

MOTHERING, CATECHESIS, AND ECCLESIAL LEADERSHIP: THE WOMEN OF EARLY METHODISM AND THEIR CALL TO WITNESS TO THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

KATHRYN A. BROYLES

With the onset of the industrial revolution, a time of upheaval and of new ideas, a particularly stringent dichotomy between what was gendered “female” and what was gendered “male,” arose in the Western world. “Inside work” was gendered “female” and “outside work” was gendered “male.” Gender and social location firmly took precedence over ability. Just one element of the inside work, the “home-making,” was children. The conceptualization of the care of these little ones, the work involved in seeing that they grew successfully into adulthood, and in adulthood contribute and achieve in the social spaces and places they inhabit is of crucial interest to me in this examination of early Methodist women leaders/preachers because it is precisely this work that became exclusively women’s “proper domain.”

Rather than accept this notion of “proper domain” and inside work, however, I believe a particular series of questions might lead to a more life-giving view of “proper domain” and might as well provide a useful lens with which to re/member the lives of early Methodist women who did anything but keep the status quo. It’s important to ask: *How should mothering and the myth of “proper domain” be understood in the church? How is mothering coded by Christians differently than by feminists? We also need to ask, How might feminist ideals of independence and of agency, and articulations of an ethic of care, be joined with Christian understandings of community life, familial responsibility, and convictions of “call” and “vocation?” And finally, How should things look if perceptions of nature and habits of tradition, dictated by culture, give way to the biblical notions of call and community so central to the early Methodist heritage?*

Emerging Methodist Leaders

Methodist scholar, Paul W. Chilcote, in his preface to *Her Own Story*, reminds the church that “the voice of women needs to be heard. The stories of the women who shaped the early Methodist movement need to be known.”¹ Not only do the stories of these women’s lives need to be reclaimed and their

¹ Paul W. Chilcote, *Her Own Story: Autobiographical Portraits of Early Methodist Women* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001), 10.

sermons studied, but their methods, the ways they lived out their *extraordinary* call, must also be examined. It is the contention of this essay that God worked through these women in miraculous ways in order not only to shape the Methodist movement but to alter as well protestant conceptions of church membership, of fellowship, of holiness, and of personal conversion and transformation. Indeed, the founding principles which Wesley's movement held in common with other movements of renewal invited a maternal ethic of "lived loving" into all notions of faithful discipleship.²

Careful study of early Methodist women as disciples of Christ, then, offers the astute observer a deepened understanding of the ways God calls God's people. Early Methodist women, in particular, provide a paradigm for understanding God's transformative love and call, and for understanding leadership in the church, as their empowerment within Methodist circles and subsequently in the larger community was a logical extension of a theology "founded upon an understanding of the New Testament community. . . [as] a radical new vision of life in Christ for all of God's children."³ Indeed, Wesley's own understanding of women's place in the body of Christ as equal members called of God allowed for a radical reworking of true discipleship. When Wesley took to heart Galatians 3:28, and personal holiness became a measure of the work of God in the life of the individual, gender became secondary to the more important demand of being faithful to God's call. In fact, "not only was faith to be expressed in the works of all, but also individual talents were to be developed as a sacred trust from God."⁴ Women as well as men were to become whomever it was God had called them and equipped them to be.

It is essential to explore mothering as critical to Christian catechesis without placing the traditional expectations of mothering solely on the woman, thus tying the responsibilities of mothering exclusively to biology. A feminist theological reading of mothering as vocation, in other words, demands that the agency of individual women not be sacrificed to the perceived "greater good" of society, rendering the actual reproductive labor⁵ involved in mothering invisible. At the same time, such a reading must acknowledge the necessity of self-sacrifice and servant-hood that sits at the core of a bibli-

² Paul W. Chilcote, "Biblical Equality and the Spirituality of Early Methodist Women," unpublished paper, 5.

³ Chilcote, "Biblical Equality," 4.

⁴ Chilcote, "Biblical Equality," 5.

⁵ I mean to imply here, not only the physical labor of pregnancy and birth, but current feminists' use of the Marxist construct of reproductive labor. Evelyn N. Glenn defines the labor of social reproduction as the "array of activities and relationships involved in maintaining people on both a daily basis and intergenerationally" Evelyn N. Glenn, ed., *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 71. She goes on to note that "reproductive labor [has shifted] from the household to the market [and] . . . race and gender stratification [is now] built into organizational structures," 77. On the issue of mothering, see also Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cornell, 1991); Terry Arendell, "Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: The Decade's Scholarship," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62 (2000): 1192-1207.

cal understanding of holy living and discipleship, regardless of the gender of the disciple. It is here, at the moment of “regardless” where the strands of disparate theory intertwine. A feminist maternal ethic which reinstates mothering as holy while not deposing agency and individual calling, must rely on a re/conception of community as a radical call to discipleship and invites us to see mothering as a vocational site of leadership and catechesis. Pioneer women of early Methodism like Mary Bosanquet (Fletcher), Sarah Ryan, Mary Barritt (Taft), and certainly Methodist’s first female preacher, Sarah Crosby, in pressing the boundaries of propriety by faithfully pursuing a rigorous call to discipleship in the Wesleyan tradition, provided powerful models for just this kind of holy mothering and ecclesial leadership. Their witness was critical for the nascent movement then and is just as important as a paradigm for leadership in the church today.

Historical Perspectives

There are moments in religious, social, and political history when real challenges have pressed against gendered identities. At each juncture, they involved radical redefinitions of community, and by consequence, mothering. Only in this way could new, concomitant notions of gendered identity and gendered work emerge. Lawrence Foster, in his work *Religion and Sexuality*, pinpointed one such historical juncture when he attempted to discover what enabled 18th and 19th century Americans, weaned on the staunch traditions of Puritanism and Victorian notions of sex and the family, to radically alter their paradigm for “holy living” and to join countercultural movements like the Shakers and the Oneida Community.⁶ Foster aimed to discover how these stolid individuals could readily participate in alternative family structures that included whole-hearted commitment to communal living and adherence to radically different paradigms for sexual relationships including innovative forms of both celibacy and group marriage.

Religious bodies, according to Foster, organize, reinforce, or reorganize sex roles⁷ when they make decisions about the purpose of and proper execution of the life one leads. As a result of this and of the fact that sex roles link to notions of authority,⁸ religion and sexuality are inextricably interwoven. The instant sex roles are redefined by the pressures of communal (and accountable) living, they automatically redistribute the challenges an individual faces on a daily basis. For women participating in groups like the Shakers or the Oneida Community, being released from child-bearing and child-caring responsibilities meant time to participate more fully in commu-

⁶ Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

⁷ See Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 18.

⁸ See Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 228.

nal life and communal decision making.⁹ Just to be informed and available for consultation in the life of a community lends one more authority within that community so that radical religious commitment, often blamed for limiting women's agency by many feminists, in actuality makes room for its innovative use in such groups.

Early Methodist groups, while perhaps not making the kind of radical calls to common property and daily living as were the Oneida or Shaker communities, were nonetheless, by nature of their very structures of individual accountability and group formation, just as radical in their reconceptions of authority. The practices of early Methodist pioneer women, then, also provide a window into ways of understanding faithful women as at once free sexual beings and as individuals who can be radically faithful to conservative biblical doctrine in the midst of that freedom. These women, in their exercise of discipleship, made a serious attempt to construct a mythology and praxis which merged *inside* and *outside* work, thus rendering women and reproductive labor visible in the process. In 1777, Sarah Crosby observed:

[Lord,] Thou has enabled me, from the first of last January to the fourth of this month (December), to ride 960 miles, to keep 220 public meetings, at many of which some hundreds of precious souls were present, about 600 private meetings, and to write an 116 letters, many of them long ones; besides many, many conversations with souls in private, the effect of which will, I trust, be "as bread cast on the waters."¹⁰

Mary Barritt Taft traveled 15,000 miles in her lifetime on horseback and still raised eleven children, encouraged by volumes of letters from her fellow female sojourners as well as her spiritual mentor, Wesley, and her loving and left-behind husband, Zechariah Taft. Traveling, preaching, praying and exhorting, both women shifted the landscape of faith and restructured their world. Becoming Methodist invited radical Christian commitment; new commitments necessitated a different vision of life.

Current postmodern experience of the inextricable ties of sexuality and religion is very different from that of women in the 18th century. The difficulties women face when attempting to participate in positions of leadership within many religious organizations today (particularly fundamentalist and Catholic) are not real, physical constraints of being a female (one must always be pregnant and therefore the primary caregiver of children) but the perceived notions of femininity as singularly, or at least primarily domestic (as a good woman you ought to be pregnant and a primary caregiver of children) that seem to persist in inherently conservative communities across denominations. This is just one of many reasons the stories of the women pioneers of early Methodism and of women of faith through the ages must be woven into the academy's frame of reference concerning religion and into

⁹ It is worth noting that of the two groups Foster considers, the Shakers were the group to most radically reorganize sex-roles, demanding complete celibacy, and thus the group most effective at establishing an egalitarian system beneficial to both sexes.

¹⁰ Quoted in Chilcote, *Her Own Story*, 82.

the church's collective social and theological memory. It is out of a conservative impulse to live a "truer" or "holier" life that radically altered notions of gender and sexuality can emerge.

Ann Braude in her work, *Radical Spirits*, also developed an historical lens through which to view religion as the location of liberation and agency.¹¹ Though Braude's focus was on spiritualism as a movement, her insights are particularly applicable to the early Methodist women. She noted that revivalist groups, groups that pay heed to more "spirit led" community practices, function as enabling conduits for a publicly accepted "woman" voice. Encouraged to maintain diaries, spend dedicated time on personal theological reflection and study of scripture, and then likewise encouraged to give public testimony of God's gifts and blessings, the women of the Methodist movement were formed into individuals sensitive to the Holy spirit, aware of the spirit's leading, and able to share the gospel of Christ freely. They naturally emerged as leaders and teachers within local communities of Methodists when given space and grace to grow.¹²

The link between Braude's analysis and the early Methodists does not end with such evidentiary fruits of the Spirit, however. Braude made the important observation that women's authority plays out cyclically and seems always to be rendered invisible when more "orderly" traditions are brought to bear on what begins as a "spirit led" movement.¹³ She emphatically asserts that "historians need to analyze the cyclical rise and fall of women's leadership. Women play significant leadership roles in a variety of new or emerging movements, only to have their leadership repressed and forgotten as those movements become either institutionalized or marginalized."¹⁴ The cycle is sadly reflected in the evolution of the Methodist movement in

¹¹ Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1989).

¹² In early Methodism, Wesleyan band meetings were the primary locus of individual accountability. "Characterized by close fellowship and stricter obligations, the bands were potent in the empowerment of women and the development of their spiritual gifts." See Chilcote, "Biblical Equality," 10. Cf. his study of women's leadership roles in *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1991), particularly chapter 2.

¹³ Foster admits that "in an imperfect world, there are no permanent revolutions, only limited and transitory triumphs. But there is, I am convinced, continuing value in the pursuit of an impossible ideal" (*Religion and Sexuality*, 247). The Quakers, the Oneida Community, the Spiritualist, and even the suffragettes of the 19th century, I believe, would concur.

¹⁴ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, xx. She asserts that much academic work, including that done in historical women's studies programs contains a kind of "tone-deafness to religion" (xxi) that unfortunately overlooks this historical aspect of women's agency and the potency with which present religious notions might be redirected should not be overlooked either. Among Methodist scholars, Chilcote's *Wesley and Women, Her Own Story*, and *Early Methodist Spirituality: Selected Women's Writings* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2007) seek to address this.

particular.¹⁵ Methodism began as a spirit-led movement with women central as a force of renewal and then rendered them invisible for nearly a century. Strikingly, within two years of Wesley's death, Methodist leaders began to question the right of women to preach within the movement. After only a decade of debate, in 1803 the Methodist Conference prohibited women's preaching under any circumstance.¹⁶

Foster's and Braude's research affords a glimpse into the ways religious women move from the *inside* to the *outside*, albeit for a time. Simone de Beauvoir's observation that "man never thinks of himself without thinking of the Other; he views the world under the sign of duality which is not in the first place sexual in character. But being different from man, who sets himself up as the Same, it is naturally to the category of the Other that woman is consigned"¹⁷ begins to explain why the move is necessary at all. This process of "othering" runs concomitant with the silencing of women in the church. Indeed such radical dualistic "othering" is what the sexualized version of Eve (and through her, all women) fostered incorrectly in the Western church and in Western culture, particularly from the 4th century onwards—the notion that women being *other* than men, are weaker, morally inferior (thus susceptible to temptation), and socially irresponsible.

Martin Luther, offers a theological corrective to the sexualized Eve in his discussion of Genesis 3 by developing what could be called a femininity of equal culpability and equal autonomy.¹⁸ This view of biblical egalitarianism, however, is lost for all intents and purposes to the reformation (and hence to much Western cultural development as well). Only a few exceptional movements in the life of the church shared this egalitarian vision, and early Methodism was one of them. After Wesley's initial hesitation to sanction women's preaching and women in leadership, "by 1765 he inclined to the view that male and female were created by God to be equal in all ways, with women's subjection to men being one of the results of the Fall. . . . [This created] at least the possibility of advocating restoration of the social equality of women as one aspect of the Christian healing of the damage of the Fall"¹⁹ Wesley's own push for a corrective to the heretical impulse to disenfranchise women from equitable responsibility and equitable grace is perhaps clearest

¹⁵ This kind of cycle of emergence and then suppression occurs in other Wesleyan-Holiness movements as well. Begun in 1881, having much theology in common with the early followers of the Wesleys, the Church of God movement (Anderson, Indiana) ordained women from its inception. In 1925 (only a few years after winning the right to vote in the U.S.) women made up 32% of all ordained clergy of that movement and by 1954, nearly 48%. Today, women comprise only 2% of the ordained clergy of affiliated churches.

¹⁶ See Chilcote, *Wesley and Women*, 221-252.

¹⁷ As quoted in Shulamith Firestone, "The Dialectic of Sex," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 22.

¹⁸ See Kirsi Stjerna, "Grief, Grace, and Glory: Luther's Insights on Eve and Tamar in Genesis 3 and 38," *Seminary Ridge Review* 6.2 (2004): 19-36.

¹⁹ Randy Maddox in *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 72-73.

in a sermon entitled “On Visiting the Sick.”

Herein there is no difference; “there is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus.” Indeed it has long passed for the maxim with many, that “women are only to be seen, not heard.” And accordingly many of them are brought up in such a manner as if they were only designed for agreeable playthings! But is this doing honour to the sex? or is it a real kindness to them? No; it is the deepest unkindness; it is horrid cruelty; it is mere Turkish barbarity. And I know not how any woman of sense and spirit can submit to it. Let all you that have it in your power assert the right which God of nature has given you. Yield not to that vile bondage any longer! You, as well as men, are rational creatures. You, like them, were made in the image of God; you are equally candidates for immortality; you too are called of God. . . . Be “not disobedient to the heavenly calling.”²⁰

To be “equal candidates for immortality” and to be equally “called of God” to the responsibilities of discipleship is a fierce reclamation of the value of women and women’s work within the body of Christ. Randy Maddox noted in *Responsible Grace* that “a Wesleyan hamartiology deconstructs images of the saintly woman that are directly tied to Augustine’s paradigm [so that] Wesley and Wesleyan theology and hermeneutics offers a new imago of the ‘holy woman.’ Female virtue need no longer be imaged as humility, submissiveness, complicity, and silence. Rather, Wesleyan theology allows for a reimagining of the holy woman as strong, dependent on God, free through grace, and even vocal.”²¹ The Wesleyan call to salvation and sanctification coalesced with Luther’s vision of the “priesthood of all believers.” The theology and practices of the early Methodist movement invited and empowered all those who had been silenced or stood on the periphery of British society and equipped them for service to the world.

Called to Motherhood: Feminist Mothering and Christian Discipleship

Ethicists like Sara Ruddick “affirm the feminine psychological traits and moral virtues that society associates with women.”²² In her work *Maternal Thinking*, she identified those practices which are constitutive of maternity: preserving the life of a child, fostering children’s growth, and training children in order that they might become concerned citizens.²³ These practices ground maternity and ought also to be foundationally paradigmatic for all ethics. Ruddick’s ideas revealed the possibilities not only of a more peaceful, life-affirming world, but succinctly delineated the call of radical dis-

²⁰ Quoted in Chilcote, *Wesley and Women*, 73.

²¹ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 38.

²² Rosemarie Tong, “Feminist Ethics,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-ethics/>.

²³ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); cf. her “An Appreciation of Love’s Labor,” *Hypatia* 17.3 (2002): 214-26.

cipleship for the Christian.²⁴ Likewise, Virginia Held, in “The Obligations of Mothers and Fathers,”²⁵ among a number of other feminist scholars,²⁶ believes that both men and women can and should parent. Both are capable of cultivating the qualities and skills which enable successful caring. Women’s ultimate responsibility for birth does not negate the importance of fathers as maternal—of fathers in the procreation and maintenance of life. Scripture makes it clear that what distinguishes the body of Christ from its cultural surroundings *is love*. All Christians are called to be good Samaritans, to be servants of all, and to embody the kind of love that “lays [life] down for a friend.”²⁷ From a Wesleyan perspective, love always reaches out.

It destroys indifference, isolationism, the pride that cuts off fellowship, partiality, aloofness, exclusiveness. It must be confessed that there is a tendency among Christians to interpret holiness as withdrawal from society, civic concerns, “bad” people, and everything secular. It is true that there is in holiness an apartness; but on the other side of holiness, and saturating it to its core, is love. Holiness is self-identity; love is losing oneself in others. Holiness is wholeness; love is sharing that wholeness. Neither holiness nor love is Christian without the other. They are logically distinct but only one thing in life.²⁸

If this vision of Christian love is to be inculcated and fostered in children and in young believers, then the work of mothering is of the highest order in Christian catechism and it may be argued that mothering is the most formative and most identifiable aspect of discipleship in the body of Christ. It follows as well that both men and women are gifted and called to be *mothering* the church and be mothering in the church.

Pregnancy and Childbirth as a Paradigm

If mothering is not, or should not be a gendered vocation, what about the biology of birthing? That women would continue to participate with God in creation, through the physical experience of childbirth, I believe, marks the biological experience of women as holy and significant, not private and shameful. For a goodly number of women in the world, childbirth

²⁴ In *The Cost of Discipleship*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959), Deitrich Bonhoeffer boldly insisted: “The only man who has the right to say that he is justified by grace alone is the man who has left all to follow Christ”(51). The way that such a radical commitment to discipleship should play out, according to Bonhoeffer, is in a kind of all-consuming passion for others.

²⁵ See Virginia Held, “The Obligations of Mothers and Fathers,” in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. J. Trebilcock (Savage, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 1983), 9-20.

²⁶ See Arendell, “Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood” for a concise summation of feminist work on mothering. I wanted to note here, though, her mention of Forcey, Rothman, Rudnick and Schwartz as among the scholars who insist “not all women mother and mothering as nurturing and caring work is not inevitably the exclusive domain of women” (1192).

²⁷ John 15:13

²⁸ Quoted in Mildred Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City, Mo: Beacon Press, 1972), 29.

still means risking death (something the West too easily forgets).²⁹ God in Christ did the same—risked life and risked death. Thus birthing, the very physical experience of mothering, provides a catechetical paradigm for the church—risk life and risk death for new birth. Birthing and discipling new souls comprise the catechetical call of *all in the church* gifted for mothering. “Inside work,” mothering, is a vocation of catechetical leadership.

Sara Ruddick calls pregnancy “active waiting,” providing another image of mothering as a catechetical paradigm in relation to the process of childbirth. The church calls this the season of Advent. Ruddick noted that risking pregnancy is exercising agency and being willing to cope with “chosen and predictable pain.” The church calls this martyrdom. Rosemarie Tong summed up Ruddick’s work powerfully:

Caring for a child imposes a set of demands—for preservation (survival), for growth (development into a healthy adult), and for acceptability (enculturation that ensures fitting into a community). Meeting these demands involves a range of activities that are governed by a distinctive set of values: protecting a fragile existence, acknowledging the limits of one’s power and the unpredictability of events, cheerful determination to persist despite setbacks, responsive adaptability, sensitivity to the child’s subjective viewpoint, and tolerance for inconclusive processes of disclosure. Although the practice of mothering places no premium on independence, self-interest, free choice, power, advance planning, or control, it clearly calls upon a wide range of interpersonal and reflective skills and enlists caregivers’ agentic capacities.³⁰

Traditional modes of reasoning too often place mothering purely in the realm of biological responsibility and deny the complexity of the role. The demands of mothering, however, resonate closely with the responsibilities of *any* disciple of Christ. Dying to self, living to give life, caring, this is the call of discipleship. Failing to recognize mothering as a critical aspect of community life, a catechetical vocation, and therefore model for pastoral care and leadership, places the church in the awkward position of inadvertently (or for some denominations deliberately) pandering to further commodification of biological mothering. It is also, it would seem, an abdication of the responsibility so emphasized by Wesley of “living a life of holy love.” To understand women’s purpose in the world and in the community as always and in every instance mitigated and defined by reproductive ability is to denigrate those talents and experiences with which each individual woman has been created by God. If God’s purpose for woman had been only and purely procreative, there would be no need for her redemption, nor her giftedness.

Early Methodism’s legitimization of women preachers grew naturally out of the imagery of the home as the locus of the band meeting and the site of most personal growth and transformation, as well as out of the notion of the

²⁹ This agony is ever-present in the moving accounts of grief, of fear and of struggle which appear over and over again in the diaries of Methodist women of the 18th and 19th centuries. See Chilcote, *Early Methodist Spirituality*.

³⁰ Tong, “Feminist Ethics.”

shepherding and care of the community as “Housekeeping.” Wesley’s view of “Housekeeper” as a critical position of biblical leadership further attested to this visibility and sanctity of domestic imagery within Wesleyan circles. As a result, women and men who were otherwise disenfranchised began to develop a new sense of self esteem and purpose. In the setting of the Methodist Society every individual was encouraged to testify and to pray.³¹

Why then do Methodists and others now forget this truth of God? Why do they forget the Eucharistic value of “doing dishes” and the necessity of daily domestic participation in God’s family as the primary work of the church? “[N]ot one of us can escape the daily needs that are met in family living, from the changing of a baby’s diaper to the feeding of ourselves and those closest to us. The most destitute among us are the homeless, literally the household-less, and also those whose households have become unbearably lonely.”³² It is not a stretch theologically to understand the poverty that descends on the church when family living is replaced by corporate models of organization, nor when personal responsibility and individual fruits of the spirit and gifts of God are ignored or suppressed in favor of the elevation of those not “othered” or those formally educated, but not necessarily gifted, to lead.

The church makes a grave mistake if it adopts the prevalent attitudes of contemporary culture towards domestic and reproductive labor (and here we may read the reproductive labor of evangelism and discipleship), rendering it invisible and exclusively the “proper domain” of females. It errs too, in clinging to modes of thought like biological determinism which limit expressions of the gifts of God in the individual for the community. To devalue mothering in the church because it is primarily done by women is to devalue the vocational call to catechesis and to devalue gifts central to Christian community and the spiritual growth of every individual believer.

Caring for the Vulnerable

A community which placed catechesis and care work at the heart of its mission was the Leytonstone circle of women. Lauded by Wesley as a model of holiness and Christian witness, Leytonstone demonstrates one way early Methodism embodied both Christian love and catechetical leadership. The community’s foundress, Mary Bosanquet (Fletcher), was born into a wealthy family on September 1, 1739 at Leytonstone in Essex. Deeply moved by the witness of a Methodist servant and the writings of Mrs. Lefevre, she joined company with the Methodists and in the summer of 1757 at the age of 18,

³¹ “The equality of women and men in early Methodism begins in the simple fact that both had stories about their lives to tell, and all honored the testimony of their faith” (Chilcote, “Biblical Equality,” 2).

³² Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and “Women’s Work”* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 6. In this narrative, she finds her way into the meaning of the mass after a long absence from worship when she is shocked to see the extravagantly robed priest “doing dishes” after celebrating Holy Eucharist.

was taken under the wing of Mrs. Sarah Ryan, a woman of great gifts and influence. In 1761, her personal convictions led Mary to eschew her life of comfort and to enter into a kind of monastic rule of life and form a kind of Christian enclave. March 24, 1763, Mary, Sarah, a servant, and Sarah's niece moved to a family property called "The Cedars" in order to establish this semi-monastic community. Together, these "mothers in Israel," as they were known, developed an orphanage and school, having determined to share hospitality with the poorest of poor and needy—both orphans and widows.

Leytonstone's simple dress, family table, and family devotions gave birth to a space the Holy Spirit readily occupied in new ways and through the simple sharing of prayer, scripture, and common life, all were transformed.³³ "Mothering hospitality" characterized this community. Its success lay in choosing to love as God loves in every circumstance in life. Mary Bosanquet's conception of love is quite clear in words recorded by Mary Tooth:

O that you would therefore do as Jacob did, be earnest with the Lord, that his love may fill your heart, as the Scripture expresses it, the love of God, shed abroad in your hearts by the Holy Ghost, given unto you. If you get your hearts full of the love of God, you will find that is the oil by which the lamp of faith will be ever kept burning. . . Pray, my friends, pray much for this love; and remember that word, "He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him!"³⁴

This community of "mothers" exemplified the Wesleyan vision that "a disciple with a living faith is. . . one whose whole heart has been renewed, who longs to radiate the whole image of God in his or her life and [who] therefore hears the cry of the poor and wills, with God, that all should truly live!"³⁵ Mary Bosanquet, Sarah Ryan, and Mary Barritt, a later addition to this circle of women, in their commitment to accountable discipleship in community, embraced caring for the poor. It was out of the abundance of the experience of God's love that any one of them was able to give sacrificially to those poorest of poor who sought refuge with them. To have a servant-heart in gratitude to God's blessings is something entirely other than to be placed in servitude. If service is demanded, it is not freely given. Only in being free to choose can a life of service be a life lived lovingly. To be served by a wife because you expect to be served, erases any giving in love which might have been done otherwise. A community which values the contribution of even "the least of these"³⁶ cannot overlook the vocational call of women as unique to the individual, according to the gifts given her by God, and as related [or rather unrelated] to her gender as is a man's calling. Holy living, passionate

³³ Chilcote, *Wesley and Women*, 124.

³⁴ Quoted in Mary Tooth, *A Letter to the Loving and Beloved People of the Parish of Madeley* (Shiffnal: Printed by A. Edmonds, n.d.), 17-18. See also Chilcote, "Biblical Equality," 13-14.

³⁵ Chilcote, "Biblical Equality," 14.

³⁶ Matthew 25:40.

discipleship, love of God and neighbor, defined the innovative mothering of this amazing group of early Methodist women. They modeled the practice of mothering not only for other women, but were elevated by Wesley as examples for all devout Methodists to follow.

The Language of Calling

Webster's linked the etymological history of the term *vocation* inextricably to the notion of a summons from God or a divine appointment, or a call to particular religious service or to an ecclesial position. The term *calling* is used to depict a sense of passion, giftedness, a direction one longs for and a sense that God has placed this on one's heart. In their various translations, the Christian scriptures themselves utilize language that defines the discourse: "God has given gifts to each of you from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Manage them well so that God's generosity can flow through you. Are you called to be a speaker? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Are you called to help others? Do it with the strength and energy that God supplies" (1 Pet 4:10-11 [NLT]). There seems to be then, a particular call to vocation for each individual, ineluctably tied to physical and spiritual gifts. More than a duty or obligation, vocation is a "listening to the calling that comes from a voice within [God?], calling [the individual] to be the person [he or she] was created to be."³⁷

Even in the case of undeniable gifts both public and private like those in evidence in the women of the Leytonstone community, the church has questioned the legitimacy of such work and its propriety, failing to realize that in doing so it challenged the work of the Holy Spirit. The failure of the church to identify and celebrate the critical labor of household caring and reproductive labor, ignoring its legitimacy, its holiness as Eucharistic and catechetical has meant that too often church teaching has been preoccupied with *outside* work, and failed to pay attention to the marks of calling to *inside* work, preferring instead, to let the overarching cultural paradigm define leadership.

Early Methodism's conflation of public and private spheres of holiness circumvented cultural norms and allowed the formidable responsibilities of "housekeeping" and of "mothering" to shape congregational life. Evidence of the depth of love which emerged from women disciplined by such a society can be found in the diaries, hymns, poems and prayers of these pioneers. The care and concern for the abandoned corpse of a young woman found dead in St. George's Field, expressed in poetic form by Portia Young in 1784, reflects the profound compassion and empathy which comes about only through the deep inner workings of the spirit and a first hand knowledge of birth and death and of being "othered:"

Unhappy daughter of distress and woe,

³⁷ Melanie A. May, "One Woman's Wrestling with Vocation," *Brethren Life and Work* 46.3 (2004): 231.

Whate'er thy sorrows, and whoe'er thou art;
For thee the tear of sympathy shall flow,
Warm from the purest fountain of the heart!

Poor wanderer! perhaps thou couldest not find
One liberal hand the slender gift to spare,
Insatiate Avarice the soul confined,
And timid Prudence disbelieved thy prayer.

Whate'er thy lot has been, unhappy shade,
From sin, at length, and sorrow thou are freed;
Thy debt to Virtue, --it is amply paid,
And weeping Pity pays her debt to thee.³⁸

Concluding Remarks: The Call to Mothering and to Catechesis

The family is the learning and proving ground for democracy and a sense of justice.³⁹ Proverbs specifically elevates caring about what women say and appreciating the value of women as among the lessons expected of a Jew, and, interestingly enough, learned at home (site of catechesis).⁴⁰ In fact, lived discipleship and Christian witness, “holy” ways of living, must be learned and practiced at home if they are ever to become central to public practice. Such intense care-giving often falls on the mother. That it falls on a mother called by vocation to mothering is reason to celebrate. When this calling falls to a mother expected to fulfill a mother’s role in order to serve God and her family simply because she is female (rather than called there by God and gifted to do the work), then neither she nor those in her care are being valued in the faith community. Children and new believers alike are as the precious lamb for whom the shepherd would leave the ninety-nine in order to rescue the one.⁴¹ Living in community demands sharing the tasks of mothering—both the physical responsibilities as well as the spiritual leadership—among those gifted in carework, enabling biological mothers not to be overwhelmed by being expected to manage alone a task for which they are not suited, and enabling men and women who by virtue of their gifts for mothering, but who may or may not, inhabit fertile bodies, to be mothers par excellence as they were gifted to be.

By allowing a conception of motherhood as purely tied to biology, rather than properly understanding it as a catechetical function within the church, practiced in small ways at home and in larger ways in the wider community, the church deprives itself of some of its most able and gifted disciples. I would assert, even, that based on an understanding of mothering as catechetical, mothers are to mother and fathers are to mother. Extended to the

³⁸ Chilcote, *Early Methodist Spirituality*, 186-187.

³⁹ Joan C. Tronto, “The ‘Nanny’ Question in Feminism,” *Hypatia* 17.2 (2002): 34-50, referring to the conclusions of Susan Okin (1989).

⁴⁰ See James Crenshaw, “A Mother’s Instruction of Her Son (Proverbs 31:1-9),” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 15.4 (2004): 9-23.

⁴¹ Matthew 18:12.

community, mothers are to lead, to teach, and to pastor and fathers are as well. Early Methodism succeeded in no small measure because Wesley understood Paul's insight that in Christ "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female" (Galatians 3:28 [NRSV]) and that "house keeping" was a responsibility with incarnational implications for the entire body of Christ, the church.

We cannot forget that early Christians exercised a radical faith which disrupted the patriarchal expectations of the nuclear family and of the surrounding culture of Rome. There was equality in Christ. There was new life in Christ. This egalitarian distinctive of the Christian faith seems constantly to disappear from body-life as soon as a group which has rediscovered it enters, as Foster and Chilcote observe, a stage of cultural legitimization or functional institutionalization. Such institutionalization too often neglects that mother-love is inclusive, extending to all children, no matter who they are as individuals. Such loving is connected and focused on the needs of others and is unconditional. As such, mother-love better fits as paradigmatic of the scriptural stories from which Christians are supposed to take their understanding of love. Jesus told the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*, a story about love that does not have limits, and a story about a man who behaved not like a neighbor, but like a lover. "Mothers, too, are like lovers in that they care intensely for others, regardless of what is given back. It is this intensity to which Christians are both drawn and called."⁴² That Christians are called to such radical mothering regardless of gender further support the notion that the work of mothering is not work that should be tied to biological sex, but to holy vocational calling. Indeed, whoever is gifted in mothering is a primary teacher in a community of faith, is a catechetical leader and a pastor, regardless of sex.

Early Methodist women demonstrated the spirituality of mother-love quite dramatically in the formation of communities like Leytonstone and in preaching that the birth of new souls requires the careful cultivation of God-given "housekeeping" gifts. Unfortunately, the female models for this form of leadership were often caught in the cross-currents of male ambition and institutionalization. When the Methodist Conference voted to ban women preachers in 1803, it was not because biblical exegesis had led them to it, for Wesley himself had come to understand the whole of the Methodist experience as an extraordinary movement of the Spirit, and the call of women as a part of that extraordinariness. It was their own internalization of societal expectations regarding women and the traditional interpretation of women's place in the church, as well as the internal tensions of working outside the bounds of propriety and power, that led to the silencing of Methodist women whose gifts of oratory, prayer, exhortation, and holy living all emerged from their disciplined participation within the movement itself. That Conference

⁴² See Julie H. Rubio, "The dual vocation of Christian parents," *Theological Studies* 63.4 (2002): 786-813.

voted to deny the fruit of its own faithfulness to the call of God and to squelch the blessing of God on the community as a whole. To use the language of Kathleen Norris, they “chose manly public appearance over godly house-keeping.”⁴³

By re/membering the lives of early Methodist women preachers like Mary Bosanquet (Fletcher), Sarah Crosby, Mary Barritt (Taft), and Sarah Ryan, and weaving their stories into the daily fabric of our collective understanding of what it means to love God and neighbor, to disciple, and to pastor, we restore to the church a faithful witness to the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of every believer. Indeed the founding principles of Wesley’s movement invited, and still invite, a maternal ethic of lived loving into all notions of faithful discipleship. A feminist maternal ethic which reinstates mothering as holy while not deposing agency and individual calling, re/conceives community as a radical call to discipleship and invites the participation of all who are gifted by God to holy mothering and ecclesial leadership.

⁴³ Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries*.