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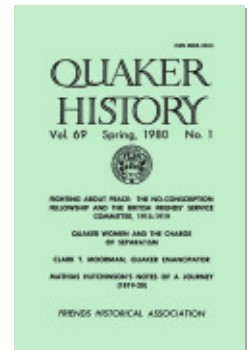
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QUAKER WOMEN AND THE CHARGE OF SEPARATISM

BY MARGARET H. BACON*

The current women's movement has had reverberations within the Society of Friends. In many monthly and yearly meetings, women have chosen to meet separately in support groups, while continuing as full partners in the business meeting and meeting for worship. These separate groups have been regarded as controversial, and frequently the charge is made that they are not "Quakerly." A glance back into Quaker history assures us that the controversy is an old one.

George Fox is credited with establishing the first separate business meetings for women, to supplement the men's meetings; and to handle the placement and supervision of servant girls, the care of poor widows, and the like. He did so not so much out of principle, but in the belief that women had much practical ability to contribute to the life of the Society of Friends. He was criticized for the establishment of these separate meetings by two fellow Quakers, John Wilkinson and John Story, who felt that they were innovations grafted onto primitive Quakerism. Why not let the women join the men in business meetings? the schismatics asked. Because women would then be too intimidated to bring their concerns out into the open, Fox replied. "There is some dark spirits (sic) that would have no women's meetings, but as men should meet with them, which women cannot for civility and modesty's sake speak amongst men of women's matters"¹ he argued. In other words, separate meetings for women were more functional at that time. Meeting apart, women were able to play a more constructive role in the Society than if they had been submerged by meeting with men.

Almost 170 years later in the life of the Society, Fox's empirical insight was defended by Lucretia Coffin Mott, the founder of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and the guiding spirit at

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1. George Fox's Epistles No. 313 as in Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, p. 274, Note 4.

the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. Two Quaker sisters from South Carolina, Angelina and Sarah Grimké, had joined the Female Society and subsequently became lecturers for the American Anti-Slavery Society. When they began to speak to mixed audiences, the abolitionists quarrelled among themselves over the question of permitting the rights of women to become part of the anti-slavery campaign. The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society backed the Grimké sisters, and became the springboard for the women's rights movement.

In Lynn, Massachusetts, a young Irish Quaker schoolteacher, Abby Kelley, sponsored the Grimkés in speaking to a "mixed" or "promiscuous" audience in the Lynn Friends Meeting House. Inspired by the Grimkés, Abby became an ardent supporter of women's rights within the antislavery movement. In 1837 she attended the first American Convention of Anti-Slavery Women, and in 1838 she came to Philadelphia to be part of the second such gathering. Here she made her maiden speech to a "promiscuous" audience, the night before the hall in which the meetings were held, Pennsylvania Hall, was burned by a mob.²

From Philadelphia, Abby went to Boston, where her appointment to a committee of the New England Anti-Slavery Society began a schism over "the woman question." Becoming more and more of a radical, she answered Lucretia Mott's invitation to attend the third annual American Convention of Anti-Slavery Women, to be held in Philadelphia in May of 1839, with a letter claiming that for women to meet separately was to violate the very principle for which they were struggling. This letter has unfortunately been lost, but Lucretia Mott's answer is self-explanatory:

My dear friend Abby Kelley

Thy letter of 1st mo. last, tho apparently so neglected, has been read again and again with deep interest—and has been lent to such as have the cause of human rights at heart, asking their aid in making a suitable reply—They have failed to furnish such arguments as I wanted to meet thine—and had I not been somewhat at a loss to find convincing reasons even to satisfy my own mind, I should not have been thus remiss in replying to thee.

I should be very glad if women and men too could so lose sight of distinction of sex as to act in public meetings on the enlightened and true ground of Christian equality. But that they cannot yet do so is abundantly evinced by the proceedings of your New England Convention last spring, as well as by the more recent movements in Massachusetts. There is perhaps no better or speedier mode of preparing

2. *The History of Pennsylvania Hall, which was Burned by a Mob on the 17th of May, 1838.* Merrihew and Gunn, 1838.

them for this equality, than for those women whose "eyes are blessed that they see" to act in accordance with the light they have, and avail themselves of every opportunity offered them to mingle in discussions and take part with their brethren.

At the same time, without compromise of the principle of equality or sanction of any error as I conceive in their present circumstances, they may meet by themselves for special purposes, in the same manner as the Society of Friends have ever done, and thus prepare themselves for more public and general exercise of their rights.

Will not the ground thou assumes, oblige thee to withdraw from the Society of Friends? as all their meetings for discipline are with closed doors, not only against the world's people, but men against women, and women against men.

And yet their meetings of women, imperfect as they are, have had their use, in bringing our sex forward, exercising their talents, and preparing them for united action with men, as soon as we can convince them that this is both our right and our duty.

Again, I think we may yield in some measure to the conscientious objections of those whose education has kept them in the dark on this subject, but who are in other respects valuable co-adjutors—at least until we have labored more to convince them that "in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female" . . . it is already acknowledged that our conventions have done something toward bringing women to a higher estimate of her powers—and it will be a subject of regret, if those who are qualified to enlighten others and who may be instrumental in removing the prejudice by which so many are bound, should hastily withdraw and leave their sisters to serve alone.

I would therefore use what little influence I may have in endeavoring to persuade thee and such as thyself to suspend the conclusions to which your arguments are leading you, in order that you may give us your company this spring, when we may examine the whole ground more fully than I have yet been able to do—and if it can clearly be shown that the course we are pursuing is inconsistent with the principles we recognize, I shall then be willing to abandon it.

Thou wilt observe that we have changed the time first concluded upon for our convention, and have fixed on the 1st of 5 mo. to meet here at such place as we may succeed in obtaining for the purpose. We have applied for several places of worship—those of Friends as well as others have so far been refused us, with the exception of the Universalists' house in Callowhill street, which we shall probably have, if we can find persons willing to guarantee the safety of the building.

We are making some progress in our City society—two of our youngest members delivered each an address before a large meeting of women invited for the occasion, and we have another appointment for next week, to hear Elizabeth Stickney. They have begun as S. & A. E. Grimke did, and in as short time they may be prepared for a mixed audience.³

Affectionately thy frd—L. Mott

3. Lucretia Mott to Abby Kelley (Foster). Abby Kelley Foster Papers, American Antiquarian Society.

Despite this very sensible appeal Abby did not attend the second annual meeting of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, held in Philadelphia on May 1, and the decision made at the American Anti-Slavery Society meeting two weeks later to admit women as members ended the argument. In 1840 Lucretia, not Abby, was made a member of the executive committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and thereafter she played from time to time a major role in its proceedings. As the leading female abolitionist, she won the title of the "Black Man's Goddess."

As early as 1836, Lucretia had challenged the right of the men's meeting to override the women's meeting within the Society of Friends. Her long crusade bore fruit when in 1877 she served on a committee of the Yearly Meeting that reported out a proposal that the discipline "should be so altered and amended that women Friends should have the same voice as men in all business of the meetings of the Society."⁴

Yet Lucretia Mott continued to defend the right of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society to meet separately. In 1853, and again in 1866, it was suggested that the word "female" be dropped from the title. Lucretia argued that the present arrangement was working well, the sewing circles which prepared for the annual Anti-Slavery Fair proving a means of drawing many additional women into the antislavery work.

One of the strengths of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society was that it was integrated from the first. As a result the Motts and others practiced social integration in Philadelphia at a time that it was rare indeed. They also became involved in campaigns for the end of discrimination, such as the campaign to integrate the Philadelphia streetcars at the time of the Civil War. At the same time Lucretia Mott defended the rights of the blacks to "flock together" when they were so discriminated against in the larger society.

Today, the proponents of separatism within the Society of Friends argue that it is needed in the short run to undo the damages of racism and sexism and prepare both blacks and women to challenge the unwitting assumption of power by the white male. In the long run all Friends share a vision of a society in which there is as in Christ, "neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free."

4. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Hicksite) minutes, 1877.