

Historical Egalitarian Theology: Contributions from European and English Women in the Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries

Julie Walsh

Although specific women who promoted egalitarian theologies since the Reformation have been studied, scholarship has not adequately traced the origins of their egalitarian beliefs. It can be shown that from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, a steady stream of European and English women wrote texts offering biblical views for women's equal roles in the home, church, and world.

*The Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide*¹ makes clear that many contemporary lines of reasoning for women's equality have their earliest beginnings in these sixteenth- through eighteenth-century writings by women. Including a few from North America, the writings of these women are highlighted in this study: Domenica Narducci da Paradiso (1473–1533), Argula von Grumbach (1492–ca. 1563/68), Marie Dentièrre (1495–ca. 1561), Katharina Zell (ca. 1498–1562), Teresa of Ávila (1515–82), Moderata Fonte (1555–92), Justina Sengers (fl. 1585), Rachel Speght (ca. 1597–ca. 1661), Bathsua Makin (ca. 1600–after 1675), Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–52), Sarah Cheevers (ca. 1608–ca. 1664), Margaret Fell (1614–1702), Katherine Evans (ca. 1618–92), Mary Cary (b. 1620/21, fl. 1647–53), Anne Docwra (ca. 1624–1710), Hester Biddle (1629/30–97), Johanna Eleonora Petersen (1644–1724), Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–95), Mary Astell (1666–1731), Susanna Wesley (1669–1742), Elizabeth Bathurst (fl. 1678–85), Anne Dutton (ca. 1692–1765), Mary Bosanquet Fletcher (1739–1815), Dorothy Gott (1747/48–1812), Jarena Lee (1783–ca. 1849), Phoebe Palmer (1807–74), Catherine Booth (1829–90), Amanda Berry Smith (1837–1915), and Frances Elizabeth Willard (1839–1898). The foundational thoughts and works by these twenty-nine women enable contemporary authors to retain and build the ongoing tradition of egalitarian scholarship.

Categories of Egalitarian Arguments

Using a modification of Paul Chilcote's categories, the following categories of egalitarian biblical arguments are well established:²

1. *Questioned Prohibitionism*. Refuting interpretations of the prohibition of women in key biblical texts (e.g., 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:12).
2. *Pauline Egalitarianism*. Egalitarian statements in Pauline texts (e.g., Gal 3:28).
3. *Apostolic Practice*. Women's leadership illustrates NT egalitarian practices (e.g., Rom 16:1–15).
4. *Messianic Witness*. Examples from Jesus's teachings and ministry (e.g., John 4:7–39; Matt 28:1–11).
5. *Biblical Exceptionalism*. Evidence of women used by God in the Bible.
6. *Prophetic Fulfillment*. OT prophecies referred to in the NT unveil a time when men and women will function as equals in God's realm (e.g., Joel 2:28–29/Acts 2:17–18).

7. *New Dispensation*. NT ideas that support women's equality in the new dispensation of Christ and the Spirit.
8. *Egalitarian Narrative*. These theories propose a new narrative theology about God's actions concerning women from the Bible's beginning to end.

We will see how these arguments can be identified in the publications of women who wrote in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Before that, we briefly review the sixteenth century for egalitarian arguments contributed by women. Throughout this article, these eight categories will be noted, in italics, when appropriate.

**Most Christian women throughout history
had been forbidden access to the Christian
scriptures, whether through almost
universal illiteracy as a result of deliberate
exclusion from education, or because
of the intentional barring of women from
study of the sacred texts.**

Europe: Reformation Period (Sixteenth Century)

Books authored before the Reformation by women advocating Christian egalitarianism are scarce. As Mary Malone says,

Most Christian women throughout history had been forbidden access to the Christian scriptures, whether through almost universal illiteracy as a result of deliberate exclusion from education, or because of the intentional barring of women from study of the sacred texts.³

Further, before the Reformation and even afterwards, very few women's writings were preserved by the church. For instance, during the Inquisition in 1580, Teresa of Ávila's *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (1566–1571) was ordered to be destroyed. We have access to it today only because a few copies were hidden.⁴

Despite these circumstances and more, we have several extant contributions from women dating up to the seventeenth century in the categories cited above. Consider Domenica Narducci da Paradiso (1507) from Italy, who argued that since Paul does not limit the freedom of the Spirit (*New Dispensation*) he was writing about women who were making too much noise during their church services in 1 Cor 14:34–35 (*Questioned Prohibitionism*). She added that God enables women to speak, preach, and prophesy to

confound the proud (1 Cor 1:27–29).⁵ Teresa of Ávila, writing in Spain from 1562 to 1582, was described by a papal nuncio as one who “teaches theology as if she was a doctor of the Church.”⁶ In response to church officials citing Paul’s letters opposing her leadership, Teresa countered with a hermeneutical principle: “they shouldn’t follow just one part of Scripture, but . . . should look at other parts, and ask them if they can by chance tie my [God’s] hands.”⁷ She also taught that Mary Magdalene was an apostle to the disciples, and she herself often closely identified with Mary (*Messianic Witness*).⁸

Among the Reformers, women like Argula von Grumbach in Bavaria, Marie Dentière in Geneva, and Katharina Zell in France provided biblical and theological support for women’s leadership. Grumbach (1523) justified her own prolific teaching with her sense of having a prophetic role as did many women in the Bible (*Biblical Exceptionalism*).⁹ “I don’t intend to bury my talent, if the Lord gives me grace,” Grumbach said.¹⁰ Dentière (1539) defended women’s ability to interpret Scripture and teach other women by giving examples of OT women (*Biblical Exceptionalism*) and women preaching in the Gospels (*Messianic Witness*). Dentière also countered a false interpretation that women should be silent (1 Cor 14:34) with instances of the grace given to women to “speak, preach, and declare [Jesus’s resurrection] to others” and the Samaritan woman of John 4 (*Questioned Prohibitionism*): “What preacheress has done more than the Samaritan woman, who was not ashamed to preach Jesus and his word, confessing it openly before all the world, as soon as she heard from Jesus that one must adore God in spirit and in truth?”¹¹ Similarly, Dentière recognized that the “Queen of Sheba had such wisdom that she is not only named in the Old Testament, but Jesus also named her among other sages.”¹²

Writing from France between 1524 and 1553, Zell used *Pauline Egalitarianism* and *Prophetic Fulfillment* to counter the text of 1 Cor 14:34 (*Questioned Prohibitionism*). She said, “You remind me . . . that the Apostle Paul told women to be silent in Church. I would remind you of the word of this same apostle that in Christ there is no longer male nor female and of the prophecy of Joel: ‘I will pour forth my spirit upon all flesh and your sons and your daughters will prophesy.’” Then, wittily, she compared her critique of those men to the words of Balaam’s ass: “I do not pretend to be John the Baptist rebuking the Pharisees. I do not claim to be Nathan upbraiding David. I aspire only to be Balaam’s ass, castigating his master.”¹³ Furthermore, Zell identified herself in her writings with the prophet Anna.¹⁴ Justitia Sengers (1586), a woman born blind, defended herself as a theological author by referencing Miriam, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Monica—women who praised God and wrote songs (*Biblical Exceptionalism*).¹⁵

With the exceptions of *Apostolic Practice* and *Egalitarian Narrative*, sixteenth-century European women used largely the same arguments writers rely on today,

England: Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Women continued to minister and publish biblical and theological defenses for their leadership in early modern Britain. Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld explain: “The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries provided women with more opportunities for ministry

than they had previously enjoyed, but only if they were willing to defy male leadership in the institutionalized churches or be associated with sectarian movements and endure the scorn of respectable society.”¹⁶ They continue: “But even when women such as Margaret Fell Fox sought to open the door for women through carefully reasoned scriptural arguments, there was no room for debate in theological circles. Women were admonished to keep silent in the churches, and the vast majority did.”¹⁷ In most denominations, arguments in favor of egalitarianism made by women were not supported by male theologians and pastors. We will treat these arguments using the eight categories listed earlier.

1. *Questioned Prohibitionism*

Questioned Prohibitionism counters interpretations of the prohibition of women in certain biblical texts. Over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many women such as Rachel Speght,¹⁸ Margaret Fell Fox,¹⁹ Anne Docwra, Johanna Eleonora Petersen, Juana Inés de la Cruz, Mary Astell,²⁰ and Mary Bosanquet Fletcher contributed arguments supporting the *Questioned Prohibitionism* category, usually appealing to a canonical interpretation such as Teresa of Ávila had used previously.²¹ Speght (1617), however, carefully exegeted 1 Tim 2:14, 1 Cor 7:1, and Eccl 7:28.²²

Fell Fox (1666), called the “Mother of Quakerism,” wrote from prison her most famous pamphlet supporting women.²³ Concerning 1 Cor 14:26–35, Fell Fox noted that “here the Man is commanded to keep silence as well as the woman, when they are in confusion and out of order.”²⁴ Moreover, she saw the women commanded to keep silent (1 Cor 14:34–35) as women still under the Law who had not come to Christ or the “Spirit of Prophesie” (1 Cor 11:4–5, Rom 10:4), for “he is the end of the Law for Righteousness to all them that believe.”²⁵ Additionally, Fell Fox recognized that Paul cannot be addressing all women since not all women have husbands (to consult with), and because Paul did not forbid Philip’s daughters from prophesying.²⁶ As for Paul’s injunction that a woman should not “usurp authority over” her husband (1 Tim 2:12), Fell Fox took the position that this says nothing about whether a woman can preach or speak in church.²⁷ She also suggested that the women addressed in 1 Tim 2:9–15 are the same as those mentioned in 1 Tim 5:11–15 who “grew wanton, and were busie-bodies, and tatlers, and kicked against Christ.”²⁸

There were other women of this period who interpreted the passages related to *Questioned Prohibitionism*. Though an English Quaker, Docwra (1683) used the hermeneutic of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England to dispute some views of 1 Tim 2:11–12. She said: “The Protestant-Religion forbids the expounding one place of Scripture to make it repugnant to another.” In support, she offered biblical examples of women preaching, Peter’s sermon using Joel (Joel 2:28–29/Acts 2:17–18), and Paul’s teaching in Galatians 3:28.²⁹ In Mexico, de la Cruz (1691) questioned the prohibition on women’s teaching by referring to the Roman Catholic Church’s recognition of the teachings of Bridget (c. 451–525), Gertrude (1256–1302), Teresa (1515–82), Maria of Agreda (1602–1665), and others.³⁰ As a Pietist, Petersen (1696) believed that 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:12 did not apply to her because “just as in Christ Jesus according to the giving of grace and the Spirit, neither man nor woman count (Gal. 3:28), so also grace and the gift of God are not to be dampened or

suppressed in a female person, according to the admonition of Paul (1 Thess. 5:19)” and 1 Cor 12:7.³¹

Astell (1706) asserted that Paul in 1 Cor 14:34–35 “argues only for decency and Order, according to the present Custom and State of things” with the proper standards of dress so that no inequality can be inferred (1 Cor 11:8) since “Praying and Prophecy in the Church are allow’d the Women.”³² Astell acknowledged that there is “no natural Inferiority among the Divine Persons, but that they are in all things Coequal”; therefore, the two genders must be “on a Level” in 1 Cor 11:8. Moreover, in 1 Cor 11:12 “the Relation between the two Sexes is mutual, and the Dependence Reciprocal, both of them Depending entirely upon GOD, and upon Him only.”³³

In the same vein as others before her, Bosanquet Fletcher (1771) wrote to John Wesley about the so-called prohibitive passages, declaring that 1 Tim 2:12 conveys only that a wife should not take authority over her husband or teach by usurping authority and that 1 Cor 14:34–35 deals with women disrupting, who should not meddle in church government.³⁴ If 1 Cor 14:34–35 is not interpreted in this way and is seen more generally as forbidding women to speak in church, Bosanquet Fletcher points to the internal contradictions that would conflict with Paul’s declarations in other passages, alluding to 1 Cor 11:5.³⁵ Chilcote views Fletcher’s letter as a significant turning point in Wesley’s life, as Wesley then not only *permitted* women’s activities if they had received an “extraordinary call” from God but also began to *encourage* women who felt compelled to the vocation of preaching.³⁶ Without access to the original Greek texts or to present-day knowledge of Greco-Roman culture, these women generally interacted only with translated texts.

Speght (1617) asserted the “good”-ness of women because of the promise of salvation in Gal 3:28—“male and female are all one in Christ Jesus”—countering centuries of enumeration of women’s flaws.³⁹

2. *Pauline Egalitarianism*

Pauline Egalitarianism foregrounds egalitarian statements in Pauline texts. This approach was employed by Rachel Speght, Margaret Fell Fox, Anne Docwra, Johanna Eleonora Petersen, Mary Astell,³⁷ and Anne Dutton.³⁸

Speght (1617) asserted the “good”-ness of women because of the promise of salvation in Gal 3:28—“male and female are all one in Christ Jesus”—countering centuries of enumeration of women’s flaws.³⁹ Fell Fox referred to Paul’s ideas that if women are weak, God’s strength is manifest in weakness (2 Cor 12:9), and that God chooses weak and despised things to bring to naught the things

that are (1 Cor 1:28).⁴⁰ Docwra (1683) and Petersen (1696) likewise pointed to the idea of equality in Paul’s Gal 3:28,⁴¹ and Astell (1700) used many biblical examples of women to further substantiate the Gal 3:28 message.⁴² Dutton (1750) responded to those who would silence her female voice by saying that all believers are gifted and commanded to be useful (1 Cor 12:1–31) and to share how Christ has impacted their lives.⁴³

3. *Apostolic Practice*

Apostolic Practice takes into consideration statements about female coworkers that illustrate NT egalitarian practices. Prominent among those who took this approach were Hester Biddle,⁴⁴ Margaret Fell Fox, and Mary Astell.

When Biddle (1662), a Quaker, was arrested for preaching to two to three hundred people, she justified herself to the court saying, “*Phoebe was a Prophetesse* [Rom. 16:1] and *Philip had four Daughters that prophesied* [Acts 21:9], and *Paul* wrote to his Brethren that they should take care of *the women that were fellow labourers with him in the Gospel* [Phil. 4:3].”⁴⁵ Following Biddle, fellow Quaker Fell Fox (1667) argued, “If the Apostle would have had Womens speaking stopt, and did not allow of them, why did he entreat his true Yoak-fellow to help those Women who laboured with him in the Gospel? Phil. 4.3.”⁴⁶ Also, “we do not read that he [Apollos] despised what Priscilla said because she was a Woman, as many now do.”⁴⁷ Fell Fox asked: “And why did the Apostles joyn together in Prayer and Supplication with the Women, and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and with his Brethren, Acts 1:14 if they had not allowed, and had union and fellowship with the Spirit of God, wherever it was revealed in Women as well as others?”⁴⁸ Later Astell continued with the idea that Priscilla as well as Aquila catechized Apollos, yet Paul found no fault with this. Rather, he referred to the two as “my helpers in Christ Jesus” (Rom 16:3).⁴⁹

4. *Messianic Witness*

In the category of *Messianic Witness*, evidence is offered from Jesus’s teachings and ministry supporting the ministry of women. Contributing in this area were Arcangela Tarabotti, Margaret Fell Fox, Anne Dutton, and Jarena Lee, among others.⁵⁰

From Venice, Tarabotti (*Paternal Tyranny*, 1654) observed that Jesus treated women as equals with men.⁵¹ Fell Fox acknowledged that Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman of John 4:1–30 more than with any other woman or man, and that because of their exceptional devotion to him women were rewarded by being the first to declare Jesus’s resurrection: “Mark this, ye despisers of the weakness of Women, and look upon your selves to be so wise: but Christ Jesus doth not so for he makes use of the weak.”⁵² Understanding Jesus’s revelations to the woman of Samaria, to the sisters Martha and Mary, and to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection, Fell Fox stated: “And thus the Lord Jesus hath manifested himself and his Power, without respect of Persons, and so let all mouths be stopt that would limit him . . .”⁵³ Moreover, Fell Fox pointed to the Magnificat as Mary’s “sermon.”⁵⁴ Dutton (1750) compared men who resist women in church ministry with the disciples grumbling over the woman who anointed Christ (Matt 26:8).⁵⁵

Writing just after the period we are reviewing, in the early 1800s in the United States, Lee asked her minister and founder of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination, the Rev. Richard Allen (1760–1831), for permission to preach. Allen denied Lee permission in 1811, but he affirmed her impromptu preaching eight years later.⁵⁶ Her spiritual narrative, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of her Call to Preach the Gospel* (1836), marks the second known publication by an African-American woman.⁵⁷ In supporting a woman's right to preach, Lee pointed to Mary Magdalene: "Did not Mary *first* preach the risen Saviour, and is not the doctrine of the resurrection the very climax of Christianity – hangs not all our hope on this, as argued by St. Paul? Then did not Mary, a woman, preach the gospel?"⁵⁸ Therefore, emulating Jesus is used to back equal opportunities for women to preach in churches.

5. Biblical Exceptionalism

Biblical Exceptionalism highlights female biblical leaders elevated by God. Those who commented on this in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries included Margaret Fell Fox, Bathsua Makin, Juana Inés de la Cruz, Mary Astell, and Elizabeth Bathurst.⁵⁹

Fell Fox pointed to the fact that men in Scripture frequently praise the speech of women, and Isaiah, who "went to the Prophetess, did not forbid her Speaking or Prophesying. Isa. 8."⁶⁰ Notably, Makin (1673) argued for female education by observing the many exceptional, intelligent, and gifted women in Scripture who were "eminently employed in the great transactions of the church."⁶¹ De la Cruz highlighted the governing of Deborah, the learning of the Queen of Sheba, the prophesying of Abigail, the persuasion of Esther, the piety of Rahab, and the perseverance of Hannah.⁶² Praised as an effective Quaker preacher before being jailed, Bathurst defended the writing of her book *The Sayings of Women, which were spoken upon sundry Occasions, in several Places of the Scriptures* (1691) by saying, "Women receive an Office in the Truth as well as Men, and they have a Stewardship, and must give an Account of their Stewardship to their Lord, as well as the Men."⁶³ Finally, Astell notes that Deborah and other biblical examples of prophetic women contradict the idea of women's natural inferiority;⁶⁴ the Bible portrays women as having a responsibility to the Lord. The biblical women are not exceptions to the norm, as some still view them today.

6. Prophetic Fulfillment

The *Prophetic Fulfillment* approach concerns OT prophecies unveiling a time when men and women function as equals in God's realm. The oracle of Joel cited in Acts 2:17—"your daughters will prophesy"—was specifically used as support for women's equality by many women including Katherine Evans, Margaret Fell Fox,⁶⁵ and Mary Bosanquet Fletcher.⁶⁶

For example, Evans, an early Quaker (1663) who wrote while imprisoned in Malta with Sarah Cheevers for evangelizing, responded to 1 Cor 14:34–35 by saying, "He that is born of God, whether in Male or in Female, Let him speak freely as his Father giveth him Utterance."⁶⁷ Fell Fox (1666) concluded that opposition to women's preaching is from "the opposing Spirit that would limit

New Dispensation interpretations make the case for women's equality in the new era ushered in through Christ and the Spirit.

the Power and Spirit of the Lord Jesus, whose Spirit is poured upon all flesh, both Sons and Daughters, now in his Resurrection."⁶⁸ Similarly, one hundred years later in response to some who claimed women should only speak under peculiar impulse from the Holy Spirit, Fletcher wrote to John Wesley: "But how often is she to feel this impulse? Perhaps you will say, two or three times in her life; perhaps *God* will say, two or three times in a week, or day."⁶⁹ The Holy Spirit should not be quenched or stifled when speaking through a woman.

7. New Dispensation

New Dispensation interpretations make the case for women's equality in the new era ushered in through Christ and the Spirit. Two women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who employed this method are Margaret Fell Fox and Anne Docwra.

For Fell Fox, Christ and the Spirit bring a new age for women. She asked: "And what is all this to Women's Speaking? That have the Everlasting Gospel to preach, and upon whom the Promise of the Lord is fulfilled and his Spirit poured upon them according to his work" (Acts 2:16–18).⁷⁰ Moreover, Fell Fox elaborated on the church as metaphorically portrayed as a woman in Scripture: "Christ, who is the head of the Church, the True Woman which is his Wife, in it do Daughters Prophesie . . . And here Christ is the Head of the Male and Female, who may speak; and the Church is called 'a Royal Priesthood'; so the Woman must offer as well as the Man, Rev. 22.17. 'The Spirit saith, Come, and the Bride saith, Come': and so is not the Bride the Church? . . . Doth not the Woman speak then?"⁷¹ That is, given that the church is represented as a speaking woman and a royal priesthood, women should be able to speak in it. Docwra (1683) additionally emphasized that the "Light, Power and Spirit of the Lord God is tendered to all mankind, as well Women as Men."⁷²

8. Egalitarian Narrative

The hermeneutical approach of recognizing an *Egalitarian Narrative* in the Bible was employed by Rachel Speght, Margaret Fell Fox,⁷³ Dorothy Gott, and Anne Docwra.⁷⁴ For instance, Docwra (1706), using the inspiration of Scripture, cited Isa 54:13—"thy Children shall be taught of the Lord"—and thus considered that in the New Covenant (Jer 31:31–34) women would also be taught by the Holy Spirit and should not be silenced.⁷⁵

Speght (1617) considered Eve and Adam as holding equal authority, co-partnership, and "mutuall participation" as a couple, with the living creatures subject to both of them.⁷⁶ Fell Fox (1666) recognized

an egalitarian hermeneutical trajectory when she stated: “So Abraham [did] obey the voice of Sarah, as you may read in Genesis 21 and so he did not quench the good that was in his wife for that which he spoke to Abraham was concerning the Church.”⁷⁷ Here Fell Fox was pointing out how God spoke his directions to Abraham through Sarah. Fell Fox noted that “the Husband must learn of the Woman” because their offspring Isaac was chosen by God and would be the ancestor of Jesus. Like Speght, Fell Fox also found no differences between men and women in Genesis and elsewhere in the way some men do.⁷⁸ Both sexes are joined together in his image, both are weak but he is strong, and Christ’s strength is made manifest in their weakness (2 Cor 12:9). God has chosen both of them as the weak things of the world (1 Cor 1:26–29). Moreover, Fell Fox indirectly acknowledged the important connection between God making no such difference between the sexes in their

Astell noted that in the creation order in Gen 1 there is an increasing value in what is created. ... On that basis, woman, being created after man, should not be made subservient to men for the reason that they were created after men (Gen 2:22).

creation and Jesus arguing from Gen 1:27 and 2:24, which is before the fall, in Matt 19:4–6.⁷⁹ Jesus Christ’s statements concerning marriage repeat these Genesis statements that emphasize men and women’s equality.

Furthermore, Fell Fox pointed to the intertextual theme of Gen 3:15—God puts enmity between the Serpent and the woman, and between his seed and her seed, yet the seed of the woman will bruise the Serpent’s head—as running through the whole Bible, tying it to Jer 31:22, Gal 4:4–5, and Rev 12, and she uses it to support women’s speech and influence:

Thus much may prove that the Church of Christ is a woman, and those that speak against the woman’s speaking, speak against the Church of Christ, and the Seed of the woman, which Seed is Christ; that is to say, Those that speak against the Power of the Lord, and the Spirit of the Lord speaking in a woman, simply, by reason of her Sex, or because she is a Woman, not regarding the Seed, and Spirit, and Power that speaks in her, such speak against Christ, and his Church, and are of the Seed of the Serpent, wherein lodgeth the enmity.⁸⁰

It is possible that Gott built upon this idea from Fell Fox since Gott (1811) suggests that Mary is the mother of the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15) and therefore God has given women a responsibility in his redemption of humanity.⁸¹

Astell noted that in the creation order in Gen 1 there is an increasing value in what is created. Thus, humankind is not subjected to the creatures created before them. On that basis, woman, being created

after man, should not be made subservient to men for the reason that they were created after men (Gen 2:22). Astell also viewed Gen 3:16 as a prediction instead of a command, comparing it to Esau serving his younger brother (Gen 27:40).⁸² She found it irrational that “one Text shou’d be a Command any more than the other, and not both of them be Predictions only . . . foretelling what wou’d be; but, neither of them determining what ought to be.”⁸³ Consequently, these four women theologians constructed early theological, anthropological, biblical arguments that reveal mutuality between the sexes and women’s equality with men based upon the story of God in the Scriptures and their inspiration.⁸⁴

Influence on Later Theology

Several of these women theologians directly influenced later theologians. Margaret Fell Fox’s 1666 work, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, had a significant impact on the Quakers and succeeding generations of scholars, including Mary Bosanquet Fletcher.⁸⁵ Bosanquet Fletcher subsequently influenced John Wesley and later, Phoebe Palmer.⁸⁶ In her 1771 letter to John Wesley, Bosanquet Fletcher exegeted the “prohibitionary texts,” Paul’s teachings, and Jesus’s actions toward women in the Gospels—presenting “the first defense of women’s ministry in Methodism, closely following the template provided by Fell Fox.”⁸⁷

Later, Palmer argued from every argument type that Bosanquet Fletcher did while also adding the categories *Apostolic Practice* and *New Dispensation*. Chilcote declares, “Phoebe Palmer stands out, not only as ‘the mother of the holiness movement,’ but as one of the greatest female apologists in the history of Methodism. Her *The Promise of the Father* (1859) is the largest and most fully developed argument for women’s ministry in any tradition. Its formative influence cannot be overestimated.”⁸⁸ Palmer’s work influenced many, including Catherine Booth, who then penned a powerful defense of women’s ministry defending Palmer’s ministry.⁸⁹ Booth’s pamphlet was republished in 1870 and “has remained the definitive Salvation Army authorization for women’s ministry.”⁹⁰ Palmer also spoke at Frances Willard’s church, and Willard claimed she received “entire sanctification” or the “second blessing.”⁹¹ Furthermore, after attending Palmer’s weekly meetings, Amanda Berry Smith began preaching in AME churches.⁹²

Conclusion

Biblical egalitarianism is often understood as a new phenomenon.⁹³ For this reason, egalitarian arguments since the 1990s are often rejected as novel stances. Research discloses, however, a consistent chronology from the time of the Reformation onward of the thoughts and writings of women who have held a biblical view of women’s equal roles with men in the home, church, and world, or some combination of the three. These egalitarian publications by women theologians contributed to the foundations of Quakerism, Methodism, AME churches, the Holiness Movement, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (a sister AME denomination), and the Salvation Army’s churches and social justice ministries.

Notes

1. Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide*

- (Baker Academic, 2012), hereafter cited as Taylor and Choi.
2. Paul W. Chilcote, *The Methodist Defense of Women in Ministry: A Documentary History* (Cascade, 2017), 9–10.
 3. Mary T. Malone, *Volume III: Women & Christianity: From the Reformation to the 21st Century* (Orbis, 2003), 215.
 4. Carole Slade, “Teresa of Avila (1515–82),” in Taylor and Choi, 493–98, esp. 494.
 5. Adriana Valerio, “Narducci da Paradiso, Domenica (1473–1533),” in Taylor and Choi, 383–86, esp. 385.
 6. Ruth A. Tucker and Walter L. Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Zondervan, 1987), 203.
 7. Teresa of Ávila, *Spiritual Testimony* (before 1567), quoted in Slade, “Teresa,” 495.
 8. John 20:1–18. Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle* (1577); Slade, “Teresa,” 496–97.
 9. Barbara MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Fortress, 2006) 100. See also Kirsi Stjerna, “Grumbach, Argula von (1492–ca. 1563/68),” in Taylor and Choi, 221–24.
 10. In Argula von Grumbach, *The Account of a Christian woman . . .* (1523), as reprinted in MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 119.
 11. John 4:7–39. Marie Dentièrre, “A Most Beneficial Letter, Prepared and Written Down by a Christian Woman of Tournai, and Sent to the Queen of Navarre, Sister of the King of France . . .” (1539), as translated in *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (University of Georgia, 1987), 275–81, esp. 277–78.
 12. Dentièrre, “A Most Beneficial Letter,” 277.
 13. Katherina Zell, “Apologia for Master Matthew Zell” (1524), as translated in Roland H. Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy* (Augsburg, 1971), 55. Zell also uses maternal imagery with Jesus Christ “laboring” on the cross in her exposition of the Lord’s Prayer (1532); Elsie McKee, “Zell, Katharina Schütz (ca. 1498–1562),” in Taylor and Choi, 547–51, esp. 549.
 14. McKee, “Zell,” 550.
 15. Justitia Sengers, *Little Book of Comfort on the Subject of the Sixty-Ninth Psalm* (1585); Isa Hauser and Marion Ann Taylor, “Sengers, Justitia (fl. 1585),” in Taylor and Choi, 445–48, esp. 446. Sengers refers to herself as “a Maiden who Was Born Blind” in the title of the 1593 reprint of her over 400-page *Little Book*.
 16. Tucker and Liefeld, *Daughters*, 243.
 17. Tucker and Liefeld, *Daughters*, 244.
 18. Rachel Speght, “A Mouzell for Melastromus” (Nicholas Oakes for Thomas Archer, 1617), in *The Polemics and Poems of Rachel Speght*, ed. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski. *Women Writers in English, 1350–1850* (Oxford University, 1996).
 19. Margaret Thickstun, “Fell Fox, Margaret Askew (1614–1702),” in Taylor and Choi, 198–202, esp. 200; Malone, *Women and Christianity*, 173.
 20. Michal Michelson, “Astell, Mary (1666–1731),” in Taylor and Choi, 44–49, esp. 46.
 21. See also Katherine Evans, *A Brief Discovery of God’s Eternal Truth* (1663); Catie Gill, “Evans, Katherine (ca. 1618–92), and Sarah Cheevers (Chevers) (ca. 1608–ca.1664),” in Taylor and Choi, 195–98, esp. 197.
 22. Speght, “Mouzell”; Shannon Miller, “Speght, Rachel (ca. 1597–ca. 1661),” in Taylor and Choi, 465–67, esp. 466.
 23. Margaret Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures . . .*, 2nd ed. (1667), as reprinted in *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578–1799*, ed. Moira Ferguson (University of Indiana, 1985), 115–27; Thickstun, “Fell Fox,” 199–200; Malone, *Women and Christianity*, 173.
 24. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 119.
 25. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 119–120, 122.
 26. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 122.
 27. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 120.
 28. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 122; see also 124–25.
 29. Anne Docwra, *An Epistle of Love and Good Advice . . .* (A. Sowle?, 1683) 4, quoted in Mari Jørstad, “Docwra, Anne (ca. 1624–1710),” in Taylor and Choi, 168–69.
 30. Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Response to Sor Philotea de la Cruz* (1691); Pamela Kirk Rappaport, “Juana Inés de la Cruz (Sister) (1651–95),” in Taylor and Choi, 294–99, esp. 296.
 31. Johanna Eleonora Petersen, *Anleitung zu grundlicher Verstandnib der Heiligen Offenbahrung Jesu Christi . . .* (Johann Daniel Müller, 1696), translated in Ruth Albrecht, “Petersen, Johanna Eleonora (1644–1724),” in Taylor and Choi, 404–407, esp. 406.
 32. Mary Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, 3rd ed. (1706) 11, quoted in Michelson, “Astell,” in Taylor and Choi, 46.
 33. Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, 46.
 34. Mary Bosanquet, “Letter of Mary Bosanquet to John Wesley” (1771), reprinted in Chilcote, *Methodist Defense*, 25.
 35. Chilcote, *Methodist Defense*, 19.
 36. Chilcote, *Methodist Defense*, 19–20.
 37. Michelson, “Astell,” 48.
 38. See also Mary Bosanquet Fletcher’s argument in Chilcote, *Methodist Defense*, 19.
 39. Rachel Speght, “Mouzell”; Miller, “Speght,” 466.
 40. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 115.
 41. Docwra, *Epistle*; in Jørstad, “Docwra,” in Taylor and Choi, 168–69; Petersen, *Anleitung*, quoted in Albrecht, “Petersen,” 406.
 42. Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage*; in Michelson, “Astell,” 48.
 43. Anne Williams Cattel Dutton, *A Brief Account of the Gracious Dealings of God . . .* (J. Hart, sold by J. Lewis, 1750), quoted in Karen O’Dell Bullock, “Dutton, Anne (ca. 1692–1765),” in Taylor and Choi, 172–75, esp. 174–75.
 44. Hester Biddle, “The Trumpet of the Lord Sounded forth unto These Three Nations” (1662); Elaine Hobby, “Biddle, Hester (1629/30–97),” in Taylor and Choi, 71–74, esp. 72.

Prepare for your future
and intern with CBE.

Apply Now!



45. Society of Friends, *The Third Part of the Cry of the Innocent for Justice* (1662), quoted in Hobby, “Biddle,” 73.
46. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 121.
47. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 119.
48. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 121.
49. Astell, *Serious Proposal*, 1:24, quoted in Michelson, “Astell,” 45.
50. See also work by Docwra who refers to the woman of Samaria and Jesus’s post-resurrection appearances to two women, Jørstad, “Docwra,” 169; Astell who refers to the daughters of Philip, Mary, Mary Magdalene, the Syrophoenician, Elizabeth, Martha, Tabitha, Anna, and the women who witnessed to the resurrection in *Reflections upon Marriage*; Michelson, “Astell,” 48; and Bosanquet, “Bosanquet to Wesley,” 27.
51. Joy A. Schroeder, “Tarabotti, Arcangela (1604–52),” in Taylor and Choi, 491–93, esp. 492.
52. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 117–18.
53. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 121. See Acts 10:34.
54. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 123.
55. Dutton, *A Brief Account*, 174–75.
56. Joy A. Schroeder and Marion Ann Taylor, *Voices Long Silenced: Women Biblical Interpreters through the Centuries* (Westminster John Knox, 2022), 151.
57. Judy Fentress-Williams, “Lee, Jarena (1783–ca. 1849),” in Taylor and Choi, 324–26, esp. 324.
58. Schroeder and Taylor, *Voices Long Silenced*, 151–52.
59. Also in this category, Mary Bosanquet Fletcher mentions the woman of 2 Sam 20:22 and Deborah in “Bosanquet to Wesley,” 27.
60. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 122. Fell Fox also mentions Miriam, the wise woman from the city of Abel in 2 Sam 20, Huldah, the Queen of Sheba, Esther, the prophetess who was the wife of Isaiah, Judith, and the women in Ruth. Thickstun, “Fell Fox,” 200–201.
61. Makin refers to Miriam, the Queen of Sheba, the company of women greeting David with victory songs (1 Sam 18:7), Huldah, Deborah, Jael, Judith, Esther, the Virgin Mary, Anna, Phoebe, Priscilla, Lois, Eunice, and the elect lady (2 John 1:5) in Bathsua Makin, *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673); Joy A. Schroeder, “Makin, Bathsua (ca. 1600–after 1675),” in Taylor and Choi, 342–44, esp. 343.
62. Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Response to Sor Philotea* (1691); Rappaport, “de la Cruz,” 297.
63. Elizabeth Bathurst, *Truth Vindicated by the Faithful Testimony and Writings of the Innocent Servant and Hand-maid of the Lord*, 3rd ed. (Mary Hinde, 1773), 1st printing (1679), quoted in Margaret Thickstun, “Bathurst, Elizabeth (fl. 1678–85),” in Taylor and Choi, 57–59, esp. 57–58.
64. Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage*, 26, quoted in Michelson, “Astell,” 47–48.
65. Thickstun, “Fell Fox,” 199.
66. Chilcote, *Methodist Defense*, 26, 27. See also Hester Biddle, “Wo to thee Town of Cambridge” (1660–69?); Hobby, “Biddle,” 72; Mary Cary, who saw herself in the “last days” by applying Joel 2:28–29 and Acts 2:17–21, Mary Cary, *The Little Horns Doom & Downfall* . . . (1651); Robert Knetsch, “Cary, Mary (b. 1620/21, fl. 1647–53),” in Taylor and Choi, 114–16, esp. 115; and Anne Docwra’s views in Jørstad, “Docwra,” 168.
67. Katherine Evans, *A Brief Discovery of God’s Eternal Truth*, 83, quoted in Gill, “Evans and Cheevers,” 197.
68. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 121.
69. Bosanquet, “Bosanquet to Wesley,” 26.
70. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 120.
71. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 125.
72. *An epistle of Love and Good Advice*; quoted in Jørstad, “Docwra,” 168–69.
73. Thickstun, “Fell Fox,” 199; Malone, *Women and Christianity*, 173–74.
74. Jørstad, “Docwra,” 169.
75. Jørstad, “Docwra,” 169.
76. Speght, “Mouzell”; Miller, “Speght,” 466.
77. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 126.
78. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 115.
79. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 116–17.
80. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 116. For the many historical men who have taught the “Seed of the Woman” concept see John L. Ronning, “The Curse on the Serpent (Genesis 3:15) in Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1997).
81. Dorothy Gott, *Christ the standard of truth set up* . . . (The author, 1796/98?), and Dorothy Gott, *The Noon-day sun; A revelation from Christ* . . . (1811); Nancy Jiwon Cho, “Gott, Dorothy Newberry (1747/48–1812),” in Taylor and Choi, 216–18, esp. 217.
82. Michelson, “Astell,” 47.
83. Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, 19, 20, quoted in Michelson, “Astell,” 47.
84. Other significant arguments include: (i) God calls both men and women—felt as a personal and spiritual calling—toward a vocation in ministry (Justitia Sengers, Sarah Cheevers and Katharine Evans, Susanna Wesley, and Anne Dutton); and (ii) the Godhead does not discriminate when choosing who would speak for him (Hester Biddle, Mary Astell, and Margaret Fell Fox).
85. Chilcote, *Methodist Defense*, 19.
86. Renee Kwan Monkman, “Palmer, Phoebe (1807–74),” in Taylor and Choi, 390–93, esp. 390.
87. Chilcote, *Methodist Defense*, 19, 24–28, referring to Bosanquet, “Bosanquet to Wesley.” Chilcote states: “John Wesley, who had been such a strong protagonist for the ministry of women and of women preachers in particular, died in 1791. In the final decade of the eighteenth century, the expansion of the public ministry of women seems to have approached its zenith. On the threshold of a new era, increasing numbers of women openly exercised their gifts in the ministry of preaching.” *Methodist Defense*, 37.
88. Chilcote, *Methodist Defense*, 13.
89. Monkman, “Palmer,” 392; MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 199; Catherine Booth, *Female Teaching* . . . (G. J. Stevenson, 1859).
90. Barbara Robinson, “Booth, Catherine Mumford (1829–90),” in Taylor and Choi, 86–89, esp. 87.
91. Nancy A. Hardesty, “Willard, Frances Elizabeth (1839–98),” in Taylor and Choi, 533–37, esp. 533.
92. Eric Brandt, “Smith, Amanda Berry (1837–1915),” in Taylor and Choi, 450–52, esp. 451.
93. For instance, even though he is a champion of women’s biblical equality and supports this view historically, William G. Witt believes the theological positions of evangelical and Catholic egalitarians to be a new theological development in response to cultural changes in the last couple centuries. *Icons of Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Theology for Women’s Ordination* (Baylor University, 2020), 5.



Julie Walsh is a PhD candidate in theology at Regent University’s School of Divinity, focusing on egalitarian theology. She has earned an MA in ministry, a Master of Theology, and a Certificate in Biblical Languages. Julie lives in the Washington D.C. area, and she enjoys

kayaking and gardening.