

The Aggressive Christianity of Catherine Mumford Booth

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The American holiness movement of the mid-nineteenth century provided a fertile seedbed for women preachers responding to the Spirit's prompting. One such woman became the mother of a whole army of daughters, following their heroine into battle for the Lord. It was Catherine Mumford Booth (1829–1890), co-founder with her husband of The Salvation Army, who argued the innate equality of women and promoted them to clerical parity with men.¹

Assurance of salvation was a central concern in the Methodism of Catherine's youth. This should come as one listened to sermons, searched the heart and soul in class meetings, and read the Bible and prayed. "By assurance," she said, "I mean the personal realization of my acceptance in Christ . . . I mean the inward assurance which men and women find for themselves, or have revealed in themselves, which they know as a matter of consciousness."² Catherine struggled with this until she was sixteen; it seemed unreasonable to her that she could be saved and not know it. But, one morning, her eyes fell upon the lines of Charles Wesley, "My God, I am Thine, What a comfort Divine, What a blessing to know that my Jesus is mine!" She had read and sung these verses dozens of times, but now they came home to her soul with a force and illumination as never before. She wrote, "Previously not all the promises in the Bible could induce me to believe [I was saved]; now not all the devils in hell could persuade me to doubt."³

When we have the witness of the Spirit in our souls of our acceptance with God, that he does now for Christ's sake pardon and receive us, what power it brings. This is what the old divines called assurance of faith, a conviction wrought in the soul by the Holy Ghost that Jesus Christ has given Himself for me, that God has accepted that offering in view of my sin and transgression, and . . . has justified me freely from all things by which I could not be justified by the Law of Moses, and that in Him God becomes my Father, and now accepts me and looks upon me well pleased—a conviction wrought in my soul by the Holy Spirit.⁴

Catherine's thinking on women in ministry

Although an avowed supporter of women, Catherine Mumford's convictions about women in ministry evolved gradually. A year before she met William Booth, at the age of twenty-one, she wrote a letter to a London clergyman who demeaned the moral quality of women after Phoebe and Walter Palmer began holding revivals there. Her aim before she would marry William was to win him to her views. In fact, as a young girl, she had formed four qualifications for any future husband.⁵ One was most critical to her thinking: he must agree about the equality of women. She wrote, "There can be no doubt that Jesus Christ intended, by making love the law of marriage, to restore woman to the position God intended her to occupy; as also to destroy the curse of the Fall. . . . Of course there must and will be mutual yielding."⁶

After their engagement, Catherine sent William a letter with her ideas on "the position and mission of women." She argued

that it was a lack of education and not mental capacity that subjugated women. The day was just dawning on female education, and, therefore, any verdict on woman as an intellectual being was premature.⁷ Catherine's was the defining voice behind the institutionalization of women's ministry within The Salvation Army, but it is a tribute to her persuasiveness that she was able to convince others, including her own husband, that women preaching the word of the Lord received a biblical mandate.

Catherine's own education was attained mostly at home. Attracted to the writings of Wesley, Fletcher, and Finney, her training under the tutelage of her mother has been described as training of the soul and shaping of character.⁸ An intellectual by nature, she had read the Bible through eight times by the age of twelve, and by the age of twenty had become such an expert on the text that she was able to argue on equal terms with the most eminent scholars of her day.⁹ But she was later to bemoan the fact that her education was so meager. "Never till she is valued and educated as man's equal," she informed William, "will unions be perfect, and their consequences blissful." William responded that, though he would not like women preaching, he was in favor of the world's salvation and would "quarrel with no means that promises help."¹⁰ Four and a half years later, it was William who encouraged Catherine to take a more active role in chapel affairs. Charles Finney's wife Elizabeth was speaking to women's groups in England at the time, and most evangelicals thought this to be the limit of women's public speaking. But Catherine had other ideas. She wrote to her parents that if she found that she had any ability for speaking, she would also be preaching.

Her final commitment to the idea of female ministry came in late 1859. Preceded by Phoebe Palmer's books, *The Way of Holiness* and *Faith and Its Effects*, which had become very popular in England, the Palmers toured England in order to hold a series of lectures. To defend Palmer's preaching against critics, Catherine composed a thirty-two-page pamphlet entitled *Female Ministry: Women's Right to Preach the Gospel*. She began with the most common objection—that women preachers were unnatural and unfeminine. On the contrary, she argued, woman's "graceful form and attitude, winning manners, persuasive speech, and above all, a finely-toned emotional nature" are ideal for public speaking. And just as men have escaped the drudgery of the curse of the fall, why should not women?¹¹

Booth espoused no new hermeneutic in her discussion of the relevant scriptures to support her view of women ministers.¹² To the argument that female ministry is forbidden in the Bible, she referred, as Palmer had, to Paul's 1 Corinthians 11:4–5 admonition to women to cover their heads when they pray or prophesy

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in the assembly. As Palmer did, she appealed to the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy in Acts 2, that "your daughters shall prophesy." She interpreted 1 Corinthians 14 to mean "imprudent or ignorant talking," not a woman who is speaking under the influence of the Holy Spirit. She argued that even Jesus did not deny the Samaritan woman the right to proclaim the good news, and, if a woman has the call to preach from the Holy Spirit, there is no Scripture to disqualify her. She explained that Mary Magdalene was privileged to be the first to make the announcement of Christ's resurrection, and added that, just as woman was first in transgression, she was the "first also in the glorious knowledge of complete redemption."¹³ But the most important passage quoted in Booth's defense of female ministry was Galatians 3:28. Matters of racial, status, and sexual distinctions were all the result of the fall and a sign of sin. This passage taught, she avowed, "that in the privileges, duties, and responsibilities of Christ's Kingdom, all differences of nation, caste, and sex are abolished."¹⁴ To allow that Paul denied women that right does not fit with the preponderance of his own teaching and with the totality of Scripture. A general, inaccurate, and injudicious application of "Let women keep quiet in the churches," she argued, has resulted in loss to the church, evil to the world, and dishonor to God.¹⁵

Preaching ministry begins

Phoebe Palmer's preaching and effective revival methods overcame any lingering reluctance Catherine had to following her husband into public ministry. She began her preaching in the wake of the Palmer revivals on Whit Sunday, 1860, at her husband's Methodist New Connexion church. **A few weeks earlier, during an illness,** she had promised to obey God no matter what that might mean. At the end of William's sermon on this day, feeling the Spirit come upon her, she approached the front and asked to speak. William sat down as Catherine spoke of her struggle over her call to public ministry. Years later she reflected, "I had long had a controversy on this question in my soul. In fact, from the time I was converted, the Spirit of God had constantly been urging me into paths of usefulness and labor, which seemed to me impossible." She admitted to having been "one of the most timid and bashful disciples of the Lord Jesus ever [to be] saved. I used to make up my mind I would, and resolve, and intend, and then, when the hour came, I failed for want of courage. I need not have failed."¹⁶

She preached that night, initiating a thirty-year preaching ministry in England, unsurpassed in popularity by any man, including William. When the Booths broke with the New Connexion, **they traveled all over England conducting revivals. To double their power for good (and their income),** they often held separate meetings, and crowds thronged to hear Catherine. In Portsmouth, the crowd averaged one thousand people for seventeen consecutive weeks, and, at Hastings, two thousand five hundred attended nightly. Some came just to hear a woman preach, but her skill held their interest.¹⁷ Catherine's compulsion to preach and their dependence on two incomes drove her to share William's campaigns and to initiate revival services on her own. She was said to be formidable in the pulpit and in the press.¹⁸ Hundreds

made professions of faith under her ministry at that time. Her campaigns took her throughout London and as far afield as the eastern and southern coasts of England. Often her sermon topic was the "assurance of faith." "Nobody," she said,

knows the soul but God. Nobody can see the secret windings of the depraved heart but God. . . . Nobody can tell when a soul is whole-hearted but God, and as soon as He sees it, He will tell that soul it is saved; but, if God has not told you, be up and doing and strive to make your calling and election sure, for you are not saved yet, or you would know it. . . . Instead of trying to make yourself happy in this state of uncertainty and misery, for Christ's sake, get up and get saved.¹⁹

After William founded his East London Mission in 1865, Catherine became the main provider for the family, preaching in West London and selling her writings while William accepted no salary at all. When the Mission began holding annual conferences, Catherine insisted on the employment of women evangelists along with the men. The rules stipulated the rule of equality, although the introduction of women preachers (Bible Women) was accomplished slowly. In *Christian Mission Magazine*, the Booths argued that the work of the Mission had prospered most at the very time that women preachers were being allowed their fullest opportunity.²⁰ As the Mission grew into The Salvation Army in 1878, Catherine recruited and trained thousands of young women to be Army officers. Many from small towns, some only teenagers, these "Hallelujah Lasses" spread the Army around the world by 1890. They received six months of intensive immersion in practical evangelism, management, and literacy so that they could preach nightly, indoors and out, visit house to house, and raise money for their own support through the sale of William's weekly *War Cry*. Men raised from the ranks of the newly converted worked alongside the women, but William claimed that his "best men were women."²¹ When The Salvation Army came to America in 1879, there were only 165 women clergy and 65,533 males. By 1900, more than 9 percent of all its clergy were women (11,227).²² Of the Booths' eight children, three sons and four daughters grew up to align their energies with their parents' mission. Daughter Evangeline, who remained single, became the national commander of the Army in America from 1904–1934 and was elected the fourth general of The Salvation Army in 1934.

Social ministry

The Salvation Army is one of the largest organizations in the Christian Holiness Association.²³ Charitable ministries have always been an important part of the Army, and its aim from the beginning was to make converts from among the poor and down-fallen. Its social ministries were intended to supplement evangelism as natural expressions of God's love.²⁴ William had found his destiny in the slums of London, and Catherine, like Phoebe Palmer, believed that holiness meant that the Christian is a servant, sharing in Jesus' great work of suffering service to humanity.²⁵ As William Kostlevy explains, "Holiness leaders, like their eighteenth-century Methodist forebears, taught that sanctifica-

tion does not stop in the individual heart, but must overflow into social holiness.”²⁶ Their work among the poor was supported by gifts from friends and money earned as Catherine preached to the wealthy West Enders.

The Booths discovered that many who would never set foot inside a chapel would listen to a rousing sermon if it was delivered from the stage of an abandoned theater. Many of the women played musical instruments and used theatrics and costumes to draw in their audiences. Capitalizing on the appeal of commercial entertainment, at one of the meetings, a “Hallelujah Band” was formed out of converts. This lay organization was the first indication that the Booths knew that the common people could be reached best, not only by their own peers, but also by using media methods that they could appreciate. Thus, the Booths began to realize the benefit of using reformed sinners to bring the unredeemed to salvation. William was of the opinion that converts were saved to serve, for many of them had been lifted literally right out of the gutter; they were formerly drunks, thieves, and prostitutes, and it was their testimonies to God’s love and grace that proved the most compelling to the others whom society deemed unsalvageable.²⁷ As they unashamedly spoke of their newfound freedom in Christ from all that had enslaved them, one by one, their jeering opponents would join their ranks.

The unique mission of the Booths began when they became convinced that it was a mockery to talk about people’s souls when their bodies were perishing with hunger.²⁸ Catherine and William knew they had to follow Christ’s command, “Give ye them to eat” (Luke 9:13). Soon, they were immersed in finding work for the unemployed, assisting the poor with soup kitchens and handouts of food and clothing, and doing door-to-door surveys of spiritual and physical needs. While their primary focus was always on saving souls, “soup, soap, and salvation” became their battle cry, and nothing could stem the tide thereafter; the Booths could not turn their backs on the daily struggles of the poor.

One tenet of the Army has always been that with salvation comes the power to live a holy life. In one of her last sermons, Catherine proclaimed,

Perhaps on no point has the Salvation Army suffered persecution more than on this one point of its teaching: that it proclaims a Saviour **not only willing to pardon but who does pardon absolutely**, and who communicates a sense of that pardon by His Holy Spirit to the hearts of those who truly repent and sincerely believe; and that He not only washes their past sins away but has the power to keep them from their sins, and will, if they trust in Him, enable them to live in righteousness and holiness all their lives, walking in obedience to His commands, keeping . . . the law of Christ—which is the most perfect law and fulfills all others—loving the Lord thy God with all thy heart, mind, soul, and strength, and thy neighbour as thyself. Oh, for some mighty herald that would get up on every kerbstone, or every other available space, and proclaim to this poor world, full of hungry souls, that there is peace, pardon, purity for them, and power in a living Saviour to keep them from sin and to enable them to walk before Him and to enjoy His presence and smile.”²⁹

To those who complained that those who emphasized holiness did not make enough of Christ, she replied:

We make *all* of Christ; only it is a living Christ instead of a dead one. It is Christ in us as well as for us . . . those He is not *in* He will not be *for*. If He dwell not in you, ye are reprobates. But Christ in us—an ever-loving, ever-present, Almighty Saviour, is just able to do what the angels said He should do, that for which He was called Jesus, to save His people from their sin.³⁰

For her, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a system of truth to be received into the mind like one would receive a system of philosophy or astronomy, “but it represents Him as a REAL, LIVING, MIGHTY, SAVIOUR, ABLE TO SAVE ME *now*.”³¹

Women involved at all levels

Catherine abjured any title for herself within The Salvation Army in deference to William. She at first kept from having any of her sermons published and turned down an offer by a group of London men in 1868 to build her a tabernacle larger than Charles Spurgeon’s. She seemed to be plagued with a concern that she not appear superior.³² But, as far as equality is concerned, her ideas produced positive results. Women officers in the Army have always been afforded equal status and continue to make up half of its ordained officers.³³ If it had not been for her influence on behalf of female ministry, the Army might be just another inner-city ministry.

Catherine took advantage of every opportunity to discuss social issues and to stress the importance of women’s involvement in the church at all levels. She preached to royalty and did not hesitate to approach Queen Victoria for changes in oppressive laws. As a social reform movement in the 1880s, the Army drew much of its concern from Catherine’s involvement with the “Midnight Movement for Fallen Women,” which had opened her eyes to the depth of the misery and destitution of the poor of England and the necessity to combine evangelism with social action. As the calls increased, Catherine held more meetings, some in London’s largest halls, in engagements lasting as long as three months. Her West End work to the materially wealthy but spiritually poor provided continuing support for her husband’s work in the East End. She turned the tables on the comfortable and affluent Christians and insisted that they were responsible for the sweatshops, for employing women and children in filthy working conditions and at the lowest possible wage. “It will be a happy day for England when Christian ladies transfer their sympathies from poodles and terriers to destitute and starving children,” she urged.³⁴

In actuality, Catherine seemed far better known than William by the general public when he first began the Mission. Possibly nine out of ten who knew the name of Catherine Booth had never heard of William Booth’s work.³⁵ She became a tireless evangelist and preacher, usually preaching for over an hour. One of the bishops of the Church of England sent a letter to his clergy, urging them that, if they wanted to be aroused and stimulated to take the gospel to the masses, they should study the sermons of Catherine Booth. Here they would find inspiration and incentive.³⁶ The foreword to Catherine’s book, *Aggressive Christianity*, states that anyone expecting to find a “gospel of gush” will be happily disappointed in this small volume of her sermons:

She has the insight and intellectual penetration, the intuitive discernment of truth of St. John, and the Pauline ability to forge and weld together the successive links of a chain of reasoning. . . . In these sermons there is no incoherency . . . but sound theology in consecutive propositions set forth in natural and logical sequence . . . delivered with Divine unction, a river of truth set on fire by the Holy Ghost, bearing down or burning up everything before it.³⁷

The gospel entering the heart, she urged,

should be aggressive till it conquers the last lurking foe, through the power of the Holy Spirit wholly sanctifying it by an instantaneous finishing stroke given to original sin, as taught by John Wesley. This is a cardinal doctrine of the Salvation Army, and the secret of its conquering power.³⁸

A meeting for the promotion of this experience was held weekly within Salvation Army ranks.

Christianity should be aggressive until it subdues the whole world for Christ, she said, and this could happen when a generation of believers completely yields itself to the impulses of the Holy Spirit. Catherine was no pessimist, bemoaning the decay of Christianity and postponing the world's conversion until Jesus should come again. Her sermons were a healthy antidote to this paralyzing error. She exhorted Christians to make a grand evangelistic assault on the people of the world, even imposing the gospel upon them!³⁹ She preached:

People say you must be very careful, very judicious. You must not thrust religion down people's throats. Then, I say, you will never get it down. What! am I to wait till an unconverted, Godless man *wants* to be saved before I try to save him? He will never want to be saved till the death-rattle is in his throat. What! am I to let my unconverted friends and acquaintances drift down quietly to damnation, and never tell them about their souls, until they say, 'If you please, I want you to preach to me!' Is this anything like the spirit of early Christianity? No. Verily we must *make* them look—tear the bandages off, open their eyes, make them bear it, and if they run away from you in one place, meet them in another, and let them have no peace until they submit to God and get their souls saved. This is what Christianity *ought* to be doing in this land, and there are plenty of Christians to do it. Why, we might give the world such a time of it that they would get saved in very self defense, if we were only up and doing, and determined that they should have no peace in their sins. Where is our zeal for the Lord?⁴⁰

In addition to her preaching, Catherine wrote voluminously, publishing six books and countless articles in Christian Mission and Salvation Army publications. At her death at age sixty-one, all England mourned, and fifty thousand filed past her coffin. Her husband reflected that she had been indeed the "Salvation Army Mother," and her son-in-law, Frederick de Latour Booth-Tucker, wrote, "what better argument could we find in **favour of woman's** ministry than the success achieved by the five thousand women

officers and tens of thousands of women speakers whom Mrs. Booth left behind at her death."⁴¹ She not only attained a position previously foreign to women, but she fought for the equality of all women. He wrote, "She was to the end of her days an unflinching, uncompromising champion of women's rights."

Notes

1. Norman H. Murdoch, "Female Ministry in the Thought and Work of Catherine Booth," *Church History* 53 (Spring 1984): 348.
2. Catherine Mumford Booth, *Aggressive Christianity: Practical Sermons*, (Boston, Mass.: McDonald & Gill, 1883), 73.
3. Roger J. Green, *Catherine Booth: A Biography of the Cofounder of The Salvation Army* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1996), 31.
4. Booth, *Aggressive Christianity*, 78.
5. Green, *Biography*, 56.
6. Frederick de Latour Booth-Tucker, *The Life of Catherine Booth, the Mother of the Salvation Army*, vol. 1 (New York, N.Y.: Fleming H. Revell, 1892), 135.
7. Booth-Tucker, *The Life of Catherine Booth*, 119.
8. Green, *Biography*, 23.
9. Roy Hattersby, *Blood and Fire* (New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1999), 3.
10. Murdoch, "Female Ministry," 351.
11. Catherine Mumford Booth, *Female Ministry: or, Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel* (London: Morgan & Chase, 1870; reprint, New York, N.Y., 1975), 5–6.
12. Murdoch, "Female Ministry," 348.
13. Booth, *Female Ministry*, 16.
14. Roger J. Green, "Settled Views: Catherine Booth and Female Ministry," *Methodist History* 31, no. 3 (April 1993): 140.
15. Murdoch, "Female Ministry," 354.
16. Booth-Tucker, *The Life of Catherine Booth*, 358.
17. Green, *Biography*, 76.
18. Helen K. Hosier, *William and Catherine Booth: Founders of the Salvation Army* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour, 1999), 75.
19. Booth, *Aggressive Christianity*, 78.
20. Murdoch, "Female Ministry," 355.
21. Murdoch, "Female Ministry," 359.
22. Murdoch, "Female Ministry," 349.
23. Melvin E. Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1980), 94.
24. E. H. McKinley, "The Salvation Army" in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, ed. Daniel G. Reid, Robert D. Linder, et al. (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990), 1043.
25. William Kostlevy, "Saving Souls and Bodies," *Christian History and Biography* 82 (Spring 2004): 29.
26. Kostlevy, "Saving Souls and Bodies," 28.
27. Hosier, *William and Catherine Booth*, 119.
28. Hosier, *William and Catherine Booth*, 118.
29. Hosier, *William and Catherine Booth*, 118.
30. Booth, *Aggressive Christianity*, 72.
31. Booth, *Aggressive Christianity*, 71.
32. Murdoch, "Female Ministry," 359.
33. This is according to Jennifer Woodruff Tait, "'I Received My Commission from Him, Brother': How Women Preachers Built up the Holiness Movement," *Christian History and Biography* 82 (Spring 2004): 37.
34. Hosier, *William and Catherine Booth*, 77, 71.
35. Green, "Catherine Booth and Female Ministry," 138.
36. Booth, *Aggressive Christianity*, 9.
37. Booth, *Aggressive Christianity*, 10.
38. Booth, *Aggressive Christianity*, 11.
39. Booth, *Aggressive Christianity*, 12.
40. Booth, *Aggressive Christianity*, 28.
41. Murdoch, "Female Ministry," 362.