teach regularly in a graduate school in California as well as in degree courses in the UK. There are therefore no prizes for guessing the real agenda! At the same time, though, the likely outcome is equally transparent and predictable. For when we go we will both share equally in the 'serious' sessions (as also in the Sunday worship), and John will likely join the storytelling workshop as a participant along with everyone else. On past experience, the further outcome will almost certainly be that this sort of partnership will be well received and may just encourage that congregation to move beyond what is still the medieval distinction between a 'real' sermon and a more homely 'story'. Paradoxically, churches that think this way also tend to be the sort of people who display bumper stickers asking, 'What would Jesus do?' If they thought about it, the answer to that might also surprise them! Many churches seem to end up with this kind of thinking not because they are card-carrying chauvinists, but rather because they don't actually think at all about what they do and how they do it.

Beyond traditional chauvinist arguments, some would argue that there is an intrinsic difference between the ways in which men and women function and communicate, and of course we all have different strengths and weaknesses and function best in one form rather than another. But ultimately it is the culture that makes these distinctions and imposes them on us, not our innate humanity or gender. These cultural expectations can be spiritually damaging to both women and men, but are also deeply rooted in the way we now do theology, indeed in what we think theology actually is.

In addition to such pragmatic concerns, we also need to take account of the way that both the form and function of preaching is being closely scrutinized today, and at least one well-informed study has claimed that it is both unbiblical and unnecessary.⁴⁰ This question is especially pressing in the Free Church context because of the way that preaching is claimed to be central to worship. If the sermon is to be the main dish, it

³⁹ In our experience, Anglicans and Roman Catholics seem much less likely to react like this – though whether that relates to the nature of the different traditions, or is more a reflection of the sort of church that choose to engage with us, is not easy to decide.

⁴⁰ David C Norrington, *To Preach or not to Preach: the church's urgent question* (Carlisle: Paternoster 1996).

needs to offer spiritual nourishment. Jarena Lee (b.1783) was the daughter of freed slaves, and an officially endorsed itinerant preacher within the American Methodist Episcopal Church. Her autobiography eloquently expresses the question that women preachers have struggled with through the ages. Referring to Mary Magdalene as the first preacher of the resurrection, she observed that ‘...some will say that Mary did not expound the Scripture, therefore, she did not preach, in the proper sense of the term. To this I reply, it may be that the term ‘preach’, in those primitive times, did not mean exactly what it is now made to mean; perhaps it was a great deal more simple then, that it is now – if it were not, the unlearned fishermen could not have preached the gospel at all, as they had no learning.’⁴¹

We have both argued elsewhere that storytelling (especially as personal faith story) is a particularly appropriate medium for communication of the Gospel in a post-modern culture,⁴² but style is just as important as content. Eunjoo Mary Kim gets to the heart of things when she points out that ‘if the preacher uses prescriptive, propositional, imperative, authoritarian, and judgmental language, which has traditionally been categorized as male language, the congregation is tamed to acknowledge the hierarchy between the pulpit and the pews and thereby becomes passive believers’, whereas ‘if the preacher uses descriptive, imaginative, poetic, inviting, and inspiring language, which has traditionally been categorized as feminine language, the congregation becomes active believers, autonomous in nurturing their faith and understands the church as an egalitarian community.’⁴³ This correlates very well with the account of Acts 20:6-12 and also resonates with our own experience. Reference has already been made to Olive’s ministry through clowning,⁴⁴ and part of the genius of a clown sermon is that it recasts preaching in an entirely different genre, and in the process creates a space in which people no longer feel bound by their traditional expectations and assumptions. Further, by focusing on the element of witness and personal testimony – though in connection with the historic tradition, especially through its emphasis on the centrality of the cross as divine marginalization and identity with redemptive suffering – it has an authenticity that points to a God who is not found in clever answers, but in the ambiguity and complexity of life as we all experience it.⁴⁵

We cannot leave this without saying something about the nature of the church, and of theology and theological education. Free Church ecclesiology has always prioritized ‘the priesthood of all believers’, whether or not that actual phrase is used. A recurring feature of this story is the way that women have found relatively easy acceptance at times of spiritual renewal, but the ensuing institutionalization of the very structures that set them

⁴¹ Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs Jarena Lee, giving an account of her call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Printed and published for the Author, 1849), 36. Can be accessed at http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/wwm9716/@Generic_BookView

⁴² John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2000); Olive M Fleming Drane, *Clowns, Storytellers, Disciples* (Oxford: BRF 2002).

⁴³ Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Women Preaching: theology and practice through the ages* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press 2004), 75.

⁴⁴ For the record, she does not always minister in this guise, though it has become one of her more distinctive images.

⁴⁵ Cf Olive M Fleming Drane, *Clowns, Storytellers, Disciples* (Oxford: BRF 2002), 110-145.

free has then conspired to marginalize them. In the context of the Free Churches, the social processes of rationalization have also tended to create an aspiration to be indistinguishable from other, more ancient and established, forms of church. More often than most are prepared to admit, Free Church clergy can operate in an even more hierarchical mode than their colleagues in the wider catholic tradition, albeit being held to account by congregations in ways that frequently undermine their ability to accomplish much at all.⁴⁶ In fact, the congregational ecclesiology that in theory ought to have created spaces for women as preachers and leaders of worship often turns out to be the major blockage, for many (perhaps most) local congregations are still resistant to regarding the preaching of women as the real thing. Ultimately, the experience of women as preachers is unlikely to be changed until the way that we do theology is also reimagined – doing theology in the strictest sense of the word, that is, namely asking how we can know God. Is theology a deductive or an inductive process? Do we begin from theories and abstract ideas, or with human experience? Is it a philosophical system, or a matter of praxis-reflection?

The frequently made distinction between expounding scripture and telling a story is in fact purely arbitrary and artificial. Forty years ago, majority world Christians were discovering that their own stories were inextricably bound up with how they read the Bible. Western Christians had, of course, done the same thing for centuries, but because of their love affair with Cartesian rationalism they managed to convince themselves that they were ‘objective’ (a good thing) and untarnished with ‘subjectivity’ (a bad thing). It has taken us a long time to appreciate that there is no such thing as a presuppositionless exegesis, and that to espouse such a thing can produce a very emaciated version of the Gospel that might feed the intellect, but does little to nourish the soul. The hermeneutical cycle now so beloved of practical theologians has at its heart the integration of personal experience with wider historical and Biblical awareness. In sorting out matters of personal identity and meaning, most people intuitively start with their own experiences of life, and then ask questions of the wider tradition. Most clergy, on the other hand, are still trained to start with the tradition and then to apply it to the circumstances of real life. Even then, it tends to be other people’s lives, rather than their own experience of God. There is a serious discontinuity here that goes to the heart of the subject we have been considering, and which contributes to the widely-held notion that theological education tends to stifle the life of the Spirit.

Consideration of women as preachers, then, raises some profound questions about the nature of Christianity in the 21st century. In the context of the Free Churches, and taking account of recent developments in the wider context of the world church and ecumenical relationships, it also brings back to haunt us the observation first made by Paul Tillich almost fifty years ago: ‘The Protestant era is finished, after nearly all the historical

⁴⁶ Significantly, the only group that seems to have navigated that particular minefield with some success (at least as far as women are concerned) is one that from the outset has had a hierarchical structure, namely the Salvation Army. This parallels the Anglican experience, in which women have made significantly greater progress in a shorter space of time than in any of the major Free Church denominations. This must be saying something about an ecclesiology that generally prefers committee-based decision making over against the inspired leadership of visionary individuals.

conditions upon which it rested have been taken away from it'.⁴⁷ If 'Free Churches' is substituted for 'Protestant', could that be the biggest question of all?

⁴⁷ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 1948), 286.