Introduction

In 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the door of Wittenberg church. Seventeen years later, King Henry VIII in England lost patience with the pope and rejected his authority. His quarrel was not with the church but with the pope who refused to annul Henry’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon. The Act of Supremacy made Henry the head of the Church of England, but it did not make him a “Protestant.” He kept the Catholic religion essentially intact, and he continued to persecute Protestants; and he dissolved the monasteries in England. In 1546, Anne Askew, a preacher and teacher, was arrested, tortured in the Tower of London, and burned at the stake.

The Protestant Reformation did not come to England until Elizabeth I was crowned in January 1559. Hers was a moderate Protestantism, and she disapproved of the Puritans who wanted to “purify” the Church of England of its Catholic elements. Blocked from changing the established church and severely restricted in England by laws controlling the practice of religion, the Puritans emigrated, first, to the Netherlands, and then between 1630 and 1650, to the New World.

At the same time in England, George Fox (1624–1691) and Margaret Fell (1614–1702) founded the Society of Friends (Quakers), for which both were persecuted, and were often imprisoned. Margaret Fell wrote a short pamphlet called Women’s Speaking Justified, a Scripture-based argument for women’s ministry, and one of the major texts on women’s religious leadership in the 17th century. She based her argument for equality of the sexes on the belief that God created both men and women and both were capable of not only possessing the Inner Light but also the ability to preach.

Susanna Wesley (1669–1742), known as the mother of Methodism, gave birth to 19 children, including her two famous sons,
John and Charles Wesley. Distressed by the poor preaching in the local Church of England, she assembled her children for a family service every Sunday afternoon, reading a psalm and then one of her father’s sermons. Neighbors began asking to attend her services, and soon 200 people were crowded into her barn every Sunday to listen to God’s Word from the mouth of this godly woman.

Susanna’s son John Wesley (1703–1791) created a new religious movement, called the Methodists; and linking up with the powerful evangelist George Whitefield (1714–1770), he launched the great 18th-century revival in England and Wales. They worked alongside Selina, Countess of Huntingdon (1707–1791), who founded 64 chapels and funded many others, appointing ministers to officiate in them. Most of these chapels later joined with the Congregational churches. When the need arose, she founded a minister’s training college that later merged with Westminster College, as part of Cambridge University.

All three of these English women played a part in evangelism in the American colonies. Margaret Fell and Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, were able to do much because they had wealth and position. But to assume that all women in England had similar opportunities is a serious error. Roughly half the population lived in one-room cottages, and women were bound by English Common Law that denied them what we would consider today to be basic rights.

This historical overview of women and church leadership will now shift to the New World as Puritans settled in the Boston area, Quaker missionaries from England traveled in most of the colonies preaching for conversion, and in the 18th century, George Whitefield joined forces with Jonathan Edwards in the First Great Awakening.

I. Women and Christianity in the American Colonies

Most of what we know about colonial views on the nature of women and on their appropriate behavior in church comes from sermons and other writings of the Puritan clergy in New England. These writings were voluminous, published, sold, and read throughout the colonies. They played an important role in shaping American religious life. Church records give us some idea of the extent to which theories on women’s roles were carried out in practical ways, or whether or not women could act con-
trary to these ideals. What we lack is knowledge of how women viewed themselves within the Christian communities. Some written works by colonial women are coming to light, and what is emerging from these is not the expected picture of colonial churches as being uniformly and rigidly patriarchal.

A. “The bad woman”

In the early colonial decades (1620s–1690s), the ancient image of “the bad woman” so prominent in medieval thought lingered on, especially in New England. Women’s minds were thought to be incapable of handling anything more basic than rudimentary learning. Learning was considered not only inappropriate and futile for women but even dangerous. Governor John Winthrop was convinced that the wife of Mr. John Hopkins of Connecticut had lost her sanity “by occasion of giving herself wholly to reading and writing” and by meddling in things proper to men.

In a society that valued religious and moral integrity above all else, the accusation that women were spiritually and morally weak was even more serious:

- Once again, women were thought to be powerful seducers and easy prey for sexual seduction.
- Women were accused of being prone to lying and more susceptible to doctrinal error and heretical opinions.
- The image of woman as “the devil’s dunghill” was not entirely out of line with much colonial thought.
- Although disputed, colonial literature discussed whether or not a woman even possessed a soul.
- The traditional images of Eve and Jezebel helped spread the view of the gullible woman who had direct contact with the powerful forces of darkness.

Such notions help us understand the power of the Salem witchcraft trials in 1692 in which 19 men and women were hanged; 16 had already been hanged before 1692 in New England.

The response to these ideas of female weakness was to keep women under control and in subjection in all areas of life. Women were excluded from positions of leadership in public life. They did fare better legally than their English sisters and did cast an occasional vote in New England town meetings, but in general they could not vote or hold public office.

B. Women and the colonial churches

This subjection was enforced in the colonial churches as well.
Church membership was open to women in all the colonial denominations, but the office of minister was closed to them in the Anglican and Puritan traditions. However, the Quakers (primarily in Pennsylvania) did allow women a remarkable degree of participation as ministers and missionaries.

Some churches forbade women to sing in the worship services, and some seated women apart from the men. In Puritan congregations, all candidates for church membership were in theory required to give a public declaration of their conversion. But some ministers insisted that women speak only privately about their conversions so they would not violate the New Testament command of silence. And of course, women were thought incapable of theological study or discussion and were required to defer to male church members or their husbands in matters of belief.

That was the prescription. The description tells us that exceptions emerged less than a generation after the first Massachusetts settlement in 1620 by the pilgrims, and these exceptions multiplied as the colonial period progressed: Women found opportunities for power and influence in the colonial churches. Church records for the Wenham, Massachusetts Congregational Church reveal a congregation open to equality even in the 1640s. Those women had to give a full articulate public account of their conversion. When a married couple left the church, the wife received her own letter of dismissal. One woman, Joan White, took an active role in governing the church, with her ideas accepted.

By the end of the 17th century, a more positive image of women in New England emerged. The concept of spiritual and moral equality between men and women began to replace the image of woman inclined to false beliefs and sin. Cotton Mather led the transition to thinking of women as spiritual equals as the balance of women to men in the churches shifted over time. Though men had outnumbered women in the churches during the first waves of immigration; by 1800, women outnumbered men in the pews 2 to 1. With that shift, the views on the nature of women shifted. Women were now thought to be endowed by nature with a whole cluster of characteristics that were specifically “feminine” and naturally more religious and moral than men.

Although the subordination in Genesis 3:16 continued as the spoken ideal, the Galatians emphasis on equality was closer to the truth in many colonial homes. In clerical families, women were encouraged to read the Bible as well as other devotional...
books and works of church history and theology. Women learned shorthand so they could take notes on sermons. Many were encouraged to write for the cause of salvation, works that were published at times by admiring pastors or quoted in sermons before an entire congregation.

Anne Hutchinson remains the first well-known woman on the North American continent to raise questions about the appropriate status of women in church and society, but she was only one of a number of women in New England who tried to participate in the reformulation of Puritan doctrine and who were prosecuted for failing to comply with clerical authority. Any impact such women might have had on the development of Puritan doctrine was curtailed by the increasing inclination to try rebellious and activist women as witches.

C. Apathy in the churches and the First Great Awakening

In both English and colonial American churches during the early years of the 18th century, apathy prevailed. Members didn’t take their obligations seriously. Sermons were no more than academic presentations on good living. Deeply felt piety was missing from the general understanding of Christian life. Then came the first Great Awakening under Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield in the colonies and under Whitefield and John Wesley in England. Once again, rebirth or conversion became the hallmark of the Christian experience, as did a devotion to righteous living. Preaching changed in style and content: It became more emotional and less formal in order to awaken congregations to their sinfulness and encourage them to turn to Jesus for salvation.

In the American colonies, the First Great Awakening began with outbreaks of conversions in New England and New Jersey, spreading in the 1740s throughout the colonies as a result of evangelist George Whitefield’s itinerant preaching. But the fervor and emotional enthusiasm of the Awakening troubled many clergy who feared the disruption to church order and who disparaged revival preaching as “a species of insanity” to which women were particularly susceptible. Ironically, it was not women but men who were converting in greater numbers, attracted by the new emphasis on sin and salvation.

But the First Great Awakening was also significant for women, giving them wider opportunities for participation. The conversion experience became a public ritual in which women joined. John Wesley appointed women as group or class leaders and
welcomed their public speaking as it took the forms of prayer, personal testimony, exhortation, and exposition on religious literature. Wesley approved Sarah Mallet, Mary Fletcher, and other women who wished to engage in “biblical exegesis and application” or preaching. And before the end of the 18th century, the Freewill Baptists permitted women to serve as preachers and evangelists, including Mary Savage who began to preach in New Hampshire in 1701.

The character of evangelical Christianity in the 18th century gives us clues why women were acquiring a wider role. Evangelicals emphasized that the experience of conversion dramatically changed men and women. Anyone who experienced God’s grace was compelled to tell others about it. Authority to speak or write was rooted in God’s warming of the heart, not in theological education or church approval. Many evangelical leaders were open to experimentation in matters of church life. If the experiments brought more people to Jesus, they were acceptable. Wesley permitted laymen to preach and, before long, laywomen were included. He believed that the awakening signaled extraordinary times in which exceptions to the biblical command of silence could be made.

Several prominent women aided in the Awakening:

- Anne Dutton, a prolific and talented English writer, published numerous poems, tracts, and a magazine called The Spiritual Magazine. All her writing was infused with a sense of wonder at the transformation God had carried out in her life and a sense of obligation to open this experience to others. She often wrote anonymously to insure that her work was published. She didn’t hesitate to speak out against clergy who deviated from the gospel, and she often fulfilled a pastor’s role in offering counsel. Her experience of God’s grace gave her confidence in her worth and destiny, which society could not shake.

- The Countess of Huntingdon, Selina Hastings, impacted revival in the American colonies, pioneering women’s work in missions and social reform. She directed a mission to the Cherokees in Georgia.

- Sarah Osborn led women’s groups for Bible study, prayer, and discussion in Rhode Island, beginning in 1741. Her experience with Newport Society led her to take an active role in the revivals sweeping the area in 1766–67. She struggled to defend the work she believed God had
set for her despite criticism from people around her. In 1765, she began meetings for free black people on Tuesday evenings and for slaves on Sundays. Word of her compassion spread, and white people (male and female) began crowding her home on other evenings of the week. But some in the community insisted that she give this up because she was not qualified to have a leadership role. They said she was dangerously close to forbidden territory by discussing theology with both men and women, and she was threatening the social order by making black people proud and disobedient (because the gospel moved people to equality).

Quakerism appealed to women in both Britain and America because claims about the equal spiritual status of men and women were given concrete form in both domestic life and in the public arena, especially in institutional structures of Quaker society. Also, the Quaker religious experience gave women a source of power with which to criticize cultures in which injustice and intolerance flourished.

Early in Quaker history, separate Women’s Meetings were formed that were equal in scope and status with those of the men. Women collected and disbursed their own money for charity, disciplined members, discussed topics like female dress, proposed marriages for members, and elected delegates to larger regional gatherings of Quaker women.

Preaching was open to women as well as to men. The Quakers eliminated the need for a specially trained interpreter of the Bible. They also eliminated the sacraments as part of worship, and thus the need for someone to celebrate them. They did not formally ordain people to ministry. They “acknowledged” certain members, both male and female, as being gifted with preaching and counseling skills and charged them with spreading the Quaker message and instructing and overseeing Quaker communities. They responded to criticism for these practices with three important biblical points:

- Men and women were equal in status before the fall and were restored to equality by the redemptive work of Jesus.
- First Corinthians 14:34-35 was addressed to a specific group of people who had not experienced God’s grace.
- In the New Testament, numerous women spoke and taught on religious matters.
The Inner Light was a source of strength and power for many Quaker women, enabling them to undertake journeys calling for enormous physical endurance. They defied established authorities, were whipped, pilloried, and expelled from Virginia. Mary Dyer was hanged in Boston in 1660, refusing to recant in order to save her life. The Inner Light appears to have enabled some Quaker women to make autonomous decisions about their life’s work even with family responsibilities. When God called, they answered in spite of pregnancies, young children, or the needs of husbands.

II. Nineteenth-century women organizing for mission and reform

The 19th century brought change not only to women but change to religion itself. As early as 1650, the Puritan clergy began lamenting the absence of men in the pews on the Sabbath. And by 1700, it had become clear that the siren call of economic success in the New World had begun to replace the church steeple with the marketplace in colonial life. In addition to the almost unlimited economic opportunities in America, at least six new ideas were also demanding attention.

A. The first new idea was a change in the way both men and women thought about themselves in relation to the group.

By the 1700s, the interdependence of the early colonists was being replaced with John Locke’s “natural rights” philosophy and the focus on the individual rather than on the common good of the community. Some of Locke’s ideas made their way into the American Declaration of Independence—ideas like the inalienable right of individuals to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or the notion that all men are created equal.

B. The second new idea came from changing role relationships in the Industrial Revolution.

Earlier, a colonial wife had a good knowledge of her husband’s business and could run it in his absence. Women in colonial America had important roles as “deputy husbands,” which meant that women could shoulder male duties—anything from planting corn or running a ferry boat to managing the external affairs of the family. But 18th-century wives knew relatively little about their husbands’ work. The “pretty gentlewoman” emerged and women’s work and space were separated from men’s work and
space. The Industrial Revolution took workers out of the home and into the new mill and factory towns. With that major demographic shift, a new construct of ideal roles emerged.

C. The third new idea came out of the First Great Awakening with its revitalization of religious faith.

Fiery revival sermons called people to “forsake their ‘unconverted’ ministers and experience the new birth.” This assurance of salvation was new, and battles raged within churches and entire denominations over the challenge to clergy authority. The First Great Awakening polarized colonists sharply along religious lines, at the same time that it encouraged women’s participation and that of African Americans in revival and congregational activities.

D. A fourth new idea was the move to independence from Great Britain with its consumer boycotts in the 1760s and 1770s.

Patriot women as well as men experienced growing pride and self-respect as they engaged in the successful revolution against British rule.

E. With independence came a changing view of women’s roles to that of republican motherhood.

This was a political role of teaching and training virtuous citizens for the new republic. When the Declaration of Independence declared that all men are created equal, the founding fathers used the word men literally. It did not include women, slaves, or men without property. The problem of female citizenship in the new republic meant giving women a civic role and an identity distinct from men’s. Women for the first time were to take over the task of educating their children, a task men had carried out for centuries. (While women like Susanna Wesley did home-school her large family, in most families, the father taught the children.)

F. The sixth new idea also came out of the Industrial Revolution: the full-time housewife with a husband who now earned enough money to cover family needs.

This became the mark of entry into the growing American middle class. Slowly but inexorably the Industrial Revolution separated “work” from home so that marriage was no longer seen as an economic partnership.
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G. As a result, women gained a new role in the churches.

As America survived the Revolutionary War and moved toward the 19th century with these six new ideas in place, the church was in a precarious position. In 1800, only 1 in every 15 Americans (6%) belonged to any church or religious body. (Americans tend to think that the USA is a Christian nation on a strong Christian base, but the statistics at the nation's birth challenge that notion.) With only 6% of all Americans belonging to any church or religious body, the vast majority of people in the pews were women.

Furthermore, nine out of the thirteen colonies had “established” religions (Congregational in Massachusetts, Baptist in Rhode Island, Anglican in Virginia, etc.). All of the people in these states were taxed to support the established churches. But with the revolution came the gradual disestablishment of the churches, turning the American religious scene into a free-for-all competition for members and money. At the same time, the Methodists and Baptists were sweeping not only through the expanding frontiers but through the older colonies as well. Previously state-supported denominations now had to compete with multiple other groups. Because at the end of the 18th century most members (the 6%) were women, the clergy turned to women for help in bringing the men back into the church. As a result, throughout the 19th century the clergy catered to women for help in bringing the men back into the church. As a result, throughout the 19th century the clergy catered to the women in the pew. One consequence of this was a softening of rhetoric in the pulpit and in our hymns. Sometime when you’re sitting in church, leaf through the hymnal, noting the dates when hymns were written and the kind of lyrics coming out at that time.

Also emerging early in the 19th century was what came to be called the “Cult of True Womanhood.” This was a cluster of ideas on the nature of women and their appropriate role. This permeated American culture to the most remote corners of the frontier, spreading mainly through the publishing industry flourishing between 1820 and 1850. It was called a cult because it was an almost sacred idea to which many people were devoted. The ideal woman was characterized by four things: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. This identification of women with religion led some clergymen to reshape Christian beliefs in ways more pleasing to women. For example, they abandoned the doctrine of infant damnation, and they stressed God’s mercy and love. In the process, women acquired a deeper sense of self-worth and an impetus to social action from the constant reminder from the pulpit and press that they were morally and
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If that were true, shouldn't women take a greater part in running the world? The Cult of True Womanhood gave women the right and power to extend morality and religion throughout America, as long as they were deferential to male authority. Between 1800 and 1850, thousands of women joined a host of female voluntary societies for religious, benevolent, or reform purposes. They started maternal societies to train women to be good mothers. Missionary societies were formed to bring the Christian faith to large segments of the population in “godless” cities or on the “barbaric” frontier. Women raised funds to support various evangelistic efforts to Native Americans. They formed Sunday schools to teach poor children religion and how to read. They distributed Bibles and aided churches in poor sections of major cities. They paid preachers to minister to seamen and they helped young men go through seminary.

Benevolent associations, often led by women of wealth and status, cared for orphaned children, indigent young women, and widows. They provided food, clothing, and occasionally shelter for them. Some groups opened schools, which taught women reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion. Reform associations emerged, directing attention to creating a Christian America through social change. These women were concerned about peace, temperance, prison reform, and moral reform (closing brothels and converting prostitutes). These crusading women adopted bold tactics, descending on brothels to pray and talk with prostitutes, and working against the double standard by publicly listing names of respected men who patronized such places.

What came of all that activity? Women contributed great sums of money and countless hours to the religious and social welfare of many citizens. They improved living conditions in urban areas and met needs that others didn’t consider. But something deeper was also happening. Through all of these efforts women gained a knowledge of the democratic process of government. They experienced self-development and companionship, which took them out of their domestic world, and they had a chance to use their physical and mental resources outside the home.

The clergy encouraged women to get involved as long as they stayed as helpers, assisting men, doing their work modestly and in subtle and quiet ways. But like the sorcerer’s apprentice, the clergy turned the household “living broom” into a living ener-
getic being, and they had no spell to turn it back into a broom again. The voluntary associations gave women an opportunity to learn certain organizational skills, which enhanced their own sense of self-confidence and self-worth. In addition, women benefited from the support of other women, and they made group meetings a priority. They learned from each other and acquired a sense of solidarity with other women.

This sense of solidarity led women to crusade against the oppression of women. Temperance groups spoke out against the drunk husband who victimized his wife. Moral reform groups spoke against the male lecher who tricked young women into prostitution. Benevolent societies worked against factory owners who took advantage of female employees.

The most direct link between revival-grounded reform and women’s rights came in the antislavery societies of the 1830s. Abolition of slavery grew out of the revival preaching of Charles Finney and his followers. Antislavery societies multiplied for both men and women. But the antislavery movement directly raised the issue of the status of all women, leading to a serious discussion of what came to be called “the woman question.” At issue was whether or not women actually had a special sphere of life differing from that of men.

### III. Women in mission

Until the 19th century, foreign missions were the domain of men. The missionary societies, which screened candidates, raised funds, published materials, and supervised fieldwork, were organized and run by men. Women could do no more than pray privately for the work and attend special sermons preached to raise money for missions. But the Second Great Awakening (1830s/1840s) changed this. Women began to take a more active role in the cause of spreading Christianity throughout the world.

Changing Patterns for Women from the 17th to the 21st Centuries

**Foreign Missions**

By 1850 three women’s boards for foreign missions had made women a major force in world missions:

- Women raised huge sums of money to support women in missions.
- They built and ran complex national organizations and introduced creative ways to educate church members about missions.
- Above all, they elevated the status of women on the mission field, winning full missionary status for wives and making mission work overseas an option for large numbers of single women.
- By the early part of the 20th century, women represented two-thirds of the overseas missionary force.

If a woman in the early 19th century felt called to devote her life to “spreading the light where there was darkness,” her only option was to marry a missionary and go overseas as his wife. Her primary task was to provide her husband with a serene, well-run and comfortable home, as well as to teach morality and religion.
to her children as an example to the native population around her. The missionary wife had no official status in the mission society, and she had no vote in running the daily affairs of the mission station.

Then, in the 1820s, under pressure from women, mission boards began reluctantly sending a few single women overseas, but the appointments were sporadic and made with hesitation. There was tension on fields where single women joined the work because men were reluctant to give women authority or responsibility. For this reason, in the late 1850s women began organizing their own missionary sending boards. By 1900, there were more than 40 such female sending societies in the USA. Some were totally independent with complete control of money and policy; others were independent but worked closely with men. Throughout the history of the women’s boards, some men continued to hamper and oppose the new groups. They had a deep-rooted fear that the women’s boards represented a movement for women’s rights in disguise.

These women’s boards made women a major force in world mission by 1900. Women raised huge sums of money to support women in missions. They built and ran complex national organizations, and they introduced creative ways for educating church members about missions. Above all, they elevated the status of women on the mission field, winning full missionary status for missionary wives as well as an equal vote in everyday affairs of the mission. They also made mission work overseas an option for large numbers of single women. By the early part of the 20th century, women represented two-thirds of the missionary force. These women taught or managed schools, published literature, orchestrated evangelistic campaigns, and engaged in preaching. In short, they were involved in activities not open to them in most of the American churches.

These mission boards enabled women to engage in work that was useful and important. They expanded professional opportunities for women. Finally, women in mission work began to understand other cultures and thus became more critical of their own, including the way in which women were treated. The Cult of True Womanhood gave women an opportunity to enlarge their sphere of activity by sanctioning their reform, benevolence, and mission efforts in which women grew in self-confidence.
IV. Nineteenth-century women as preachers and scholars

The Second Great Awakening in the 1830s gave an evangelical character to large segments of American Protestantism, and two-thirds of the new converts were women under 50. Why were women so prominent as revival converts at this time? The evangelist Charles Finney made a notable contribution to widening the role of women in these revivals. He introduced new measures or techniques to stimulate conversions. One of these new measures was to allow women to speak and pray in mixed groups of men and women. Finney and his assistants believed that women should not be prevented from speaking about their faith if they felt deeply moved to do so. His policy aroused hostility among his colleagues, but he continued to do it. He later became president of Oberlin College, the first college in the USA to admit women. Among Oberlin’s early graduates was Antoinette Brown, the first woman to be ordained to the ministry in the Congregational Church.

But Finney wasn’t the only evangelical leader to endorse the public speaking of women. Luther Lee, founder of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, believed that women had the right to preach the gospel, and he preached the sermon at Antoinette Brown’s ordination, pointing to female prophets in the Old Testament and women “ministers” in the New Testament. Methodist W. B. Godbey wrote, “It is a God-given, blood-bought privilege and bounden duty of the women as well as the men, to preach the gospel.” The large Methodist Episcopal Church issued local preaching licenses to women until 1880 when they ended that practice.

Women were most active in the Holiness movements emerging within evangelical circles in the 19th century. Phoebe Palmer was a major force behind the movement. She traveled as an evangelist throughout the USA, in Great Britain, and Canada, and under her influence both Catherine Booth and Frances Willard were called to public ministries. Booth did as much as her husband William to establish the Salvation Army. She was an outstanding revival preacher who firmly believed in the equality of women and men in all spheres. Her own marriage as well as her work in the Salvation Army was based on that principle.

Frances Willard worked for a while as an assistant to Dwight L. Moody, speaking and writing for him on suffrage and temperance. Amanda Berry Smith, a black woman who spent the earlier
part of her life as a house servant, came into the holiness movement under the influence of Phoebe Palmer. She began an active preaching ministry that eventually took her to England, India, and West Africa.

The Holiness movement was first nurtured within mainline Protestant churches, especially the Methodist Church. But gradually, separate holiness denominations emerged with women widely participating well into the 20th century. The Church of the Nazarene guaranteed women the right to preach in its constitution of 1894. The Pilgrim Holiness Church, founded by Seth Rees, claimed that “no church that is acquainted with the Holy Ghost will object to the public ministry of women.”

V. The debate over women preaching

As one might expect, as women began to preach in various places, this raised the issue of the proper role of women in the church. By the end of the 19th century, most denominations had debated whether or not to sanction preaching and teaching by women.

The arguments for women in ministry were based on these points:

- Churches should not prohibit what women felt called by the Holy Spirit to do. This was considered the most persuasive argument in light of the 19th century’s emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-29).
- Women were needed in new roles to extend the work of the church. Urban expansion, immigration, and the growth of science all challenged American Christians, and many concluded that the churches could not afford to overlook the skills and energies of women with a proven record as “movers and shakers” in existing efforts to spread the gospel and reform society.
- The Bible figured prominently in the defense of women preaching:
  - Galatians 3:28 became the authority for all Christians on the status of women.
  - Some worked with Paul’s statements, concluding in 1 Corinthians 14 that only married women were prohibited from speaking; others noted that Paul condemned babbling but not the preaching of women.
  - Others pointed to ministering women in the Bible.
Many linked Peter’s quote of Joel’s prophecy at Pentecost to say that God was again pouring out His Spirit in America, making women’s preaching acceptable.

The arguments against the preaching of women were based first on biblical texts:

- The New Testament teaching on this issue was clear and grounded in reasons not affected by the passage of time. Woman was created after man and as his helper. Women brought sin into the world. Because the Holy Spirit dictated the Scriptures, that same Spirit could not be self-contradictory and call a woman to preach.
- They also argued that women’s sphere was as mothers and members of female religious groups. They could speak in small sex-segregated meetings but not in mixed groups.
- A host of social and historical reasons were used to attack those who allowed women to preach:
  - A pregnant woman or a nursing mother could not bear the exhausting duty of preaching.
  - A woman could not combine household duties and the demands of a preacher.
  - Most women didn’t have the proper education for the ministry.
  - Women did not have minds suited to theological study. They were intuitive, not logical and reasonable, and their preaching could not win back the men so desperately needed by American congregations.

The issue of women’s ordination was widely debated in the 19th century. Ordination in most congregations means the authority to preach, administer the sacraments, and supervise the affairs of the congregation. Some Congregational churches made the decision on a local level to ordain, and Antoinette Brown was the first woman to be ordained to a charge in East Butler, New York, in 1853. By 1900, there were 40 ordained women in Congregational churches. Although in 1880 the Methodist Episcopal Church rejected requests for ordination of Anna Howard Shaw and Anna Oliver, the Methodist Protestant Church (a small branch of the Methodist family) ordained Shaw a short time later. Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians did not admit women to ordained ministry until well into the 20th century.

Generally, women who hoped to be ordained to the ministry in the 19th century faced a lonely struggle, even within sympathetic denominations. A Women’s Ministerial Conference was formed in 1882 to provide a network of support for women, but
it had little power to enact changes. Some theological schools (Oberlin and Boston University) admitted women, but aspir-
ing candidates faced strenuous opposition at both the local and national levels of church life.

Conclusion

As in colonial America, some segments of the evangelical com-

munity in the 19th century encouraged women to preach and

speak in public. But for most American Christians, the case

against female preaching was stated plainly in the Bible along

with the doctrine of separate spheres and female subordination.

While the 20th century would open more pulpits to women as

pastors and preachers, the debates continued and are with us

still.

Blog: As you think about changes women brought about in the

church and changes for women themselves in the last four cen-
turies, make notes on the issues you think are most germane in
determining a position on women and church leadership.