M. MADELINE SOUTHARD (1877-1967) ON “ECCLESIAL SUFFRAGE”

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Raised on the Kansas prairie and becoming an internationally known figure before her death, M. Madeline Southard became a vocal proponent for women preachers, challenging her own denomination, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and encouraging other women to work as preachers. In her early forties, she wrote in her journal:

Today I read . . . Anna Howard Shaw’s autobiography. What a road a woman has to travel to get anything done for women in this world. Oh, you girls of the future who will be able to fulfill your personal life and life’s sweet relationships too, will you think sometimes, I wonder, of what it cost other women to bring this to you. Or will you wonder uncomprehendingly what kind of beings these “old maids” were—Frances Willard, Susan B. Anthony, Anna Shaw and so many more. God must help me to be brave, to do my part of the task.¹

The task she set before herself was to gain equality for women preachers and she was instrumental in nudging the Methodist Episcopal Church in that direction. Of particular interest for this essay, however, is to understand what propelled her to take up this task and to work for what she called “ecclesial suffrage.”

Drawing from her personal journals that now are located at the Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, three aspects of her life coalesced to provide the impetus for her activism. The first of these reflects her context—geographical, familial, and personal experiences. The second and third reasons for her activism revolve around her expanding awareness of biblical interpretation and sexism in the church.

I

Recognizing the wide open prairie, the vast contour of the sky, the abiding sun, and the unrelenting wind are crucial to becoming acquainted with Southard’s environment. From violent thunderstorms that emerge on the horizon and crash upon a community with overpowering force to blinding dust storms that prey on an already parched land, living in Kansas is never easy. Land shapes a person down to the core. The result in human nature is a solidness of character, a resolve that scarcely can be shaken, a quiet deter-

mination that resides in the soul much like a smoldering fire that continues to burn, although unrecognizable to most.

Land also shapes how people create communities. In the West, women and men had to work together to establish a new way of life. The geography of that region uniquely determined that separate spheres could not be maintained. Thus, while the “separate spheres” ideology may ring true in many eastern regions of the United States, this framework does not accurately portray the way of life in the West. Women in the West did think in terms of a specific moral responsibility, but they certainly did not maintain a separate sphere of activity. The reason for this distinction, as Elizabeth Jameson contends, is that “family survival depended on flexibility and interdependence in work roles.”

Flexibility of “westering women” can be seen, for example, in their clothing. The physical surroundings of the West did not allow women to wear long, full dresses with tight-fitting bodices. Long skirts were too cumbersome for women who needed to walk through tall grass, often wet with dew. Women adapted by shortening the length. Tight bodices were too uncomfortable and binding for women who had physical labor as part of their daily routine. To adjust, women often designed loose clothing and found they could accomplish more when not bound so tightly.

This loosening adjustment can also be seen in religion on the frontier where women assumed leadership roles in their churches by planning meetings, teaching Sunday Bible class, and organizing fund-raising drives for various items or projects. Julie Roy Jeffreys notes, for example, Lois Murray sought her husband’s approval, but also worked as the church school superintendent, read sermons to Bible classes, and even officiated at funerals.

In addition to this flexibility, throughout Kansas’ history, Kansas women were prominent in reform efforts. For example, women in Kansas led the nation in changing laws affecting women. By the mid-1850s, women’s rights was a topic considered in many towns across the prairie, and women’s suffrage began in the state with a gathering at the Wyandotte constitutional convention in 1859 where three women participated. In 1861,

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women could vote in school elections and gained the same right for municipal elections after 1887. When suffrage became a statewide controversy in 1867, Kansas gained national attention since it was the first state to consider woman suffrage. Frances Willard, impressed by the leadership women exhibited in the state in 1900, remarked in the *Union Signal*: "I wish some of our sisters would send me a tabulated statement of the new departures taken by Kansas since the few years ago when it was reclaimed from the Indians. . . . This novel state has woman preachers, doctors, lawyers, in larger proportions than almost any other. . . ."

This independence created by geography and the progressive impulse of Kansas was also bolstered in Southard by her particular familial situation: grandmother, mother, and two girls making their life together on the Kansas prairie. While Southard did not often reflect *per se* in her journals the ways in which this family survived, what evidence there is points to an active participation on her part of helping the family by securing housing, cleaning, doing laundry, preparing meals, etc. Furthermore, there is a motivating effect on the young Southard as she reflected on the failing health of her mother, and more particularly, when her mother died. Peppered throughout her daily accounts of ordinary events and conversations, Southard briefly mentioned that her mother didn’t feel well that day, or her mother purchased several items in town, including medicine. These simple declarations indicate that her mother’s health was frequently on her mind, although she never seemed to dwell on it or the possibility that her mother’s health did, in fact, lead to an early death.

When her mother died in 1893, Southard wrote:

Kneeling by her side in that rough, rude room, alone with my dead Mother, I asked the Father to take my life and help me to be true to Him, as she would have me. . . . Before going to the cemetery [sic] the coffin was opened; that seemed the hardest time, yet I still felt it almost mockery to call that cold, lifeless clay, “Mother.” For the eyes where the Mother-love always shone, were forever closed; the soul had deserted its home of dust, and flown to a mansion of light. I paused with my lips on her cold forehead, and again consecrated myself to God, a complete consecration. Father help me to keep the vows which I made to Thee, as I saw that dear Mother for the last time in this world.  

This “consecration” experience seemed to propel Southard to be active in changing her world and probably ensured she would not take her time on earth for granted. Thus, the extent of these early influences can be seen throughout Southard’s life most notably in her embrace of progressive

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7 For information on the Kansas campaign of 1867, see Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women’s Movement in America, 1848-1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 79-104.


movements, her independence, her innovative spirit, and her inexhaustible determination to effect positive change. While she traveled the world and made extensive contacts and friends, the influence of Kansas remained constant and her ability to rise above traditional barriers, even working to tear them down, stemmed in part from her matrifocal family who demonstrated buoyancy in the face of adversity.

In addition to these geographical and familial aspects, and perhaps with some reading between the lines, Southard’s journal divulges her developing feminist sensibilities over the years and culminating in 1919. To begin, she recognized how different she was from most women, her mother accentuating the point, but other circumstances revealed similar incongruities. For example, she realized how difficult it would be for her to find an acceptable mate as she had no interest in a lukewarm affair. Also, while she seemed to be comfortable in her decidedly outsider position with regard to the Methodist Episcopal Church because of the freedom it afforded her, she witnessed her college friends ascending the ecclesiastical ladder while she maintained her same, easily overlooked, status.

Adding to this sense of invisibility must have been the fact that leading up to and during World War I, Southard developed a detailed plan whereby drafted men, who were noted as sanctified and in some way demonstrated a close connection their local congregations, were linked to other congregations in close geographical proximity to their training location before going overseas. In order to execute her plan, she had to draw on the assistance and logistical support of several groups within the Methodist Episcopal Church. She spent considerable time and all of her money to see that her plan received full attention and implementation; yet, that never happened. Powerful individuals and groups agreed to help, but the slow progress of institutional cogs did not move quickly enough. By the time World War I was over, she felt that what could have had tremendous impact did not, and had not contributed to the war effort as she would have liked. Dejectedly, she lamented, “It has been a source of real suffering to me that my vocation lies outside any work planned for war emergency—there has been war work for almost everyone but women preachers.”

About this time, she started recording instances of sexism in her journal, although she did not use that term. For example, while leading services in Milan, Kansas, in 1914, Southard encountered a group of Campbellites who, she said, “made a good deal of fuss about a woman’s preaching.” Someone encouraged her to respond by preaching a sermon on the subject, which she did. Two and a half years later, while at Garrett Biblical Institute, Northwestern University, she experienced sexism more blatantly and her response reveals more indignation. At the time, it was customary for men to receive free boarding while women were not allowed to room on campus

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and had to pay for their housing. Apparently a new dormitory for men had left the old one unoccupied except for one professor and parent. Southard asked to room there, intending to pay for it, when she was told, "Garrett has not been a first rate theological school long enough for them to take the risk of encouraging anything that would make them appear co-educational." She responded in her journal, "Well, we shall see. The world may go on another hundred years or so, and if it does—." 12

A corresponding aspect to this developing feminist impulse in Southard was her growing familiarity with the lives of other influential women. While in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in September, 1914, she read about several women and found herself "surprised and encouraged to find that most of them were as old as I before they accomplished much beyond the ordinary." Those she noted included Mary Lyon, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Florence Nightingale, Clara Barton, and Frances Willard. 13 Providing further impetus was Willard's journal entry recorded on her thirty-eighth birthday. Southard recorded her entry on the same birth date: "I have read where Miss Willard recorded on her thirty-eighth birthday her opinion that if she were ever to do anything it was time she was about it. If she could feel that way, how much more ought I. It may be that God still has something worth while for me to do." 14

Her feminist awakening seemed to correspond to the gathering momentum of the national suffrage movement. By New Year's Eve, 1918, Southard was resolved to make a path for women preachers. She wrote:

There is one thing I want to get done. That is to help lift woman to the place God wants her to hold—and this is for the sake of man as well as woman. I especially want to see the way made for women to preach. I have learned that the woman preacher is a rare and lovely creature, with few associates of her kind. The church has given woman a palliative in the deaconess work, but with the ministry woman has failed to break down male autocracy.

I'm thinking of seeing if we cannot get a few of us together and do something for the girls of the future who feel as Frances Willard said she did, that their call is to the Gospel ministry. If women are to do religious work at all, why may they not do this most blessed part of it, the preaching of the gospel? The rising tide of democracy seems to me to call for equality of opportunity in this as in other fields. 15

In the same entry, she claimed Revelation 21:7 as her verse for 1919, a custom she often practiced as she watched each old year pass away and welcomed the new. The text, "Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children," was aptly suited for the coming year, because she saw herself overcoming many things, including her shyness and lack of ambition regarding institutional barriers. Anticipating the year ahead, she wrote, "I go out into another year—of bat-

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tle probably. But I shall trust and not be afraid.”\textsuperscript{16} She seemed to realize 1919 was an important year when she quipped, “it seems very strange how willing men are for women to do everything for men except minister to them spiritually. Well, we shall see.”\textsuperscript{17}

II

By 1919, Southard sought to convince her Methodist reader of the ecclesial rights of women by publishing an article in the \textit{Methodist Review} on Jesus’ attitude toward women.\textsuperscript{18} But before that, she had to convince herself of Jesus’ position on the “woman question.” Her master’s thesis, completed in the spring of 1919, allowed her this opportunity. A careful study of the gospels confirmed for her that Jesus treated women as individuals and important persons apart from their relationships, as mothers, sisters, or wives. Though men usually were deemed people in their own right simply by virtue of being men, women in many cultures and times have been identified primarily by their relationships to men. Her contention was that Jesus considered women as people worthy of respect not because of their relationships but simply because they were human beings.

Working under the assumption that the primary necessity for entering the Kingdom of God is faith,\textsuperscript{19} Southard illustrated that the same number of women and men were mentioned by Jesus as having this essential quality.\textsuperscript{20} Basing an egalitarian argument on faith was a departure from the hermeneutic used by earlier holiness advocates of women preachers, a movement Southard identified with throughout her life and maintained contact with varying degrees. The common foundations of the holiness movement contained three different approaches. The first originated in abolitionist circles surrounding Charles Finney and relied upon Galatians 3.28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male

\textsuperscript{16} Southard, “Journal,” vol. 51 (December 31, 1918).
\textsuperscript{17} Southard, “Journal,” vol. 52, (April 9, 1919).
\textsuperscript{19} Here Southard draws on Alexander Balmain Bruce’s, \textit{The Kingdom of God; or Christ’s Teaching According to the Synoptical Gospels}, Sixth edition (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889). Bruce emphatically declared, “faith was in reality the first and chief condition of admission to the kingdom in the teaching of Jesus.” Bruce, 94.
\textsuperscript{20} There were three each: a Roman centurion, a Samaritan leper, a blind beggar, the woman who touched Jesus’ garment, the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet with her ointment, and the Syro-Phoenician woman. Southard, “The Attitude of Jesus,” 1919, 2-3. Bruce described Jesus’ encounter with the woman who anointed his feet with ointment, the Roman centurion, and the Syro-Phoenician woman. He remarked that, “the first shows Christ’s estimate of the power of faith as a redemptive force; the other two reveal His consciousness that before faith all barriers of race, rite, or election must go down.” Bruce, 97.
and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”21 This position recognized the historical and cultural influences on scripture requiring interpretation with a “more developmental and historically oriented view.” For these holiness advocates, “the culmination of the women’s rights movement was, in fact, the culmination of New Testament teachings.”22 The second holiness approach to biblical interpretation relied on the event of Pentecost as key. Emphasis focused on Peter’s citation of Joel’s prophecy recorded in Acts 2.17-18:

In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

With Pentecost and the pouring out of God’s Spirit, a new age began where prophesying included women and men alike. Closely related to the second, the third biblical basis for an expanded presence of women accompanied a growing dedication to the work of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Spirit became a central metaphor reinforcing the powerful idea that all believers could expect God to work through each of them in extraordinary ways.23

Rather than following this emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, Southard focused on the earthly life of Jesus presented in the gospels, shifting the analysis not only in terms of persons of the Trinity, but from doctrine to activity. Faith rather than the work of the Holy Spirit formed the foundation of Southard’s approach.

To demonstrate that Jesus believed women were both intellectually and spiritually capable of a life of faith and thus worthy of Jesus’ attention, Southard used the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4.6-42, and the discussion he had with Martha of Bethany recorded in John 11.21-27.24 She argued that Jesus talked with these women because he believed they would understand what he said and they would benefit from his knowledge. If Jesus thought they did not have the mental and spiritual capacities for such conversations, he surely would not have invested himself in teaching them. Furthermore, Jesus was apparently desirous that these women hear what he had to say, indicating his interest in their unique personhood.

21 Unless otherwise noted, all biblical references are the New Revised Standard Version.


23 “Women in the Holiness Movement,” 246.

Southard concluded that these women were not judged in the case of the Samaritan by her relationships, or in the case of Martha by her domestic capabilities. Rather, Jesus “put no difference in His teaching between male and female. It was no occasion of surprise to Him that woman could grasp His highest truths. He presented them as simply and naturally to women as He did to men, expecting the same response.”

Southard then shifted her attention to episodes of Jesus rebuking women. She reasoned that “if we can find what called forth these rebukes we shall have secured important evidence concerning His attitude toward women.” Her discovery is noteworthy: “In every instance where Jesus reproved women, it was for failure to subordinate their feminine relationships to their interests as citizens of the Kingdom of God.” To support her point, Southard examined Jesus’ actions toward his mother.

The first episode, Luke 2.41-51, records Jesus in his youth when Mary discovered him in the temple and rebuked him for his unexplained absence. The second instance, John 2.1-11, revealed Jesus, with his adolescence behind him and his public ministry before him, encountering his mother at the wedding in Cana. The third encounter is later in Jesus’ ministry when, presumably, he had just appointed the twelve disciples, recorded in Matthew 12.46-50; Mark 3.21, 31-35; and Luke 8.19-21. Here Jesus had been told his family was at hand and responded that contrariwise his mother and brothers were actually among the throng of people listening to his message; a strong rejection of his familial bonds to be sure!

Referring to these encounters, Southard noted two aspects of Mary’s position. First, while much has been made of Jesus’ messianic consciousness, little effort has been undertaken to study Mary’s understanding of Jesus’ messianic calling; she must have struggled mightily to comprehend the message and the actions of her son. Particularly overlooked by scholars are two aspects of Mary’s life. First, although she was granted in one grand moment a special consciousness of the unique role her child would play in world events before he was born, the day-to-day life experiences could have had a considerable dulling effect on her faith. Second, her expectation of an earthly messiah who would usher in a physical kingdom was not unlike that of the Jewish community. Regardless of her biological tie to Jesus, her expectations of a kingly messiah who would lead Israel against its oppressor would have been difficult to dispel. It is not surprising to find her wrestling with her understanding of Jesus and his messianic role. Because of

this difficulty, Jesus rebuked her time after time.29

The second aspect of Mary’s position required a consideration of the expectations behind Jesus’ reproofs. Jesus was especially interested in Mary’s response to his ministry because he was not content with her role as his mother, but rather desired her to function as a disciple. From Jesus’ attitude toward Mary his mother, we see that Jesus required women to respond to his message in faith, as opposed to viewing women merely as people whose purpose entailed attending to their domestic duty. Mary had a responsibility to become a disciple.30

Not concentrating only on rebukes, Southard also examined Jesus’ defense of women, beginning with the story of Mary and Martha.31 In Jesus’ reply to Martha’s indignant criticism of Mary for listening to Jesus, rather than attending to food preparation, Southard wrote, “Jesus forever makes place for the woman disciple in the study of theological truth, and commends her definite decision of will, in the face of opposition, to seek first the kingdom of God and let other things take secondary place.”32 Mary, in another encounter with Jesus, was the only person who understood the profound worship due Jesus when his crucifixion was imminent.33 Realizing the gravity of the situation before Jesus, she anointed his feet with costly perfume. This time it was not her sister but the disciples who charged her with “extravagance and indifference to the claims of philanthropy.”34 Southard perceived the criticism of Mary on two levels. The first was about her contemplative state (“without doubt Mary was a mystic”),35 and Jesus’ answer that she had chosen the good part. It was fitting for a woman to be engaged in theological and spiritual discussions. Second, Mary’s action was criticized and Jesus responded by saying that she had brought about a good work.36 Mary had perceived the coming crucifixion and its meaning more

29 Southard appears to draw here on Alfred Edersheim’s, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 2 vols. (New York: E.R. Herrick & Company, 1886). Edersheim claims, “Thus it was, that every event connected with the Messianic manifestation of Jesus would come to the Virgin-Mother as a fresh discovery and a new surprise. Each event, as it took place, stood isolated in her mind; not as part of a whole which she would anticipate, nor as only one link in a chain; but as something quite by itself. She knew the beginning, and she knew the end; but she knew not the path which led from the one to the other; and each step in it was a new revelation.” Edersheim, 193. See also, Southard, “The Attitude of Jesus,” 1919, 14-5.


31 Southard takes issue with many commentators on this story: “We do not agree with the usual picture of Mary as of a rapt impractical dreamer. In the love of contrasting these two sisters both have been done a great injustice. Martha had plenty of idealism when developed, Mary had some measure of common sense.” Southard, “The Attitude of Jesus,” 1919, 31.


33 This incident is recorded in Mt 26.1-14, Mk 14.1-9, and Jn 12.1-8.


36 Southard makes the note that Mary of Bethany has sometimes been confused with Mary the sinner recorded in Luke. She admits there are some similarities in the stories, but argues, nevertheless, that these are two different women.
clearly than the other disciples.

Several other examples of Jesus' defending women were explored by Southard: the woman who anointed Jesus with oil, Luke 7.36-40; the woman caught in adultery in John 8.1-11; the Syro-Phoenician woman in Matthew 15.21-28; and the women who brought their little children to see Jesus recorded in Mark 10.13-16, and Matthew 19.13-15. In each case, Southard explained that Jesus dealt with women fairly and in a manner distinctly different from the Jewish customs of the time. She argued, "Jesus never gave an address on woman's rights, even as He made no anti-slavery speeches, nor any direct advocacy of political or economic democracy. Yet all these were implicit in His teaching and His equal treatment of both sexes and all classes." 37

If Jesus rebuked Mary his mother and other conventional women for their failure to have faith in him and his mission, what was his response to outcast women? Southard illustrated that chastity and its social constraints demonstrated most clearly the difference between the treatment of men and women in the Jewish world of Jesus' time. Where men were viewed as persons and women were viewed by relationships, Jesus acted out of step.

For her argument, Southard cited three women. 38 In the first account (John. 8.1-11), a woman was accused by the scribes and Pharisees of adultery, while the man prudently was allowed to "escape." 39 The second story entails the Samaritan woman at the well. 40 The third woman found in Luke 7.36-50, Southard rightly claimed, has been falsely identified with Mary Magdala and Mary of Bethany. 41

Southard's first observation regarding all three stories was that Jesus did not discount the sin of each woman. With their sin fully acknowledged, he proceeded to treat them as human beings. "There is no shadow in His attitude of that belief, common to this day, that a woman guilty of unchaste conduct can never be restored. Instead He shows consideration for their feelings, a desire to lead them into His kingdom, a confidence in their power to apprehend His message." 42 This treatment was highly egalitarian. Thus, Jesus demonstrated a new attitude toward women.

37 Southard, "The Attitude of Jesus," 1919, 37. Starr concurs with this assessment: "Jesus Christ stands apart from all these founders in this respect—He never by word or deed, lent encouragement to the disparagement of woman." Starr, 175.
38 She recognized that many have confused Mary Magdalene with a sinner and that some have mistakenly taken her as being possessed by seven demons. Southard dismisses both cases, and thus, Mary Magdalene is not used as an example of Jesus rebuking a woman because of her sin. In support of her position, she cites Samuel J. Andrews, Frederic Farrar, Cunningham Geikie, Charles Mayor, and others.
40 Notice Southard did not deal with the issue of sin in her first examination of this passage, instead focusing on the mental and spiritual capability of the woman.
Southard advanced her argument one step further and asserted that Jesus had genuine respect and consideration for women of all races and classes that men of his time period did not possess. Perhaps hinting of the ways she had been treated, she wrote:

When men think of women as the creatures of physical relationships, and consider them mentally inferior to themselves, they may love their own women, their wives, their mothers, their sisters and their daughters, they may show consideration for them and for the women folk of their friends. They will likely go great lengths to please women who attract them and from whom they hope to secure certain favors. But outside these circles they are rude to women with a rudeness that easily slips into cruelty.

Foreshadowing her defense of women preachers at the upcoming 1920 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Southard augmented her argument of Jesus' egalitarian treatment of women to include his acceptance of them in places of ministerial leadership. She made use of biblical scholarship demonstrating that she recognized the Bible to be subject to its own time, and as such, affected by the cultural patterns of patriarchal Judaism. The very fact that women are mentioned in some accounts, that Jesus accepted women ministering to him, and that he expected women to act upon their own faith, enabled Southard to assert:

We have enough definite information to show that Jesus took with Him on His preaching campaigns a company of women as He took a company of men; that having given them health of body and enlightenment of mind He did not hesitate to accept their ministry in material things; and that He included them in part if not all of those intimate addresses to His inner circle where we read only of the presence of the Twelve.

Acknowledging Jesus' acceptance of women's ministries provided the foundation for Southard to examine his resurrection appearances to women. A pivotal change occurred with Jesus' resurrection that Southard wished to examine. The women who were last at the cross when Jesus died were also the first present at the tomb when he appeared to them. Jesus did not necessarily need to meet the women at the tomb; he could have appeared to anyone anywhere. Yet, he chose to engage the women at the tomb first. This curiosity Southard explained by noting that since Jesus made his first messianic statement to the Samarian woman, it was appropriate to make his final messianic proclamation to a woman. By instructing Mary Magdalene to tell the disciples of his resurrection, Jesus made women the first "evangelists."
Shifting her attention from Jesus’ actions to his teaching specifically related to women, Southard noted the scarcity of material. “Either [Jesus] ignored women entirely or He so believed in the equality of men and women that all His teaching applies to humanity without sex distinction.”46 While his general teachings on marriage, divorce, and social sins revealed something of Jesus’ attitude toward women, it was his interactions with women that demonstrated the extent to which he was at odds with his culture.

As a final note, Southard summarized some of the chief personality traits of Jesus, arguing Jesus “took these traits of character, esteemed only in an inferior class, and made them the crown of His nobility.”47 The virtues she listed usually ascribed to women included compassion, meekness, purity, service, and humility. She stated, “all students of the life of Jesus are impressed by His possession of both types of virtue; it would seem to show the completeness of His humanity.”48

Southard’s thesis thus persuasively demonstrated Jesus’ attitude toward women as significantly different from his culture. Now, having confirmed through her own research Jesus’ egalitarian impulse, Southard addressed a public audience, preparing them for her upcoming conference work.

III

In her Methodist Review article of 1919, Southard began by calling attention to the fortieth anniversary of the 1880 General Conference’s rejection of Dr. Anna Howard Shaw’s preaching ministry and alerted the reader to the timing of the upcoming 1920 General Conference with regard to its position on women in the ministry and signaled that “women’s struggle to gain the right to be ordained was not a whim or fad, rather it was a protracted effort.”49

The first two arguments she addressed concerned the presumed inferi-

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47 Southard, The Attitude of Jesus, 1999, 156.
48 Southard, The Attitude of Jesus, 1999, 157. Here Southard alluded to the masculine, but did not specifically list masculine virtues.
49 Lucy Anne Lind Hogan, The Overthrow of the Monopoly of the Pulpit: A Longitudinal Case Study of the Cultural Conversation Advocating the Preaching and Ordination of Women in American Methodism 1859-1924 (Phoebe Palmer, Frances Willard, M. Madeline Southard, Georgia Harkness), Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland College Park, 1995, 197. Hogan offers an interesting study of the continuing conversation over women in the pulpit, beginning with Phoebe Palmer and Frances Willard, and continuing her examination with Southard and Georgia Harkness. Of Southard’s rhetorical strategies used in this article, Hogan discusses three: persona, refutation, and modern critical methods of biblical interpretation. Referring to the first strategy, Hogan explains even though Southard was conservative, she “was also an educated New Woman who was no longer content to accept an inferior, subordinate position, and as an educated woman she possessed the confidence and logical skills to confront her opponents.” As a skillful debater, she raised questions of debaters because she was confident her arguments successfully weakened the opposition. Finally, she did not reject the authority of scripture, but approached it with new modern critical methods. Hogan, 206-7.
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ority of women. She readily admitted women’s participation in society had been overlooked because, it was thought, they were mentally inferior to men. Southard argued that this idea held sway when women were not educated. Recent years had allowed women liberal educations; however, this notion was no longer tenable. Regarding the second argument, physical disability, Southard relied on historical evidence to demonstrate its inaccuracy, drawing on examples of women working in very difficult geographical areas such as the far western reaches of the frontier—like Kansas—and even abroad.

The third argument often used to bar women from the ministry centered on an appeal to scripture. Here Southard revealed her progressive methodology of biblical interpretation. Two issues were germane for this approach: historical method and the abandonment of the “proof-text” method. For example, Southard noted that context provides the key to understanding Paul’s isolated treatment of women in I Corinthians. His injunctions against women were specific to that particular situation and were not intended to be a prohibition of public speaking against all women. Investigating the historical situation in Corinth at the time of Paul’s letter enables the reader to see that the injunction was intended to address “ignorance and immorality,”50 not a condition plaguing all women in all ages. Moreover, in reading the whole of Scripture, Southard called her readers to recognize the presence of women who preached in the early church, giving the example of Philip’s daughters recorded in Acts. Without calling into the question the apparent contradictory messages in the New Testament—the presence of women preaching and prophesying while individual passages prohibited such action—Southard urged a reading of the New Testament in totality, convinced that such exposure would enable the earliest women preachers to be seen.

Southard augmented her argument by pointing out the inconsistency of the church’s application of the admonitions: “Let your women keep silence in the church” (I Corinthians) and “I suffer not a woman to teach” (I Timothy). With an eye toward practicality, a trait demonstrating the influence of Kansas, she remarked, that complete adherence to these injunctions meant women could not contribute to the Epworth League, Christian Endeavor, or a midweek meeting. Nor could women speak on behalf of missionary or humanitarian efforts from the pulpit. Pushing this position to its logical conclusion, she argued that “a rigorous application of this would work considerable hardship in the public schools, and might make it difficult to properly man our Sunday schools.”51 Up to this point, it appeared that Southard found most reasons to exclude women from preaching ministries to be so insignificant that little effort was needed to disprove them. The final reason, however, for the exclusion of women from the ministry received a

more thorough treatment by Southard and she remarked, “it is perhaps the only one that still has weight with thoughtful people.” The objection was that the ordination of women violated the assigned domestic sphere where women should concentrate their efforts. Southard took a less than confrontational response and did not argue against the separate spheres ideology. Instead, Southard noted that in an ideal world every woman would find her “most satisfying expression of her womanhood” in motherhood, but, alas, this was not a perfect world. Wars result in shortages of males; some men are “morally and physically unfit” for fatherhood, and women have all throughout history been required to share in “the world’s industrial burden.” Thus, she again used practicality, this time to outweigh predetermined gender roles. She intensified her argument, however, by claiming that men did not complain when women did, in fact, violate this gender sphere, as long as they worked unskilled jobs. Yet, “it seems to be only when they approach the more desirable and remunerative tasks that lively fears of the disruption of the home are entertained.”

Southard’s insight reached an apex when she laid this argument at the feet of the church. Noting its need for consistency, Southard asked:

> Shall the church cling to this argument when in all other fields it has been cast aside as obsolete? In its larger program for the years ahead it is confidently including great numbers of woman workers. Consistency would seem to demand that either, for the sake of the home, the church exclude women from all special lines of its service, or, if it continue to plead with its daughters to do definite religious work, then that it remove all artificial restrictions and let them enter any field their ability may open to them.

Southard then proceeded to highlight the various contributions women could make to the ministry. Southard’s final argument was that women are called to evangelize and should not be forced to abandon such a high calling—surely a statement born of her own struggle. “When God has so clearly given his word through women it is doubtful if any ecclesiasticism is justified in hampering their activity.” Hence, she placed the authority of

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women in the ministry with God, regardless of the church's stance on that work.

IV

The 1920 and 1924 General Conference battles over ecclesial equality demanded thorough preparation and exacted a high personal cost. Southard willingly offered both because she believed she had to do her part, a responsibility shaped by Kansas, her familial environment, and her developing sense of feminism. She undertook a full investigation of Jesus, convincing herself of her solid biblical foundation and prepared Methodists for the arguments she intended to make. When the 1924 General Conference ended and incremental progress had been made although full ecclesial equality had not been achieved, Southard shifted her energy to other places: revival work and the International Association of Woman Preachers. In more subtle ways she continued to work for ecclesial suffrage. When Georgia Harkness led the movement to secure full ordination rights for women in 1956, she was walking a path M. Madeline Southard charted some thirty years earlier.