

Module 04: How Did Abolitionism Lead to the Struggle for Women 's Rights?

Evidence 12: Sarah Grimké's Reflections on "The Pastoral Letter of the General Association of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts," 1837

A

Introduction

The outcry against the Grimké sisters increased along with their popularity. In the midst of their 1837 speaking tour, orthodox clergy in Massachusetts issued an edict condemning Angelina and Sarah for stepping outside the bounds of respectable Christian womanhood. The declaration, known as "The Pastoral Letter of the General Association of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts," also called on affiliated churches to refuse to provide venues for the women to speak in.

The sisters responded to the criticism by presenting public explanations and justifications for their actions, such as the letter below, originally printed in the *New England Spectator* and later included in a published collection of Sarah's writings entitled *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women*, published in 1838. As the letter below suggests, working to abolish slavery and responding to the attacks against them led women like the Grimkés to question their subordinate status in American society.

Questions to Consider

- Many less radical female reformers would have defended their decision to engage in traditionally male public-sphere activities by citing their unique responsibilities as virtuous and pious Christian women. What reasons did Sarah Grimké give to justify and legitimate her activism?
- Did Sarah challenge or reinforce the customs of "True Womanhood" and the notion of separate spheres?

Document

Haverhill, Massachusetts

July 1837

Dear Friend —

When I last addressed thee, I had not seen the Pastoral Letter of the General Association. It has since fallen into my hands, and I must digress. . . .in order to make some remarks on this extraordinary document. I am persuaded that when the minds of men and women become emancipated from the thralldom of superstition and "traditions of men," the sentiments contained in the Pastoral Letter will be recurred to with as much astonishment as the opinions of Cotton Mather and other distinguished men of his day, on the subject of witchcraft; nor will it be deemed less wonderful, that a body of divines should gravely assemble and endeavor to prove that woman has no right to "open her mouth for the dumb," than it now is that judges should have sat on the trials of witches, and solemnly condemned nineteen persons and one dog to death for witchcraft.

But to the letter. It say, "We invite your attention to the dangers which at present seem to threaten the FEMALE CHARACTER with wide-spread and permanent injury." I rejoice that they have called the attention of my sex to this subject, because I believe if woman investigates it, she will soon discover that danger is impending, though from a totally different source than that which the Association apprehends, — danger from those who, having long held the reins of usurped authority, are unwilling to permit us to fill that sphere which God created us to move in, and who have entered into league to crush the immortal mind of woman. I rejoice, because I am persuaded that the rights of woman, like the rights of slaves, need only be examined to be understood and asserted, even by some of those, who are now endeavoring to smother the irrepressible desire for mental and spiritual freedom which glows in the breast of many, who hardly dare to speak their sentiments.

"The appropriate duties and influence of woman are clearly stated in the New Testament. [here Grimké is quoting the Pastoral Letter again at length] These duties are unobtrusive and private, but the sources of mighty power. When the mild, dependent, softening influence of woman upon the sternness of man's opinions is full exercised, society feels the effects of it in a thousand ways." No one can desire more earnestly than I do, that woman may move exactly in the sphere which her Creator has assigned her; and I

believe her having been displaced from that sphere has introduced confusion into the world. It is, therefore, of vast importance to herself and to all the rational creation, that she should ascertain what are her duties and her privileges as a responsible and immortal being. The New Testament has been referred to, and I am willing to abide by its decisions, but must enter my protest against the false translation of some passages by the MEN who did that work, and against the perverted interpretation by the MEN who undertook to write commentaries thereon. . . .

The Lord Jesus defines the duties of his followers in his Sermon on the Mount. He lays down grand principles by which they should be governed, without any reference to sex or condition [of servitude]. . . . I follow him through all his precepts, and find him giving the same directions to women as to men, never even referring to the distinction now so strenuously insisted upon between masculine and feminine virtues: this is one of the anti-christian "traditions of men" which are taught instead of the "commandments of God." Men and women were CREATED EQUAL; they are both moral and accountable beings, and whatever is right for man to do, is right for woman.

But the influence of woman, says the Association, is to be private and unobtrusive; her light is not to shine before man like that of her brethren; but she is passively to let the lords of the creation, as they call themselves, put the bushel over it, lest peradventure it might appear that the world has been benefited by the rays of her candle. . . . "Her influence is the source of might power." This has ever been the flattering language of men since he laid aside the whip as a means to keep woman in his subjection. He spares her body; but the war he has waged against her mind, her heart, and her soul, has been no less destructive to her as a moral being. How monstrous, how anti-christian, is the doctrine that woman is to be dependent on men! Where, in all the sacred Scriptures, is this taught? . . . [In the Bible] I find nothing like the softness of woman, nor the sternness of man: both are equally commanded to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit, love, meekness, gentleness, &c.

But we are told, "the power of woman is in her dependence, flowing from a consciousness of that weakness which God has given her for her protection." If physical weakness is alluded to, I cheerfully concede the superiority; if brute force is what my brethren are claiming, I am willing to

let them have all the honor they desire; but if they mean to intimate, that mental or moral weakness belongs to woman, more than to man, I utterly disclaim the charge. Our powers of mind have been crushed, as far as man could do it, our sense of morality has been impaired by his interpretation of our duties; but no where does God say that he made any distinction between us, as moral and intelligent beings. . . .

The General Association say, that "when woman assumes the place and tone of man as a public reformer, our care and protection of her seem unnecessary; we put ourselves in self-defence against her, and her character becomes unnatural." Here again the unscriptural notion is held up, that there is a distinction between the duties of men and women as moral beings; that what is virtue in man, is vice in woman; and women who dare to obey the command of Jehovah, "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show my people their transgression," are threatened with having the protection of the brethren withdrawn. . . . The motto of woman, when she is engaged in the great work of public reformation should be, — "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" She must feel, if she feels rightly, that she is fulfilling one of the important duties laid upon her as an accountable being, and that her character, instead of being "unnatural," is in exact accordance with the will of Him to whom, and to no other, she is responsible for the talents and the gifts confided to her. . . . Ah! how many of my sex feel in the dominion, thus unrighteously exercised over them, under the gentle appellation of protection, that what they have leaned upon has proved a broken reed at best, and oft a spear.

Thine in the bonds of womanhood,
Sarah M. Grimké

Source:

Sarah M. Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women, Addressed to Mary S. Parker* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), 14-21.