

# **Mary Bosanquet-Fletcher: Paving the Way for Female Preachers**

At a time when women were largely excluded from public religious leadership, Mary Bosanquet-Fletcher emerged as a formidable figure whose influence would help shape the development of Methodism.

## **From bourgeoisie to social justice**

Born on 12 September 1739 to a wealthy family in Leytonstone, Essex, her journey from privileged daughter to Methodist pioneer demonstrates remarkable conviction and courage that challenged the conventions of her time.

Mary's first encounter with Methodism came through an unlikely source – a Methodist servant in her family's household. By sixteen, she had made the extraordinary decision to reject her comfortable lifestyle, choosing instead a path of modest living and charitable work that would define her legacy.

Mary's decision to embrace Methodism created friction with her family, who disapproved of her choices. Yet, she remained steadfast, forging important connections with other Methodist women, particularly Sarah Crosby, a prominent class leader – disciples who disciple others – who became her close associate in ministry.

In 1763, Mary demonstrated the practical application of her faith by transforming her family home in Leytonstone into an orphanage and school called The Cedars. This establishment became more than just an educational institution – it provided free healthcare and served as a centre for prayer meetings and Bible studies. Later, she expanded her educational mission by establishing another school in Yorkshire called Cross Hill.

## **The first female preacher**

Perhaps Mary's most significant contribution to Methodism was her pioneering role as a female preacher. Her letter to John Wesley in 1771, presenting thoughtful theological arguments defending women's right to preach, represents a watershed moment in Methodist history.

“I do not believe every woman is called to speak publicly, no more than every man to be a Methodist preacher, yet some have an extraordinary call to it, and woe be to them if they obey it not.”

-Mary Bosanquet-Fletcher

She explained to him that there are times when God seems to call women to preach in "extraordinary circumstances." Wesley agreed with her, which opened the door for him to start allowing women who had an "extraordinary call" to become lay preachers, just as she did.

Mary's theological reasoning and evident calling had a profound impact on John Wesley himself. The founder of Methodism came to endorse her preaching activities, along with those of other women, marking a significant shift towards greater inclusion of women in Methodist ministry. This endorsement helped establish a precedent that would gradually expand opportunities for women in religious leadership.

### **Ministry and legacy**

Her influence in Methodist circles was further cemented through her marriage to John Fletcher in 1781. Fletcher, Wesley's designated successor, formed with Mary a formidable ministerial partnership until his death four years later.

Mary continued her ministry for nearly three decades after becoming widowed, tending to her late husband's parish with dedication and skill. Mary died in 1815. Shortly before her death, she wrote: "Thirty years this day I drank the bitter cup and closed the eyes of my beloved husband, and now I myself an in a dying state. Lord, prepare me! I feel death very near. My soul doth wait, and long to fly to the bosom of God!"

Mary's legacy extends far beyond her lifetime. Through her theological arguments, practical ministry, and unwavering determination, she demonstrated that women can be divinely called to preach and lead. Her pioneering spirit helped establish principles of inclusion that gradually transformed Methodism's approach to female leadership.

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