

Historiography as Healing: Reassembling a Narrative of Clarissa H. Danforth, Freewill Baptist  
Female Preacher, 1815-1822

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*“Historical studies are worthy of investigation for their own sake; they also contribute their particular perspective to the contemporary discussion of Christian faithfulness.”*

*John Howard Yoder, Priestly Kingdom*

### *Introduction*

In 1819, Clarissa H. Danforth,<sup>1</sup> a Freewill Baptist (FWB) preacher, led a successful and astonishingly long-lived revival in Smithfield, Rhode Island. The revival continued for sixteen months, and an estimated 3,000 people were converted under Danforth’s preaching – preaching that was by all accounts well-received as delightful, efficacious, and capable of drawing multitudes before the many pulpits that were opened to her as she traveled across Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Vermont. And Danforth was by no means alone. We know that women were preaching in considerable numbers at this time (though mostly with less success than Danforth achieved). Catherine Brekus claims that there were more than one hundred evangelical women preachers between 1740 and 1845.<sup>2</sup> She cites evidence of thirty-one women of some Baptist persuasion among her list of American female preachers and exhorters, dating as early as 1759 and as late as 1844. She has found “at least” twenty-seven Freewill Baptist women engaged in preaching across the country, dating from as early as 1790 to as late as 1845.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, for all this, Danforth (and other female Baptist preachers) are conspicuously absent from much of the Baptist historical record and from our collective memory. Due to the extemporaneous nature of most revival preaching, almost no records of women’s sermons exist.

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<sup>1</sup> Depending on the source, Danforth’s name is given as Clarissa H. Danforth, Clarrissa H. Danforth, C.H. Danforth, or even mis-catalogued as G.H. Danforth. The reader is asked to keep this in mind as variant spellings appear in quoted material in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> She marks these dates as the years that the revivals of the First Great Awakening begin (1740) and the collapse of the Millerite movement after a second wave of revivalism (1845). Catherine Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: UNC Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>3</sup> See the Appendix to her *Strangers and Pilgrims*, 343-6. Brekus notes that while they were not officially licensed or ordained, they did receive official permission from church leaders, which served as their credentials when they sought to speak from pulpits in other Freewill Baptist churches. Brekus, 135.

Other primary sources written by these women are few, and even some that are known about have been lost.<sup>4</sup> Their stories occupy little space and are given little attention in histories from this period. Much of the information about these women preachers comes from fleeting references – and these not always from their supporters. In some cases, references have even been removed as the liberties of dissenting movements were found to be embarrassing to later, more established denominations.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, very few first-hand accounts of Danforth survive, and those that do must be uncovered and pieced together one by one to form a single narrative. The aim of this paper will be to reverse this effacement by attempting to resurrect a patchwork portrait of Danforth, her ministry, and most importantly, her preaching, through references and descriptions that survive in extant sources, including denominational histories, clerical memoirs, minutes from FWB Quarterly and Yearly Meetings, and even the few writings we have from Danforth herself.<sup>6</sup>

However, the emergence of a figure like Danforth (and the phenomenon of female preaching in general) will require some accounting for within the religious environment from which it emerged. Consequently, in the first section of this paper, I will begin by identifying those aspects of revivalism that, arguably, most encouraged and permitted female preaching, paying particular attention to the Baptist context. I will then offer a patchwork narrative of Danforth, including what we know of her ministry, the acceptance and success of her preaching, and will even explore the few words we have from her to ascertain her own views on the same. Finally, I will discuss the general historical consensus about the dissolution of the practice of

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<sup>4</sup> See Brekus, 167-8 for examples of documents known to be lost, as well as other, non-Baptist spiritual narratives that do survive.

<sup>5</sup> A documented case of purposeful erasure is included below in the section on the decline and erasure of female preaching.

<sup>6</sup> If these letters of Danforth's are known about, I have yet to find them spoke of or cited in any published work. This should give us even more encouragement to read them with care and with gratitude.

female preaching, the absence of historical record or even interest in the subject. I will conclude by offering a few remarks on what the practice of female preaching and these women (and their voices) might mean for Baptist identity today, and why retrieving this part of our history matters to the church now.

*Revivalism: Surveying the Religious Landscape and its Contributing Factors*

If the Great Awakening was a time of individualism, egalitarianism, and popular sovereignty in terms of American religion, then it should not be surprising to discover that these traits were manifested among its female participants as well. While it can be fairly argued that the gains achieved in the spirit of revivalism did not translate into great strides in increased freedom, autonomy, and authority for women in any permanent sense, one may still draw upon them to account for the somewhat surprising, even audacious, appearance of female preachers during this period.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, some revivalist characteristics were particularly propitious for female religious autonomy, and served to open opportunities for increased participation in the religious life of evangelical religious movements and their churches.

Certainly, an emphasis on the unmediated conversion experience alters the stakes for women. If God could speak directly to people of all socio-economic classes and all levels of education, inspiring them with visions and calling them to conversion, why could God not speak to women? And if God spoke, why should they not also proclaim? Evangelical revivalism in America was also marked by a shift in language and gender associations that marked evangelical religion as a distinctly “feminine” movement for its emphasis on the heart over the head, where the emotions and affections were to be moved in addition to the intellect. Even men referred to

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<sup>7</sup> Without a doubt, the revivals that occurred during the period known as the Great Awakening were differing, diverse, and diffuse. Those in the so-called First Great Awakening differed from those in the nineteenth century’s “Second” Great Awakening, not to mention the regional and denominational variances. Yet, there remain certain markers of the spirit of revivalism that can be discussed without wholly collapsing these differences.

themselves as brides and promised wifely obedience to the Lord. Indeed, if the soul is female (as they believed it to be), then “to be a convert was to be a wife.”<sup>8</sup> This represents a significant shift in religious symbolism, where the female is no longer equated with spiritual weakness or susceptibility but uniquely valued as a spiritual model and even as a central symbol of conversion itself.<sup>9</sup>

The rise of lay participation and authority was also an important factor. As Nathan Hatch has reminded us, the emphasis on congregational participation in camp meetings as well as the rise of the sermon as a popular medium both upend the established ecclesial structure that limited preaching to educated, ordained men. The rise of popular theology and the common person as the image of virtue and truth also makes possible a world in which women have access to religious truths and are worthy deliverers of those truths. As Hatch writes,

If nothing else, these movements were collective expressions of self-respect, instilling hope, purpose, meaning, and identity in thousands of persons whom the dominant culture had defines as marginal...These movements also allowed common people to trust their own religious impulses. They were encouraged to express their faith with fervent emotion and bold testimony.<sup>10</sup>

The “emotionalism and turbulence”<sup>11</sup> and “creative disorder”<sup>12</sup> that characterized the revival meeting were also a boon to women. Within this environment, potential threats to social order (as bold women were seen to be) were more easily borne, and the female sex, long associated

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<sup>8</sup> Brekus, 39. See also Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 4-6; and Martha Tomhave Blauvelt and Rosemary Skinner Keller, “Women and Revivalism: The Puritan and Wesleyan Traditions,” in *Women and Religion in America, Volume 2: The Colonial and Revolutionary Periods*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 327.

<sup>9</sup> The use of female and feminine language and symbolism is certainly not unique to this period, and has been employed by other religious movements in other times; yet, it is nonetheless significant and should be noted where found.

<sup>10</sup> Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 58. Though in his seminal Hatch almost never specifically addresses women, much less women preachers, it is nonetheless possible to mine his observations on the culture of revivalism and draw conclusions about the consequences it had for women’s religious speech.

<sup>11</sup> Brekus, 139.

<sup>12</sup> Juster, 44.

with the heart and emotions, could perhaps be seen to fit into this new religious atmosphere, as well as its rhetorical genre.

Because these movements were, by their very nature and self-definition, outside the sphere of the religious establishment, this kind of creativity is possible. However, in the context of the Baptist movement(s), this marginality had particular consequences for Baptist women. As Susan Juster observes, the outsider status accorded these sectarian dissenters was akin to the marginal status afforded women in late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century America. Rather than functioning as a liability, this outsider position both created a space where alternatives to the dominant religious models could be formed, and also created a common bond between all the regenerate evangelicals as they sought to enact them. Indeed, Juster writes, “As fellow travelers in the crusade to revitalize a moribund faith, evangelical men and women both positioned themselves outside the dominant religious culture and – more important – celebrated their otherworldly status as a sign of divine grace.”<sup>13</sup> This shift increased accommodation of women in Baptist church governance and polity, giving them “unprecedented access to the formal channels of authority within the church.”<sup>14</sup>

In fact, these movements seem to have “prided themselves on their stance as outsiders who rejected dominant religious values,” celebrating their differences (including allowing female

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<sup>13</sup> Juster, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Juster, 3. As any good Baptist knows, there can be no statements made about Baptists in general, and a paper of this length cannot hope to account for the status of women in all Baptist groups during the revival movements that span the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries. However, women preachers do appear during both the First Great Awakening and the Second, and among various types of Baptists in different regions. Some are known among Separate Baptists of the First Great Awakening – first in New England and later (and more successfully) in the South. The most prominent of these was Martha Stearns Marshall, wife of pastor Daniel Marshall (and sister of the well-known Shubal Stearns). The Freewill Baptists, as noted below, come to this practice early than most Baptist groups in the nineteenth century and boast more female preachers than any other Baptist group that we know of. One FWB preacher even founded a new sect, the Bullockites. We also know of at least one female preacher from the Free Communion Baptists, and others that sources merely note as “Baptist.” Again, Brekus’ consolidated list is invaluable for much of this information. See *Strangers*, 343-6.

exhortation and preaching) as a mark that they had truly embodied the revival spirit.<sup>15</sup> Their deviations from social and religious norms were both forms of their dissent and marks of God's blessing and grace upon their endeavor. Baptist churches, however, were uniquely equipped to offer women leadership opportunities in a circumscribed manner unavailable to established churches; specifically, their emphasis on the separation of church and state freed them to offer women some form of "gospel liberty" without according them "political liberty" as well.<sup>16</sup> That is, they could speak in churches without becoming a threat to the larger public order.

The denominational and theological divergences of Freewill Baptists in the nineteenth century placed them at odds with more established denominations, and in Danforth's time, were experiencing "persecution enough to keep the rust off" them.<sup>17</sup> This counter-cultural mentality can perhaps have explanatory power for their early acceptance of female preaching. In fact, the Freewill Baptist General Conference has been noted as "the earliest Baptist group to give women greater voice in governance and pulpit."<sup>18</sup> Further, their emphasis on free grace, available to all,

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<sup>15</sup> Brekus, 49.

<sup>16</sup> Brekus 51.

<sup>17</sup> Ray Potter, "Religious Intelligence for the Informer," *Religious Informer* 2, no. 19 (1 July 1821): 103. The Freewill Baptists of the Nineteenth Century were an Arminian strain of Baptists that grew in the north, with a strong presence in New Hampshire under the leadership of Benjamin Randall. Denominational histories suggest that the name Freewill Baptist (often used interchangeably with "Free Baptist") is adopted from the term "free-willers," an "appellation of contempt," used pejoratively for those who believed in free will, free grace, and free salvation. See Damon C. Dodd, *The Free Will Baptist Story* (Nashville, Tenn.: Executive Department of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, 1956), 89. They claim their place in the tradition of the Second Great Awakening, noting the birth of their denomination as an expression of this revivalism. They also claim to be inheritors of the New Light and Separate Baptist traditions, though diverging from their Calvinist theology in favor of universal atonement and free grace. See Phyllis P. Medeiros, *The Seeds and the Soil: The Planting of the Freewill Baptist Church in Hollis, Buxton, and Gorham, Maine, 1780-1820* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1998), especially her background material in ix-x, 5. Potter's 1921 report includes a litany of the charges and names leveled against them: "Free willers...self-willers, saving themselves by works...runigates...no meeting-house...delusion...enthusiasm...it will soon die away, &c. &c. and probably a hundred other appellations."

<sup>18</sup> Bill J. Leonard, *Baptists in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 209. Leonard also claims that Freewill Baptists "seem to have licensed women to the ministry relatively early in the nineteenth century." While his history omits any mention of Danforth, it does note Ruby Knapp Bixby, who was licensed in 1846 and whose 1877 obituary refers to her as both "preacher" and "pastor."

also extended to a free meetinghouse and, it seems, a free pulpit which was “free for any of Jesus’ heralds, who come along, laden with the riches of the gospel.”<sup>19</sup>

*Danforth: A Portrait Compiled*

Thanks to the remarkable denominational history of I.D. Stewart, some background information on Danforth is preserved. Though we do not have her own words recounting her call to preaching, an account is retold there. She was born in or around 1792, and though a “lofty, vain young lady,” Danforth was converted under the preaching of John Colby in 1809. She became active in local meetings, and her presence there “added greatly” and “improve[d]” those gatherings; as a result, she was “led along into prominence, having the confidence of all, till she felt herself called of God to go out and invite sinners to Christ; and she became a successful laborer in the gospel.”<sup>20</sup> Personally, Stewart describes her as “a young lady of respectable parentage, good education, extraordinary talents, and undoubted piety.” She was “tall in person, dignified in appearance, easy in manners, and had all the elements of a noble woman.”<sup>21</sup>

Of her preaching, he reports that “as a speaker, her language was ready and flowing, her gestures were few and appropriate, and her articulation so remarkably clear and full, that she was distinctly heard in all parts of the largest house.”<sup>22</sup> She was marked by “self-possession...and good common sense [which] rendered her an effective speaker.”<sup>23</sup>

References mined from the journals and memoirs of the clergy with whom she ministered, preached, or even simply encountered specifically refer to her as “sister” and

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<sup>19</sup> Potter, “Religious Intelligence,” 103.

<sup>20</sup> I.D. Stewart, *The History of the Freewill Baptists, for Half a Century, Vol I, 1780-1830* (Dover: Freewill Baptist Printing Establishment, William Burr, Printer, 1862), 306. The hard copy of Stewart’s history was primarily used, but as it lacked an index, the Google Books online version was consulted. See Stewart, *The History of Freewill Baptists*, Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=Z3biAAAAMAAJ> (accessed 5 Nov 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Stewart, 306.

<sup>22</sup> Stewart, 306.

<sup>23</sup> Stewart, 338.

“preacher,” tell of having “sat with delight” under her preaching,<sup>24</sup> and describe her “sounding the gospel trump,” as she “believ[ed] it to be her duty to warn her fellow men from error’s ways.”<sup>25</sup>

Sadly, we know of no extant copies of her written sermons. This is unsurprising given the extemporaneous nature of much revival preaching and the relatively rare occurrence of published writings by women during this time. However, rare notations of her chosen biblical texts include a sermon on Revelation 17:4, “which led her to expose the man of sin, ‘who sitteth upon the scarlet beast,’ ‘and was made drunk with the blood of the saints.’”<sup>26</sup> Her 1921 New Hampshire Yearly Meeting sermon text was chosen from Revelation 12:1,<sup>27</sup> and in June of 1821, she preached at a Quarterly Meeting in Newport from yet another Revelation text (22:1-2) and on Isaiah 42:6-8.<sup>28</sup> Though not wanting to make entirely too much hay with so few references, one can enjoy the exercise of imagining a regular recurrence of prophetic and even eschatological themes in her calls to repentance and conversion.

Mark Fernald, a FWB Elder with whom Danforth preached on at least one occasion and who she at some point even accompanied on his preaching travels, repeatedly notes hearing her preach on different occasions in various locations, but offers tantalizingly scarce description. While he does mark that she “preached well,” that “Good was done,” and that “the Lord blessed

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<sup>24</sup> Abel Thornton, *The Life of Elder Abel Thornton* (Providence, R.I.: The R.I.Q. Meeting, 1828), Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=wg0FAAAAYAAJ> (accessed 12 Nov 2010), 22. Thornton is also a great resource for his descriptions of female preacher Susan Humes, with whom he meets, travels, and preaches on his own itineracy. See 48-54, 113-14, 118-121, 126.

<sup>25</sup> John W. Lewis, *The Life, Labors, and Travels of Elder Charles Bowles of the Free Will Baptist Denomination* (Watertown: Ingalls & Stowell’s Steam Press, 1852), Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=2vOwxfnQ0pkC&dq> (accessed 9 November 2010), 30. Lewis takes most of his information from Bowles’ journal, then supplements with information from those who knew Bowles, and from Church and Quarterly Meeting Records. Here it is reported that Danforth was converted under Bowles’ labors, but it is elsewhere reported that she was converted under FWB Elder John Colby. See Stewart, 306, and *Free Baptist Cyclopaedia*, ed. G.A. Burgess and J.T. Ward (Chicago: Free Baptist Cyclopaedia Co., 1889), 148.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, 32.

<sup>27</sup> See Minutes, “New Hampshire Yearly Meeting,” in *A Religious Magazine*, 2, no. 4 (Aug 1, 1821): 111.

<sup>28</sup> “For the Informer: Weare Quarterly-Meeting,” in *The Religious Informer* 2, no. 7 (July 1821): 100-101. These minutes actually provide a summary of the topics covered in her sermon on Isaiah.

her with reformation,”<sup>29</sup> his most revealing description is of one occasion where Danforth “warned the people with tears,” evoking images of passionate, emotional preaching that we do not find quite so explicitly elsewhere.<sup>30</sup>

Surprisingly, most approved of Danforth’s motives for preaching, and she was able to provide for herself and her ministry (in a day when lay preaching was unpaid labor). And wherever she traveled to preach, revival followed – including all across Rhode Island, as well as in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont.<sup>31</sup>

It is highly illuminating to note that FWB pulpits were, in Danforth’s time, being opened to preachers of color as well as female preachers – and both at once! At a January 1817 FWB gathering, Danforth preached alongside Charles Bowles, a black FWB preacher of note. Bowles preached first, and “sister Danforth followed in an exhortation” – both with some effect, as this meeting is described as “a time of refreshing; saints were made to rejoice, backsliders cried for mercy, and sinners began to feel their need of salvation.”<sup>32</sup> The following day, Bowles and Danforth attended another meeting, and on the next day (the Sabbath), both preached again, Bowles in the morning and Danforth in the afternoon. Though Danforth “produced a deep impression on the congregation,” the greater sense was felt from their combined witness. As Bowles’ biographer John Lewis notes, “A colored man and a woman, preaching in the same house on the same day, was rather a novel spectacle; but in the importance of their subject, color

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<sup>29</sup> Mark Fernald, *Life of Elder Mark Fernald* (Newburyport: Geo. Moore Payne and D.P. Pike, 1852). Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=WzEDAAAAYAAJ> (accessed 9 Nov 2010), 116, 118-119, 145, 149.

<sup>30</sup> Fernald, 125.

<sup>31</sup> Stewart, 306-307, 377.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis, 30.

and sex were all forgotten, and nothing but man's lost condition, and the abundance of atonement presented themselves to their view."<sup>33</sup>

Descriptions like these lead us to conclude that Danforth's ministry was more than simply permitted; however, further examination of the historical record suggests that she was indeed something more like a denominational insider. That Danforth had acceptance from denominational leaders is implicit in her inclusion in various published minutes from FWB Quarterly Meetings. In the Minutes from the 1819 Quarterly Meeting in Burrilville, R.I., she is mentioned at the conclusion of a list of Elders who were present. Many meeting attendees remain unnamed ("a number of brethren from Gloucester, Smithfield, Cranston, Providence, &c"); yet, she is given recognition by name and credited with "preaching with great success" in Rhode Island.<sup>34</sup> In minutes from the 1820 Smithfield Quarterly Meeting and an 1821 gathering at the Burrilville meeting, she is included in a summary of the preachers who were present and is referred to as "our beloved sister C.H. Danforth"<sup>35</sup> and as "our celebrated female preacher, Clarrissa H. Danforth."<sup>36</sup> She was an active participant in the meetings, contributing prayers, a Sabbath-day "discourse,"<sup>37</sup> as well as preaching (at a yearly meeting no less), all of which were noted as well received.<sup>38</sup>

The surprise of her denominational acceptance can only be surpassed by the unanimity that characterizes all accounts of her successes. She was popular and compelling, with "her

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<sup>33</sup> Lewis, 30-31. This description lends some weight to the theory put forth above that it was revivalism – the near single-minded emphasis on conversion and repentance, on individual salvation and the call to the lost – that created the conditions under which women could assume the role of preacher, rather than any explicit shift in theological views on women, especially among Baptist groups.

<sup>34</sup> S.T., "Minutes, Freewill Baptist Quarterly Meeting, 25-26 Dec 1819," in *The Religious Informer* 1, no. 2 (1 Feb 1820), 20.

<sup>35</sup> Ray Potter, "Copy of a letter from Eld. Ray Potter to the Editor, dated at Pawtucket, R.I. Oct. 29<sup>th</sup>, 1821," in *The Religious Informer* 2, no. 24 (1 Dec 1821), 185.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Tucker, "Minutes of a Quarterly Meeting, which was holden at Smithfield, R.I. February 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup>, 1820," in *The Religious Informer* 1, no. 5 (1 May 1820), 71.

<sup>37</sup> See Tucker, 71; S.T., "Minutes," 20.

<sup>38</sup> Minutes, "New Hampshire Yearly Meeting," (1821): 111. I.D. Stewart also records her having preached at the New Hampshire Yearly Meeting in 1821, alongside two other FWB itinerants. See Stewart, 366.

meetings...everywhere fully attended, and she would hold hundreds with fixed attention for an hour, by the simplicity of her manner, the kindness of her spirit, the claims of her subject, and the novelty of her position.”<sup>39</sup> Apart from clerical enumerations of those coming forward for prayer and conversion after her preaching, the most detailed accounts we have are of her work leading and preaching revivals.

In a May 1821 letter to the Editor of *The Religious Informer*, Elder Ray Potter, a Six Principle Baptist, mentions Danforth among a litany of FWB preachers in his account of the revival work being done in Rhode Island. He writes of “a glorious revival of religion in this place,” saying, “Sister Clarissa H. Danforth has been an instrument in the hands of God of doing much good in this country,” and noting, “We hope to see her again soon.”<sup>40</sup> In I.D. Stewart’s 1862 Freewill Baptist history,<sup>41</sup> Danforth is noted to have held daily meetings (along with J.L. Peavy) in Strafford as early as 1818, where “the glorious work continued till two hundred were brought to Christ...Scarcely a person on the Ridge was left unconverted.”<sup>42</sup> Later she is given sole credit for the revivals in Strafford and Rockingham counties.<sup>43</sup> She could spend several months together in an area, visiting almost every church there, and in each place drew large crowds and many conversions.<sup>44</sup> Her preaching also reached beyond Freewill Baptist meetings and congregations, as Stewart notes that “almost all the houses of worship [in a certain region] were opened for her, and ministers and people in multitudes flocked to hear, and listened with

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<sup>39</sup> Stewart, 306-7.

<sup>40</sup> Potter, “Religious Intelligence,” 103.

<sup>41</sup> In contrast to other denominational histories where Danforth (and other women preachers) are treated marginally, if at all, Stewart’s history treats her as a major character, reappearing over and over again in his pages as he reports on various FWB preachers, their ministerial work, and the state of the denomination in general.

<sup>42</sup> Stewart, 300.

<sup>43</sup> Stewart, 300.

<sup>44</sup> Stewart, 310. In this account, Stewart notes that at one of these meetings, the High Sheriff was her first conversion.

deep emotion.”<sup>45</sup> She is also responsible for converting another well-known woman preacher of this time, Nancy Towle,<sup>46</sup> whose autobiography describes meeting many who “were brought to the Lord” by Danforth.<sup>47</sup>

Danforth’s ministry not only included preaching, but also the organization of several churches as well. However, her most notable success was the instigation of a sixteen-month revival in Rhode Island during 1819 and 1820, which was attributed to her leadership. As I.D. Stewart notes, “At the commencement of 1820, the spirit of revival was universal in Rhode Island,” and that “Clarissa H. Danforth was fully devoted to the work, preaching to large audiences several times a week.”<sup>48</sup> An 1820 account of the revival (originating in Smithfield, R.I.) in the *Religious Magazine* credits it to “the improvement of Clarrissa H. Danforth, a female preacher from Vermont.” The description merits quoting at length for its illumination of the reception of Danforth’s preaching:

Many (doubtless led by curiosity) turned out to hear the female preach, and notwithstanding it appeared strange, and out of the common line of tradition; many of those who were considered competent judges, were constrained to acknowledge that she admirably preached the Gospel of Christ. I am informed, that almost all the houses erected for public worship in that region, have been opened for her; and multitudes of people, and some of all ranks, have flocked to hear her. And hundreds in different parts of the State have since professed experimental religion, have reformed their lives, and are bringing forth fruits meet for repentance; and appear to love God and one another, and are sweetly united to follow the Lamb.<sup>49</sup>

In the course of this astonishingly long-lived revival, an estimated 3,000 persons were converted to a confessing faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>50</sup> An October 1820 account in *The Religious Informer* notes

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<sup>45</sup> Stewart, 318.

<sup>46</sup> Brekus, 263.

<sup>47</sup> Nancy Towle, with Lorenzo Dow, *Vicissitudes Illustrated in the Experience of Nancy Towle, in Europe and America* (Charleston: James L. Burges, 1832), 24. Her narrative of her travels also chronicles meeting other female Freewill Baptist preachers and documents their names.

<sup>48</sup> Stewart, 389.

<sup>49</sup> “Revival of Religion in Rhode-Island” *Religious Magazine* 2, no. 2 (1 Nov 1820), 39.

<sup>50</sup> “Revival,” 39. For a breakdown of these numbers by town, see “Religious Intelligence for the Informer,” *The Religious Informer* 1, no. 10 (October 1820): 139. This account gives the exact number as 2,910. For another

that the ordinance of baptism was being administered “as often as every Sabbath.”<sup>51</sup> Danforth herself writes of “multitudes flocking from every direction” and of holding meetings “every day, sometimes three in a day.” She recounts a one-day tally of baptisms at thirty-three, with twenty planned the next day.<sup>52</sup>

This unsigned account given above not only provides a glimpse of Danforth’s revival efforts, but it is also one of the few sources that acknowledge female preaching as an aberration that would seem “strange” and uncommon for revival participants. In Charles Bowles’ biography, another – very humorous – account of this debate follows a journal entry that mentions Danforth and her preaching. Though we cannot know if this is Bowles’ own writing or Lewis’ remarks, we find written the following exchange: “On the subject of woman preaching, Dr. Clark says, ‘if an Ass could reprove the prophet Balaam, and a barn-yard fowl could reprove Peter, may not a woman rebuke sin?’ Although as Mrs. Child says, the classification of women with donkies [sic] and fowls, is not very *complimentary*,”<sup>53</sup> It is not known who Clark or Child are, or if they are any relation to Danforth, but even so, the inclusion of this aside after the first mention of Danforth seems to suggest that the reference to a female preacher needed *some* explanation; yet, the easy tone of the remarks also suggests that the Freewill Baptists at this time bore this issue rather lightly.

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personal account of the revival, see Ahab Read, Letter to editor, *The Religious Informer* 4, no. 6 (June 1823): 85-86. Norman Allen Baxter’s 1957 *History of the Freewill Baptists* also mentions Danforth’s connection to the R.I. revival (specifically citing the work in Burrillville), but failing to identify her as a preacher. He vaguely notes that the church where the revival originated was the only Freewill Baptist church in Rhode Island until the revival, but fails to correlate the rise of other churches as resulting from that revival, at least one of which came about due to Danforth’s organization efforts. Baxter, *History of the Freewill Baptists: A Study in New England Separatism* (Rochester, N.Y.: American Baptist Historical Society, 1957), 30. See the *Free Baptist Cyclopaedia*, 148, 567, for Danforth’s church organization efforts.

<sup>51</sup> “Religious Intelligence for the Informer,” (October 1820): 139. Danforth is fully credited for the revival, even though Elder How’s account is quoted. The same entry quotes Elder Moses How’s description of this revival as “the most glorious he ever saw.”

<sup>52</sup> Danforth, “Extract of a letter from C.H. Danforth, the female preacher to Elder N. Piper of Stratham, N.H. dated Providence, (RI) March 31, 1820,” *The Christian Herald* 2, no. 7 (12 May 1820): 156.

<sup>53</sup> Lewis, 30.

One might also attend to I.D. Stewart's gloss on Danforth, which suggests that the practice of female preaching might, in fact, need more explanation for his audience as he is writing in 1862 than it did for those who wrote in Danforth's own time. He writes,

It would be inexcusable to pass in silence one who this year [1815] made her *debut* as a preacher. Her position will be neither assailed nor defended, but the facts impartially stated. Sufficient for the purposes of this work will it be to ignore that sentimental modesty which would have females participate in social worship only in meetings by themselves, and to acknowledge the hand of God in the blessings of salvation, whether they come through man's or woman's instrumentality.<sup>54</sup>

This passage both reveals firm support by at least some Freewill Baptist clergy, and also asserts that the question of the fittingness of women's preaching, especially to mixed meetings, was still a live one. The same work contains a second assertion on this point, reiterating that "whoever could divest himself of prejudice against a woman's appearance in public, listened to [Danforth's] preaching with profit as well as delight."<sup>55</sup> Clearly, the validity of female speech – especially from a pulpit – remained an issue, but, as these passages show, it was an issue that had been decidedly influenced by the strong, confident preaching of Clarissa Danforth, as well as by the demonstrable effects of the same.

Most happily, the final word on Clarissa Danforth can be given by Danforth herself. In four short letters preserved (if buried) in the annals of *The Religious Informer* and *The Christian Herald*, dating from 1819-1821, we find glimpses of her own understanding of her work, in her own words. All four are brief reports of her travels, her preaching activities, and the state of revival in the places she was working, yet give us a picture of the life of the church – its purpose, identity, authority, and revival practices at that time.

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<sup>54</sup> Stewart, 306. Emphasis in original.

<sup>55</sup> Stewart, 338.

She often refers to her work as laboring,<sup>56</sup> and of preachers as “labourers” in the glorious work of converting sinners<sup>57</sup> and of preaching “LIBERTY from the bondage of sin.”<sup>58</sup> The work was difficult, however, and Danforth admits that her health became “very poor indeed,” though she counts that as “but a trifle if [she could] see souls converted.”<sup>59</sup> In a particularly poignant passage, she reveals, “My labor is hard, but Jesus has helped me thus far, and I yet feel willing to be spent in his service. I have sometimes thought that my days would be ended in this state, and if so Amen; for God has let me see his glory, and I can praise his name.”<sup>60</sup> She returns to the subject of that glory, speaking of both “a glorious prospect of a great reformation,” and “a glorious auspiciousness” at work in these places.<sup>61</sup>

She speaks of baptisms taking place at “the waterside” in a practice both solemn and glorious. Those baptized – from the “grey headed” to the “blooming youth” – were said to “bow to Christ.”<sup>62</sup> Her descriptions of the nature of these conversions are beautifully written and theologically rich. In one instance she invokes prophetic language, claiming that “The people, who sat in darkness, have seen a great light; they ahat [sic] dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them, the light has shined.”<sup>63</sup> In another, she explains that “Jesus, who stretches forth his arm to all, is spreading his balmy wings over Rhode Island, and many are seeking shelter there.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Clarissa Danforth, “Copy of a letter to the Editor – Smithfield R.I. Oct. 2d. 1819,” in *The Religious Informer* 1, no. 10 (20 Nov 1819), 91.

<sup>57</sup> Clarissa Danforth, “Extract of a letter from sister G.H. Danforth [sic], to the Editor, dated at Weathersfield, Vt. April 21, 1821,” in *The Religious Informer* 2, no. 5 (1 May 1821), 73. See also Danforth, “Extract,” (12 May 1820): 156.

<sup>58</sup> Clarissa Danforth, “Smithfield R.I. Feb. 14, 1820,” in *The Religious Informer* 1, no. 16 (1 Mar 1820), 44. Capitalization in original.

<sup>59</sup> Danforth, “Extract,” (12 May 1820): 156.

<sup>60</sup> Danforth, “Extract,” (12 May 1820): 156.

<sup>61</sup> See “Copy,” 91, and “Extract,” (1 May 1821): 73.

<sup>62</sup> Danforth, “Extract,” (12 May 1820): 156.

<sup>63</sup> “Extract,” (1 May 1821): 73.

<sup>64</sup> “Smithfield,” 44.

These letters also give us a glimpse of her popularity (“many times, while on my journey, [I was] strongly solicited to stop, and spend some time in different towns”), and of her participation in denominational structures as she speaks frankly about church planning meetings and organizational proposals.<sup>65</sup> She directly addresses how the people of Rhode Island have accepted a female preacher, claiming never to have experienced the least persecution for that role, but acknowledging its potential by writing, “I hope, however, that I shall live so faithful, that if I am called to suffer persecution, I may endure it with christian patience.”<sup>66</sup>

Far from apologizing for a woman writing, she asserts, “I hasten to the pen,” and also that “I...pray God to direct my mind, while I use my pen.”<sup>67</sup> Regarding her authority to preach as a woman, she tells us, “The spirit of God is the most persuasive preacher. We poor mortals may preach, but in vain, without the spirit speaks too.”<sup>68</sup> While this is not a claim to authority *as a* woman, it is neither a denial of womanhood, claiming *only* to be a vessel for God’s word and not her own. While the amount of writing we have is painfully small, we can yet descry a confident woman, writing boldly and with clear conviction of purpose – unbowed by rigorous labors, travel, and poor health, praying only “O Lord, increase the work.”<sup>69</sup>

### *Decline and Erasure: Whither the Baptist Women?*

Despite the successes of Danforth and of other dynamic, evangelical women preachers, Freewill Baptists began to exclude lay participation in religious meetings beginning in the mid 1840s as they began to emphasize an educated clergy and a more restrained, orderly worship

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<sup>65</sup> “Extract,” (1 May 1821): 73.

<sup>66</sup> “Smithfield,” 44.

<sup>67</sup> “Smithfield,” 44; “Extract,” (1 May 1821): 73.

<sup>68</sup> “Extract,” (1 May 1821): 73.

<sup>69</sup> “Copy,” 91.

style, in accordance with social norms and the wishes of the middle-class converts they hoped to attract. Both had the effect of diminishing any preaching role for women, and even circumscribed their participation in church governance.<sup>70</sup>

This conforms to the virtually universally accepted explanation for the disappearance of women preachers in general and Baptist women preachers in particular, which can be called the Respectability Thesis.<sup>71</sup> It states that the character of these movements changed as they advanced in social, political, or economic respectability – either due to the rising status of the denomination, or of the members of the congregations themselves. As they did so, and in order that they might do so, these heretofore socially unacceptable practices with which the dissident minority experimented (often as a mark of their dissent) had to be abandoned. In order to conform to the religious mainstream, their distinctive edges had to be smoothed off, and women preachers would have been a decided edge. Juster provides key insight regarding the Baptist move to respectability, noting that the outsider status that had been a visible reassurance of divine grace on their mission became something of a hardship. As they moved from “sect” to “denomination” in the late eighteenth century – achieving great numerical and institutional growth – they already begin to withdraw many of the opportunities for ecclesial and even theological leadership to which women had previously had access.<sup>72</sup> In some cases, Baptists

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<sup>70</sup> Brekus, 288-90.

<sup>71</sup> Brekus, Hatch, Juster, and William Lumpkin all appeal to this argument throughout their works. For Lumpkin, see *Baptist Foundations in the South: Tracing through the Separates the Influence of the Great Awakening, 1754-1787* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1961).

<sup>72</sup> Juster, 6, 108 ff. Though it falls outside the scope of this paper’s focus, it should be noted that one of Juster’s most unique contributions to understanding the Baptist move from the periphery is her discussion of the ways in which Baptists (and other evangelicals) found themselves at the center of Revolutionary politics as they identified the cause of the religious dissenter with the political patriot (and the cost to women as a result). See her chapter on “The Sexual Politics of Evangelicalism in Revolutionary America,” *Disorderly Women*, 108-144. That Danforth and most of her female FWB preaching contemporaries begin their preaching ministries after this point is noteworthy, and further work must be done to understand this aberration in the trend more fully.

were explicitly clear about making the denomination “respectable as well as the rest,” and even admitted the latent political ambitions contained in this quest for respectability.<sup>73</sup>

This disavowal can be helpful in understanding the dearth of sources on the subject. Not only are there few lasting effects from this radical experiment, but it even comes to be viewed pejoratively as a libertine impulse of denominational youth – untenable as a reality in the maturation of a mainstream religion. It is not difficult to see the challenge this would present to maintaining a legacy.

In one instance we can even document a purposeful erasure. In the clerical memoirs of FWB minister David Marks, released during his lifetime (1831), Marks makes specific reference to “Clarissa H. Danforth, the female preacher,”<sup>74</sup> though he does not refer to her preaching ministry in any detail. He also discusses Susan Humes, a Free Communion Baptist female preacher, on four separate occasions, providing details of their meetings, her work, and the revivals credited to her leadership.<sup>75</sup>

Most interesting about this memoir, however, is its relation to the memoir published posthumously in 1846 by his wife as “editress,” through *The Free-Will Baptist Printing Establishment*. This version includes the original memoirs, though in “an abridged form,” followed by journal entries written after the publication of his first work, in addition to “extracts

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<sup>73</sup> See Thomas Baldwin, elder of the “cosmopolitan” Second Baptist Church of Boston, quoted in Brekus, 60; Hatch, 94; and Juster, 113. Juster argues that this meant adopting the “dominant cultural metaphor” of the patriarchal household as the model for the church, 113. If so, it is no wonder that women’s ecclesial roles were thus constricted. This household metaphor produced a “hierarchical restructuring” in which “women became almost entirely disenfranchised from formal participation in church politics,” 124. Hatch will also argue that Baptist leaders exhibited a yearning for and quest after respectability even as other Protestant movements were content to remain outside of it, 93-97.

<sup>74</sup> David Marks, *From the Life of David Marks* (Limerick, Maine: The Office of The Morning Star, 1831), Google Books, [http://books.google.com/books?id=ZEj3\\_pKfl6AC](http://books.google.com/books?id=ZEj3_pKfl6AC) (accessed 8 November 2010), 177. It is nearly universal to find her referenced as Clarissa H. Danforth, a female preacher. In this case, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the definite article used to signify her position, but it remains an interesting and perhaps noteworthy variation nonetheless. Brekus also notes the purposeful deletions by Marilla Marks, and also cites another glaring omission of Danforth from a relevant denominational history of FWB preachers in Rhode Island. See *Strangers*, 296-7, incl. nt. 80.

<sup>75</sup> See Marks, 9, 174, 177, 238, 250.

from his correspondence, and from such other documents as could be collected.”<sup>76</sup> The Preface acknowledges that the “intervening spaces” have been filled in from his wife’s memory, though it seems that her memory regarding female preachers is somewhat lacking, since all references to Danforth, Humes, and “sister Wiard, a female preacher,” have been deleted.<sup>77</sup> Some excisions could charitably be attributed to abridging, but others are no less than blatant omissions. In other cases, rather than simply removing whole sections of his itinerary that happen to include these women,<sup>78</sup> it is only the female preacher’s name that is removed, as is the case when Chapter XII’s titular reference to “My return to New-York, and travels with Abel Thornton, and Susan Humes, a female preacher”<sup>79</sup> becomes merely “Returns to New York, and travels with Abel Thornton.”<sup>80</sup>

The original memoir was by no means unheard of. It had an original print run of 2,000 copies, and the 1846 edition asserts that nearly all of those were sold in New England within nine months after it was published.<sup>81</sup> If this original text had been well- and somewhat widely- received, one can only guess at what had shifted from 1831 to 1846 that would make his wife so bold as to risk such alterations and excisions to an admittedly known work. One can posit that if Marks’ wife was so solicitous to preserve his reputation that she would employ such editorial

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<sup>76</sup> David Marks and Marilla Turner Marks, *Memoirs of the life of David Marks, minister of the gospel* (Dover, N.H.: The Free-Will Baptist Printing Establishment, William Burr, Printer, 1846), Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=pzQ3AAAAMAAJ> (accessed 8 November 2010), iii.

<sup>77</sup> Marks and Marks, iii, 296.

<sup>78</sup> This is done in several instances. Compare page 177 in the 1831 version, which includes explicit descriptions of meeting Danforth and Humes to the 1846 edition, which deletes these two paragraphs and mentions merely that he “returned to Rhode Island, preaching along the way,” 126. Also, see 174-5 of the 1831 memoir and 124 of the 1846 version, which removes a single sentence that not only mentions Humes, but also three other male FWB elders he met.

<sup>79</sup> Marks, 9.

<sup>80</sup> Marks and Marks, vi.

<sup>81</sup> Marks and Marks, vi.

freedom, this may indeed signal a shift in denominational views regarding women preachers during this time.<sup>82</sup>

*Conclusion: Why Women's Voices?*

Retrieving Danforth's story and preserving the history of the phenomenon of female Baptist preachers can be a way of understanding Baptist denominational identity in the nineteenth century, but also helps us mark how that identity has shifted through time. It is vital that we remember that the evangelical revivalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth century in America allowed for, enabled, and perhaps even produced women who claimed to have received a saving grace and a divine word, along with a call from God to share that word with others, teaching and calling sinners to repentance. They exhorted, preached, evangelized, and instructed, often as unpaid itinerants alongside the men that history has found worthy of remembering. They were, at various times and places, embraced by their denominations and by the congregations and religious meetings to which they ministered, thus enabling them to exercise the spiritual autonomy and religious authority to which they laid claim in a manner and to a degree nearly unprecedented in American religion.

By preserving this history, we are not merely rescuing and reclaiming stories about our past. By including these forgotten voices in our history – that is, the story and stories we tell about ourselves – we are opening a space for reimagining our theological and ecclesial identity in light of the incalculable contributions that have been made by these gifted women preachers. Certainly, retrieving parts of our story that have been neglected or even silenced must be seen as

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<sup>82</sup> Much more work would have to be done in order in support and substantiate this proposed theory – indeed, more than could be imagined in the scope of this project. Therefore, let it simply remain as a strong piece of evidence, awaiting further study and use.

a more faithful narration of the Baptist story. It may also force us to see that our current practices and life together are not a faithful embodiment of the *gospel* story.

Moreover, I submit that we must make room in our theological conversations for a sense of historiographical study as a healing practice for the church, as well as for the academy. Finding these voices, telling these stories, and hearing the words of our foremothers as well as our distinguished forefathers can be acts of reconciliation and healing, not only for those voices who have been and continue to be left out, but for all of us who have been impoverished by the loss. It is not about filling gaps in our history, but about articulating a fuller vision of what it has meant to be called by God and to proclaim the word of God, and what it might mean for us to be called and to proclaim that word even today.

These women's words are and will be difficult to find: the sources are scarce and disparate, the written record sparse. No doubt much work lies ahead for us in this endeavor, but inspired by Danforth's resolve, we pray, "O Lord, increase the work."