

# THE ORDINATION OF ANTOINETTE BROWN: THE TRANSFORMATION OF ‘DECENCY AND ORDER’ FROM BARRIER TO BRIDGE

BY DONNA GIVER JOHNSTON

## Introduction

On September 10, 1852, *The New York Daily Times* reported:

Lucy Stone delivered these words at the Women’s Rights Convention Second Day, in Syracuse, Thursday Sept. 9. “We can’t take rights silently, they must be struggled for first. Antoinette Brown will preach, thank God, but she cannot be ordained. Adjourned at 12 o’clock, till the afternoon.”

In Afternoon sessions, they argued on the issue of woman’s nature and role in church and society. In the evening session, they continued the argument...Mr. Brigham said they must submit like the unfortunates of the other sex. If they could not fill their proper places they must take the lower ones...Antoinette Brown took up the Bible argument. She argued that Paul did not forbid preaching.<sup>1</sup>

At the time this newspaper article was written, Antoinette Brown was known as a woman who could preach in some places, but could not be ordained. In one year, that would all change.

Antoinette Louisa Brown was born in 1825 and grew up at a time when Victorian ideas about “a woman’s proper place” were coupled with a re-prioritized religious belief of “decency and order” to prohibit women from most public speaking, including preaching. However, the changing economic, social and religious realities of 19<sup>th</sup> century America created space to challenge the prevailing understandings of a woman’s place. The question of a woman’s role in religion was addressed in various contexts: within itinerant preachers’ exhortations and private prayer meetings, at revivals and women’s rights conventions, in theological schools and churches. Antoinette Brown became a pioneer on the frontier of women’s ordained preaching. Through biblical interpretation, Brown challenged the cultural ethos and advocated for women to preach. In this essay, I argue that in her quest for ordination, Brown employed a distinct rhetorical strategy that transformed the scriptural code of ‘decency and order’ from a barrier

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Daily Times* (September 10, 1852), ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *The New York Times* (1851-2006), p. 2.

into a bridge that justified her ordination to ministry, and ultimately expanded women's religious roles to include the pulpit.

### The Cult of Domesticity

Antoinette Brown's pioneer work began on the frontier of a post-Revolutionary War culture whose understandings of a "true decent woman" and a "woman's proper place" were re-defined.<sup>2</sup> Historically, a woman's role was domestic; however, in the nineteenth century, the difference between men and women came to be recognized not simply by the roles they played, but in their very natures. Men were characterized as industrious, political, competitive, and amoral, while women were naturally domestic, submissive, pious, and pure; therefore, it was presumed, they must work in different spheres conducive to their natures. With the rigid separation of men into the public arena of industry and politics and women into the private sphere of home, the "cult of domesticity or the canon of domesticity was born, whose 'presiding spirit' was woman."<sup>3</sup> This domestic cult began to shape the ideal of 'true womanhood.' Primarily among white middle-class women, the cultural construction of the 'true woman' was based on a reification of domesticity and piety, often epitomized in homemaking and motherhood. The connection of women's virtues to domestic life was a formidable obstacle to a woman's ability to engage in work outside the home, especially public speaking or preaching. This barrier was firmly secured in the common belief: "A woman cannot be the creator of culture because she has no choice of being: her destiny is not hers to shape or control."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the issues of expanding freedom, equality, sovereignty, and representation, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 5. For a focused discussion of impact of industrialization on the family in Oneida County, New York, see Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). For more on the division of social sectors, see Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 150. Specifically note Michelle Rosaldo's 1974 essay "Woman, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview," in which she argued, "The baseline for sexual inequality was a pervasive association of women with private spaces and domestic functions," 4.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Elkin Grammer, *Some Wild Visions: Autobiographies by Female Itinerant Evangelists in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003), 29. For more on Victorian ideals of domesticity, see Ryan, *Women in Public*, 237-238.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 221.

At the same time, the 1820s and early 1830s witnessed renewed success of revivalism, which allowed and even encouraged women to expand their accepted religious roles within the home into the public realm. Revivals of the Second Great Awakening successfully brought numerous sinners—men and women alike—into the Christian fold and compelled them to give public witness to their conversion experience. In a typical revival meeting, men assumed the public roles of leadership and preaching, while women took on more private roles of praying and encouraging. Although female preachers did exist at this time, they were heard only occasionally out on the frontier as itinerants; even then they remained an exception to the rule. However, noted revivalist Charles Grandison Finney, who converted Brown’s family in upstate New York, preached a countercultural message, encouraging women’s speech and prayer in public revivals. Opponents believed this Great Awakening posed a threat to the good order of tradition, which would effectively weaken the power of religion as a social cohesive force. They feared “there was something fundamentally dangerous about this movement, something that made for upheaval, uprooting good and bad alike.”<sup>5</sup> Notably, their wariness extended to the concept of women’s preaching. In 1827, one of Finney’s colleagues warned, “Whoever introduces the practice of female praying in promiscuous assemblies, will ere long find, to his sorrow, that he has made an inlet to other innovations.”<sup>6</sup>

The 1840s were marked by a move from religious revival to theological institution, from the spirit of revivals to professional decorum, from free will to order. By the 1850s, “the clergy had become a profession, a coherent, self-conscious occupational body, organized and defined by a set of institutions which were outside lay or public control, which controlled the special

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard A. Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River: The Story of the Great Revivalists and Their Impact upon Religion in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958), 60. For more on Finney’s preaching, see Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978) and George M. Thomas, *Revivalism and Cultural Change: Christianity, Nation Building and the Market in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989) and Ted A. Smith, *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice* (Cambridge: University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Asahel Nettleton, Letter from Asahel Nettleton to S. C. Aiken, January 13, 1827, quoted in Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 276.

learning needed to become a clergyman, and which possessed the power to determine who could enter the clerical ranks.”<sup>7</sup> In the eyes of mainline ministers, female preaching was seen as a “contagious disease” that had to be controlled and managed before it spread from denomination to denomination.<sup>8</sup>

Institutionalized religion reinforced the cultural domestic norms to resist women’s preaching. As a revivalist preacher in New York, Charles Finney encouraged women to speak in limited but significant ways; but after he began teaching at Oberlin Collegiate Institute, he supported the institution’s more severe restrictions on women’s public speaking. “The change in new measures’ practice closely fit emerging canons of middle-class respectability. Respectable women acted in carefully limited ways in official public spaces. Gendered norms shaped not only the spaces but also the styles of respectable practices.”<sup>9</sup> “Respectable women” used their natural gifts of nurture and piety in domestic work—not ordained ministry.

### **The Rhetorical Quest for Ordination**

Despite this context, in her teenage years, Brown decided to pursue an unconventional vocation that would elicit criticism, but ultimately thrust her into historical prominence: she wanted to become a minister. Although her family supported her religious zeal, they tried to persuade her to consider vocations that were more acceptable for women than ordained ministry. Brown recorded:

My mother finding how determined I was begged me at least to carry on my work in some foreign mission. My father gave me to understand that his assistance would cease with my college education at Oberlin and my brother, then a minister, would not assist me to do what he considered an impossible work.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry, 1750-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 12. For institutionalization of revival religion see Thomas, 79.

<sup>8</sup> Brekus, 277. For more on female subordination in the dominant Christian tradition, see Susan Hill Lindley, *“You have Stept out of your Place:” A History of Women and Religion in America* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 53.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, 162.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Cazden, *Antoinette Brown Blackwell: A Biography* (Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1983), 4, 31.

Although family and friends told her, “You will never be allowed to stand in the pulpit, nor to preach in a church, and certainly you will never be ordained,” Brown’s final answer was, “I am going to do it.”<sup>11</sup>

Women who sought to step outside the domestic sphere encountered a double barrier. “The ideology of domesticity was, like the Bible, a canonical text that they could neither abandon nor take at face value.”<sup>12</sup> In order to make an unconventional choice of vocation, like preaching, women found that they had to challenge both the cultural understanding of a woman’s proper place and the church’s interpretation of the Biblical prohibitions against women preaching. By virtue of her decision to seek ordination, Brown had already challenged the prevailing perception of a woman’s proper place. While she had doubts about the traditional scriptural interpretation, she needed additional educational tools in order to re-interpret the Biblical text with finesse and authority. Oberlin promised such scholastic skill. She entered in the spring of 1846. However, even at Oberlin, a progressive institution of co-education, her push for women’s preaching became a struggle over women’s place within society and the church. It soon became evident that Oberlin had no intention of training women as public speakers. Along with Lucy Stone, Antoinette Brown repeatedly faced restrictions against her full participation in classes and events, especially those comprised of oral recitation. Although seen as progressive, Oberlin determined that women’s reform was ultra-radical and promoted a more conventional educational goal for female students:

Oberlin’s attitude was that women’s high calling was to be the mothers of the race, and they should stay within that special sphere...If women became lawyers, ministers, physicians, lecturers, politicians or any sort of “public characters” the home would suffer from neglect...Washing the men’s clothing, caring for their rooms, serving them at table, listening to their orations, but, themselves remaining respectfully silent in public assemblages, the Oberlin “coeds” were being prepared for intelligent motherhood and a properly subservient wifedom.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> From conversations with Antoinette Brown Blackwell as recorded by Sarah Gilson, from Cazden, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Grammer, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Samuel Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College: From Its Foundation Through the Civil War* (Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College Press, 1943), 292.

In spite of this, Brown was determined to pursue her intended vocation. After receiving a literary diploma from the Ladies Department, she applied for study in the Theology Department, but was denied admission. Oberlin's message was clear: a woman's place was not in Theology class, studying to become an ordained minister. Although Brown encountered formidable obstacles erected by both classmates ("I wonder if you have any idea how dreadfully I feel about your studying that old musty theology," Lucy Stone) and professors ("Oh, we don't call upon the ladies...she is not generally called upon to preach or speak in public," Charles Finney),<sup>14</sup> she was undeterred. At last, her tenacity and persistence paid off—she was permitted to study Theology with the men. However, Oberlin would only permit a woman to take theological courses for reasons of self-improvement; thus, her study would result in no formal degree or license to preach. While Brown accepted the fact that Oberlin would not authorize her to preach, still she refused to abandon her vocational pursuit.

Brown's theological coursework would prove critical in formulating the justification for her ordination. In particular, one class assigned a paper on the Pauline passages that prohibit women's ability to speak in church. What might have appeared as an obstacle to her ambitions ultimately helped her clarify her own position. To overcome the presumed restriction, she had to deploy the tools she had learned at Oberlin to de-construct the passages' traditional interpretation and critically transform it into one that would justify women's official entrance into the pulpit. Analyzing Brown's exegesis paper from this class, I will highlight her rhetorical strategy and how it was distinctly and necessarily different from other types of appeals, namely: divine call, women's nature, women's rights and Scripture.

### **Divine Call**

This strategy was based on the claim of having had an individual divine calling, which superseded all human authority. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many women reported having had

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<sup>14</sup> Letter from Nette to Lucy Dearest (Oberlin, June 1848) and Letter from Lucy to Dearest Nette (West Brookfield, Mass., August 1849) in Carol Lasser and Marlene Deahl Merrill, editors, *Friends and Sisters: Letters between Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown Blackwell, 1846-93* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 42, 53.

divine calls, and despite resistance, they consented to preach. Jarena Lee recorded her 1807 divine call in her 1836 spiritual autobiography as follows:

To my utter surprise there seemed to sound a voice which I thought I distinctly heard, and most certainly understood, which said to me, "Go preach the Gospel!" I immediately replied aloud, "No one will believe me." Again I listened, and again the same voice seemed to say, "Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth, and will turn your enemies to become your friends." At first I supposed that Satan had spoken to me...Immediately I went into a secret place, and called upon the Lord to know if he had called me to preach...when there appeared to my view the form and figure of a pulpit, with a Bible lying thereon, the back of which was presented to me as plainly as if it had been a literal fact.<sup>15</sup>

Lee's story of divine call, resistance and itinerant preaching echoes the stories of numerous other female preachers.<sup>16</sup> In 1829, Elleanor Knight had a dream in which God sent her a revelation—she heard God calling her to become a preacher. She cried out in disbelief, claiming that she could not preach, but she heard God telling her that she must preach. "When she awoke from her dream, she realized that even though she wanted to please her husband by "holding her peace," she had to submit to the will of God...While she continued to testify and exhort during church meetings, "she did not dare to "expound the scriptures" as a female preacher."<sup>17</sup> Others were fully aware that they were preaching and invented a code language for what they were doing, using acceptable words like "testify" or "sing." In this way, they claimed some power within the limits set by the prohibitions against women preaching. Female itinerant preachers such as Amanda Berry Smith believed they were ordained by God, who said, "Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that you might go and bring forth fruit."<sup>18</sup> With a divinely-ordained mission, women simply needed to respond to the call. As

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<sup>15</sup> Jarena Lee, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* (Philadelphia: Jarena Lee, 1836) in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, edited by William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 35.

<sup>16</sup> Other female itinerant preachers and exhorters at the time include: Abigail Roberts, Sarah Hedges, Ann Rexford, Nancy Towle, Zilpha Elaw, Rebecca Cox Jackson, and Sojourner Truth.

<sup>17</sup> Brekus, 164.

<sup>18</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 51.

evangelist Rebecca Miller noted in 1841, “Sisters had the right to speak for Jesus, whenever the spirit calls.”<sup>19</sup>

Claiming divine authority, these women argued for their need to answer their call to preach. They were called by God to the task of preaching, but not necessarily to the office of preacher. Therefore, they could answer the divine call within the limits defined by man. A line was drawn between spontaneous praying, witnessing or exhorting and authoritative preaching. By being both faithful and shrewd, women claimed the spirit’s authority to exercise their call to exhort and give testimony within the ecclesiastical structures of the church; and outside the walls of the church, they preached.

Brown did not deny or discount divine calls to preach; neither did she believe that they were a necessary pre-requisite. In her paper, she noted that “in the day of inspiration and prophetic visions,...they often received truth direct from the lips of the Most High.”<sup>20</sup> In the age in which divine revelations were rare, Brown appealed to the need for reason as a source of knowledge and truth. She astutely recognized that even though a woman may have been called by God to preach, the clergymen had the power to ordain—or not to ordain. For the women exhorters and evangelists, a divine calling was sufficient to justify their preaching. But, Brown’s quest for pulpit preaching demanded ordination. She herself claimed no supernatural event of calling, but rather took an intellectual approach in pursuit of a ‘man-acknowledged’ ordination to allow her to preach from the church’s authoritative pulpit.

### **Women’s Human Nature**

Some women appealed to traditional gender norms. Not only did these women seek to preserve the “feminine” virtues of modesty, piety, selflessness and domesticity, they also argued that women’s true nature was well suited for ministry. Their faith that “God chose the weak to confound the mighty” allowed them to remain within their culturally appropriate role, while

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>20</sup> Antoinette Brown, “Exegesis of 1 Corinthians XIV, 34, 35; and 1 Timothy II, 11-12,” *Oberlin Quarterly Review* (July 1849), 360.



working to redeem the world for good by nurturing the family of God. They described their roles in familial language, referring to themselves as “Mothers of Israel” and “Sisters in Christ.”

Opponents drew on cultural understandings of “true womanhood,” arguing that the duties of a minister would inevitably conflict not only with a woman’s primary domestic role, but with her very nature. “In response, advocates like Frances Willard turned the argument around, insisting that, if anything, woman’s nature made her a more suitable and effective minister than a man.”<sup>21</sup> Willard promoted the “true” image of women as naturally more pious and moral than men, while also advocating a more independent and active public role for women.

Likewise, Phoebe Palmer allowed that the need may arise for a woman to temporarily inhabit the public sphere, but that even if she does, her “dignity, wisdom and womanly grace”<sup>22</sup> would allow her to stay within the limits of ‘decency and order.’ “By claiming this “whole Savior”—by marrying him and placing him at the center of their lives—these women make “the world their household,” the pulpit their kitchen, and their readers their family.”<sup>23</sup> Using the language of their domestic domain, women argued that it was their duty to use their feminine virtues to preach the gospel.

Brown acknowledged the strategy of deferring to human nature or the social position of women and argued against it: “Let us not from such premises, draw the diametrically opposite conclusions, either that females were permitted to be prophetic teachers to the people on account of their ignorance, and the hardness of their hearts; or, on the other hand, that they were forbidden by the apostle to teach in their social meetings, because the world had not yet made sufficient advancement to appreciate such a dispensation.”<sup>24</sup> Brown keenly understood that if gender was allowed to be the qualifying factor, then it could just as easily be used as the

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<sup>21</sup> Lindley, 126.

<sup>22</sup> Phoebe Palmer, *Promise of the Father* (1859) in *Turn the Pulpit Loose: Two Centuries of American Women Evangelists*, Priscilla Pope-Levison (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 67.

<sup>23</sup> Grammer, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, 360.

disqualifying factor. To justify women preaching, Brown did not exalt her feminine virtues of domesticity, but exercised her intellect in the public realm.

### Women's Rights

A third strategy depended not on the logic of religious authority, but on the logic of civil authority. Appeals to women's rights were most often deployed by secular feminists. By protesting women's political and economic submission to men, they challenged the conventional belief that a woman's proper scope of influence was domestic, while men dominated the public sphere with voice and vote. Suffragists demanded a woman's right to vote. "Suffragists believed that women as women could do something significant outside their homes."<sup>25</sup> Overall, suffragists worked outside the church, arguing for women's rights in all segments of society—including the church. Given the cultural ethos of the "true woman" within the private sphere, few women in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century dared to claim a public voice. Lucy Stone was one of the few pioneers who spoke publicly. In a letter defending her decision to become a public lecturer for the antislavery cause and for equality for women, she wrote:

Women will not always be a thing. The signs of the times indicate a change...Yes, a new and glorious era is about to dawn upon us, an era in which woman taking her place on the same platform with her equal brothers, conscious of her rights, her responsibilities, her duties, will arouse, and apply her long slumbering energies for the redemption of this sin ruined world. It will take a long time to effect that change; the evil is so deep rooted and so universal, but it will come...

When I see the pulpit and the press combine to crush her intellect and the whole machinery of society calculated to drive us wholesale into that system of legalized adultery, to which we rush rather than starve, I say when I see these things, my blood leaps like wildfire through my veins and my whole being is pledged anew to life-long effort.<sup>26</sup>

In this excerpt, Lucy Stone argued against the "whole machinery of society" and the "cult of true womanhood" it produced. Conscious of the deeply rooted evil, still she was hopeful that change will come to enlarge the place for women—beyond divine decree, human virtue or ecclesial authority—in a civil society of equal rights for all.

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<sup>25</sup> Janet Zollinger Giele, *Two Paths to Women's Equality: Temperance, Suffrage, and the Origins of Modern Feminism* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 117.

<sup>26</sup> Lucy Stone, in a letter to Sarah Gilson in the autumn of 1846, in *Lucy Stone: Speaking Out for Equality*, Andrea Moore Kerr (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 42.

On July 19-20, 1848, the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York. The group adopted the Declaration of Sentiments, modeled on the Declaration of Independence, asserting, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal" and "are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." Further, it went on to chastise man for allowing woman "in the Church, as well as State, but at a subordinate position, claiming apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry."<sup>27</sup> The final resolution passed at the Seneca Falls Convention was "to overthrow the monopoly of the pulpit." In addition to the Declaration of Principles advocating women's right to vote, the Convention also declared that "women should have the right to preach, to be educated, to teach, and to earn a living."<sup>28</sup> From a platform of equal rights for all, women suffragists argued for a woman's right to vote and to preach.

While Brown supported the rights of women and the work of the suffragists, she argued against a universal rule determined apart from the authority of the Bible: "If it was wrong for them to teach in public, it is wrong for us; and if it was right for them, so far at least as this rule is concerned, it is right for us."<sup>29</sup> Brown was not convinced that civil rights would or should generate ecclesial rights. First and foremost, she was committed to securing the right to preach for herself and other women who would come after her. She astutely realized that in Protestant Christianity, the central battlefield on which all issues must be fought was the Bible. Therefore, she believed that her most effective argument for women's ordination could be made within the church, based on its most sacred and authoritative texts.

### **Scripture**

Other women employed a biblical strategy. While some women anchored their claim of the right for women to preach in the numerous examples found in the Bible (e.g. Deborah,

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<sup>27</sup> Beverly Zink-Sawyer, *From Preachers to Suffragists: Woman's Rights and Religious Convention in the Lives of Three Nineteenth-Century American Clergywomen* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Brown, 360.

Miriam, Esther, and Mary), others took on Paul's prescriptions found in his first letter to the church at Corinth.<sup>30</sup> Most women who studied Paul pointed out inconsistencies within his letters regarding women, but concluded that women could preach as long as they did not rule as an ordained minister. It was commonly understood that the Pauline text that was decisive for universal prohibition of women preaching and ordination was: *Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak...for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.*<sup>31</sup>

In her critical textual analysis of this text, Brown noted that the Greek word *lalein* is commonly translated "to speak." She argued that in classical Greek, *lalein* actually means "to talk, to chatter, to babble, strictly to make a babbling, prattling sound." Therefore, she interpreted this passage to say that women should not chatter or babble; it did not prohibit women from speaking entirely. Brown argued that the apostle Paul was concerned with the proper exercise of spiritual gifts, so that all things would be done decently and in good order, for the edification of the church. After a lengthy exegetical argument, Brown concluded:

This exegesis makes the passage have nothing whatever to do with the question of public teaching. The females were not forbidden to take part in the work of instructing the church, of speaking "either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine," or of doing anything else which they had the wisdom and ability to do, "to edification, and exhortation, and comfort:" and moreover, as we have already seen, being taught by the Spirit of the mighty God, they did actually take part in these exercises. They were reprov'd for nothing but pernicious customs which existed among them, and they were commanded to abstain from nothing except those practices which were not calculated to cause "all things to be done decently and in order."<sup>32</sup>

Brown challenged the traditional interpretation that "women preaching went against the apostle's mandate to do things decently and in order." She stretched the bounds of 'decency and order' to permit women to do "anything else they had the wisdom and ability to do," including

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<sup>30</sup> While it is commonly assumed that women did not confront patriarchy and challenge traditional Biblical interpretations until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Gerda Lerner argues that the development of women's feminist consciousness took place in different stages and over hundreds of years. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness From the Middle Ages to Eighteen Seventy* (New York: Oxford Press, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (KJV).

<sup>32</sup> Brown, 368.

“edification, exhortation and comfort,” as long as all things were “done decently and in order.” She argued that Paul was setting a standard of ‘decency and order’ for the church. As long as women could meet the standard—through education and training, so as not to “babble”—then they were qualified to speak in church. Thus, she arrived at an authoritative interpretation that effectively expanded women’s proper place to include the pulpit.

With this paper, Brown de-constructed a traditional interpretation and transformed the scriptural standard of ‘decency and order’ from a barrier to women’s public speaking in church into a bridge leading to women’s preaching *and* ordination. “She proffered an alternative reading that, while claiming the very biblical authority others used to limit women’s rights, justified public preaching and teaching for women.”<sup>33</sup> This authoritative Biblical text, Brown argued, not only justified public preaching and teaching for women, but it also showed that for women to preach in a decent and orderly fashion, they would need to be educated in theology and public speaking. Her interpretation effectively mandated women’s proper education and ministerial training. Her rhetorical strategy provided a new way of reading the Pauline texts, with the prescriptions not against women preaching, but against institutions whereby education of women is not done decently and in order. Whether he was convinced of her argument or not, Professor Charles Finney thought her paper merited publication and chose to include it in the July 1849 issue of the *Oberlin Quarterly Review*.<sup>34</sup>

### Coda

Antoinette Brown made a biblical argument for women’s ability to engage in rightly ordered sacred speech. Ordination, for Brown, was not optional, but rather a pre-condition for

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<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Munson and Greg Dickinson, “Hearing Women Speak:” Antoinette Brown Blackwell and the Dilemma of Authority” in *Journal of Women’s History* (Spring 1998, 10,1), 112. Note that while this article’s examination of Antoinette Brown Blackwell’s textual exegesis and transformative interpretation supports the argument presented in this paper, Munson and Dickson focus primarily on her later rejection of biblical authority in favor of evolutionary science (in particular, *The Sexes*, 1875).

<sup>34</sup> Antoinette Brown’s paper, “Exegesis of I Corinthians, XIV, 34, 35; and I Timothy II, 11, 12,” appeared in the *Oberlin Quarterly Review* (July 1849). Zink-Sawyer notes that “ironically, the same issue featured an article by James H. Fairchild, one of the Oberlin professors most opposed to Brown Blackwell’s presence in the theological program. Fairchild’s essay was titled “Woman’s Rights and Duties,” in *From Preachers to Suffragists*, 87 n. 29.

women's preaching. Her argument, although sound, was still too counter-cultural to be convincing to everyone. In 1850, Brown successfully completed the Theological Studies degree, but Oberlin did not list her name as among the graduating class eligible for a degree and ordination. Without a call to preach, Brown accepted Stone's invitation to join the circuit of women's rights speakers. At the conventions, Brown delivered a speech that, in essence, was a re-worked version of her Oberlin exegesis paper. Her refutation of the Biblical argument that women should not speak in public was met with great enthusiasm. On one of her speaking tours, Brown visited South Butler, New York. "After hearing her speak, the small Congregational church invited her to become their pastor."<sup>35</sup> In the spring of 1853, Brown took up her pastoral duties of preaching two sermons each Sunday. By that summer, the church's governing board met and decided to proceed with her ordination, with recognition that, "the ceremony would not change her role; she already performed all the functions of a minister, including administering the sacraments. But it would be a public statement about a woman's right to preach, and a confirmation of the rather risky step the church had taken."<sup>36</sup>

The Reverend Luther Lee, a liberal abolitionist Methodist minister who knew Brown through the temperance movement, preached at her ordination. He began by appreciating the historicity of the event, saying, "I should deem it out of place, tame and cowardly, for me to deliver an ordinary sermon...without taking hold of the peculiarity of the occasion, and vindicating the innovation which we this hour make upon the usages of the Christian world."<sup>37</sup> Lee thereby recognized not only the battle that had been fought for women's ordination, but also the impact the victory would have on the South Butler Congregational church, and even on the whole Christian church. Lee's sermon, "A Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel," was based on

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<sup>35</sup> Cazden, 74.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>37</sup> Luther Lee, "Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel": A Sermon Preached at the Ordination of Rev. Miss Antoinette L. Brown, South Butler, Wayne County, N.Y., September 15, 1853 (Syracuse, NY: Luther Lee, 1853), 3.

the Scripture text: *There is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.*<sup>38</sup> In his sermon, Lee argued: “the apostle’s injunction was not given as a general rule, but as a remedy for a specific difficulty, and to construe it against the public efforts of competent and orderly female teachers, in the face of unanswerable proof that females did teach under divine sanction, is in my view, doing violence to the word of God.”<sup>39</sup> In essence, Lee confirmed Brown’s argument that educated and rightly-trained women are justified to preach, by the authority of Scripture.

Antoinette Louisa Brown was a pioneer on the frontier of women’s ordination. The battle was not easy: Brown had to challenge 19<sup>th</sup> century-American cultural norms of “a woman’s proper place” and a re-prioritized religious belief of “decency and order” which prohibited women from public speaking and preaching. In this essay, I argued that in order to justify women’s ordination to the preaching ministry, Brown set aside appeals to divine call, feminine nature and women’s rights and employed a distinct rhetorical strategy that re-interpreted an authoritative Scriptural text known to be prohibitive for women into a liberating one. Through Brown’s critical skill and rhetorical finesse in transforming the scriptural standard of ‘decency and order’, the barrier to ordination was bridged and the place of women was expanded into the pulpit. In reflecting on this long-awaited event in her life, Antoinette Brown wrote to Lucy Stone, describing her ordination with these words: “the great wall of custom has been breached at last.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Galatians 3:28 (KJV).

<sup>39</sup> Lee, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Cazden, 83. It is curious to note that after her hard-fought battle, Antoinette Brown only served as a pastor for one year, and then left the church. The reasons why and the implications for women in ministry merit further research. Also note that it would be ten years until the next woman was ordained. In June 1863 in New York, Olympia Brown (no relation to Antoinette Brown) was ordained by the Universalist Church. Some claim Olympia Brown was actually the first Protestant woman ordained, as she was ordained with full denominational authority.

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