

The Feminist Movement (3)

Women in the Church in Recent History

Robert L. Dabney (1820-98), a professor in Union Seminary, Virginia for forty years, was an outstanding teacher of theology, an ardent Calvinist, a prolific author, and an astute observer of the American religious scene. In an article, "The Public Preaching of Women," he expresses his astonishment about the rapid changes in society.

As a churchman he was deeply struck by the increasingly influential role of women in the church. He wrote:

"A few years ago the public preaching of women was universally condemned among all conservative denominations of Christians, and, within their bounds, was totally unknown. Now the innovation is brought face to face even with the southern churches, and female preachers are knocking at our doors."

And so Dabney wrote his timely article on women preachers. He gave an in-depth biblical exposition defending the historic position of the Church on the ordination of women. But he neglected to analyze the reason for women preachers in the southern churches; and the same reason holds true for the northern churches. The Civil War had devastated the male population. The death of thousands of men, killed on battlefields, led to a significant and activist role of women in the church. The new Sunday School movement provided opportunities for women to serve the churches by teaching children. This involvement encouraged the women's movement as time progressed. Not secularism, but the churches fostered the rise of women's consciousness. In society they were viewed as a nonentity, as intruders in the professional work force. In the church, however, a woman was equal to man; an image bearer of God, a sinner saved by grace. Christian women wanted education for their daughters. They worked for educational facilities for girls wanting to broaden their horizons and have a chance to obtain academic training. Mary Lyon (1797-1849) founded the Mount Holyoke College for women in 1836-37. The college answered the great need for advanced education of girls. The college focused on the hope that every student would be brought to a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ. Christian women gave the impulse to the temperance movement and worked for the abolishment of slavery. The anti-slavery movement became involved eventually in the struggle for women's rights. This even led to schism in the abolitionist movement. A separate feminist organization was launched at a Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, NY, in 1848.

The revivals which swept 19th century America didn't leave women unmoved. They led to a significant, in-depth and dynamic role for women in missions. Many women didn't focus on inequities at home, but had a vision for the open doors abroad, social awareness, and a burden for lost souls. The plight of the heathen touched the hearts of women in particular. One writer painted a vivid picture of what these women saw "One of the strongest appeals to women to enter missionary work was to be found in their conviction that foreign women, or more specifically, non-Christian women, lived lives of hopeless degradation."

Women went abroad and pioneered. At a student conference, held at Mt. Hermon in western Massachusetts, in 1886, men and women were caught by the enthusiasm of missionary-minded students. After this famous conference mission leaders toured American colleges, taking as their motto "The Evangelization of the World in This Generation." This effort reaped a rich harvest of two thousand volunteers, of whom about five hundred were women; a significant demonstration of the important role of women in evangelical Protestantism. Women also raised funds for and gave prayer support to foreign missions. Were these women feminists? Dr. R. Pierce Beaver, emeritus professor of missions, University of Chicago Divinity School, slightly twisted history when he entitled his book on women in missions-American *Protestant Women in World Mission. A History of the First Feminist Movement in North America*. Beaver looked at the 19th century women's missionary movement through a rear-view mirror. He turned the movement into what it was not - 1980s activism. These women mission pioneers and supporters were no modern-day, banner parading, standing-for-rights women. They saw a need and had compassion and a vision for the desperate spiritual and physical plight of millions around the world.

An observer of the American religious scene noted that the women's influence was so great in the nineteenth century Protestant parishes that some historians have spoken of the "feminization of American religion."

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