



SOJOURNER TRUTH: “AIN’T I A WOMAN?”

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Excerpted from *“Sojourner Truth: Ain’t I a Woman?”*

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On 29 May 1851, an excited crowd in Akron, Ohio, jammed the stone church from the back doors to the pulpit steps. Among the many people were Methodist, Baptist, and Universalist ministers.

At the front of the church clustered the female organizers of this women’s rights convention. Mrs. Frances Dana Gage, a strong supporter of women’s rights and suffrage, was president.

Mrs. Gage called for order, and the room began to quiet down. Then, through the back door, stately as a queen, strode a tall, thin black woman in a simple gray dress. She wore a white turban twisted around her head and a faded sunbonnet on top of the turban. She walked forward with grace and dignity, even though some of the people in the church shouted that she didn’t belong there. She sat quietly on the steps of the pulpit. Mrs. Gage again called for order. The meeting began with a discussion of the laws that denied women their freedom. After two hours of heated argument, Mrs. Gage announced a recess.

Several anxious ladies surrounded Mrs. Gage. Watching the black woman disappear through the back door, one woman pleaded, “Don’t let her speak, Mrs. Gage. It will ruin us.”

“Every newspaper in the land will have our cause mixed up with abolition and Negroes, and we shall be utterly denounced,” declared another.

But Mrs. Gage answered, “We shall see when the time comes.”

Outside, unaware of the concern she was causing, the black woman was busy selling her autobiography, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. Sojourner had been born a slave in Kingston, New York, and given the name of Isabella. When New York freed its slaves in 1828, Isabella set out for New York City to find work as a servant. There she discovered the abolitionists. She joined their cause, chose her own name – Sojourner Truth – and then toured New England and the Midwest speaking against slavery. She often faced unruly crowds. She was clubbed and mobbed and frequently interrupted by those favoring slavery. When she heard about women’s rights, she began speaking of equality for women of any color. Now she had come to the women’s convention.

Soon the afternoon session resumed, and Sojourner returned to her seat on the pulpit stairs. By late in the day many of the hecklers had grown noisier. Ministers who had come to discourage the women from passing resolutions began to build their case against women’s equality. One after another they stood up to give their arguments. One clergyman pointed out, “Men should have superior rights and privileges because men have superior intellect.”

Then another minister rose and cleared his throat. “If God had desired the equality of women,” he said, “He would have sent a woman instead of Christ. You women are making an error asking for rights. You have many weaknesses. The Bible says a woman should be a man’s helper, not his equal.”

“Women are the weaker sex,” another minister preached. “Their delicate nature does not suit them for the cares and responsibilities of the world outside their homes. Once in the world they need the strength of a man to help them through the streets and into carriages. A female’s sphere must always remain the home where she can be cared for like a fragile flower.”

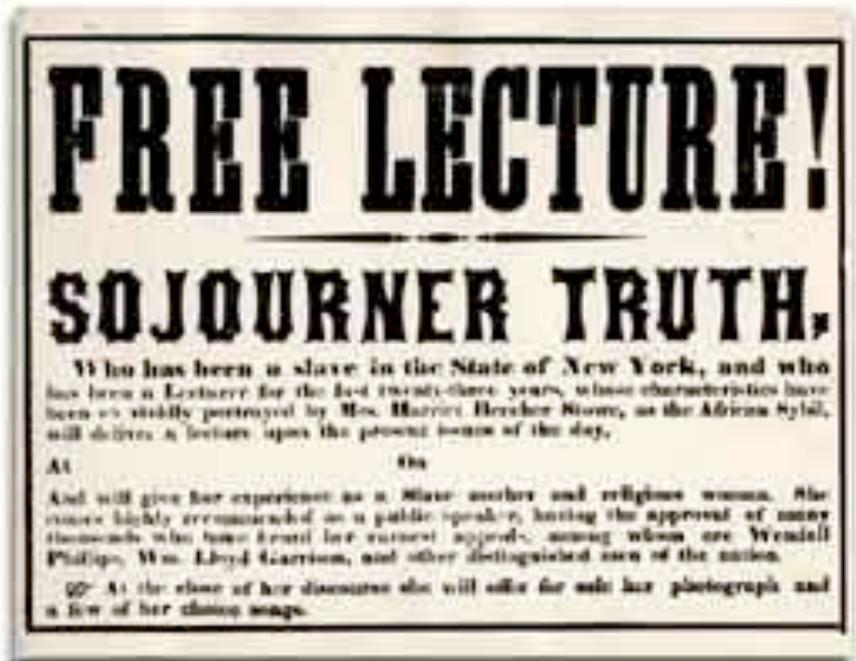
Loud whistles of approval echoed from the balcony as the man sat down. Several men applauded. Even a few of the women joined in.

Sojourner got up and walked toward the platform. Hissing rose from the balcony and the back of the church, but Sojourner stepped steadily toward the pulpit, removing her sunbonnet as she went.

“Don’t let her speak,” a woman begged Mrs. Gage.

Once on the platform, Sojourner laid her bonnet at her feet and turned to Mrs. Gage. “Sojourner Truth,” Mrs. Gage introduced her. To the audience she announced, “Please keep silent and let her speak.”

The crowd hushed. Sojourner held her head high as her dark eyes searched the room. Finding the clergyman who had just spoke, she said, “That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages or over puddles or gives me any best place.” Then, her voice rising like a roll of distant thunder, she asked, “And ain’t I a woman?”



No one stirred in the hall. "Look at me. Look at my arm." Lifting her right arm, Sojourner drew back her sleeve, showing her powerful muscles. "I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me." She paused a minute. Every eye was fixed on her as she lifted her head proudly and looked straight before her. "And ain't I a woman?"

"I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well. And ain't I a woman?"

"I have borne thirteen children and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me." Her voice grew in strength as she spoke. Against she paused, asking, "And ain't I a woman?" So quiet was the room as Sojourner stood before the crowd, it was as if no one dared to breathe.

"Then that little man in black says women can't have as many rights as men because Christ wasn't a woman. Where did your Christ come from?" Sojourner held out both arms and peered into the crowd. Raising her voice to answer she cried, "From God and a woman!"

"Yes!" cried someone near the front.

"True!" voices reverberated across the church.

"If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together," Sojourner said, sweeping her arm toward the women on the platform behind her, "ought to be able to turn it back and set it right-side up again. And now they are asking to do it, the men better let them."

Cheers and applause erupted from the crowd. So loud was the approval that her last words could hardly be heard. "Pleased to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner has got nothing more to say."

Sojourner turned and picked up her worn sunbonnet. But even before she had reached her



Statue of Sojourner Truth unveiled in November, 2002 in Florence, Massachusetts.

seat, women had rushed up to congratulate her and to shake her hand. Others stayed on their benches clapping and waving their handkerchiefs. Those men determined to defeat the women's ideals had lost their grip on the convention.

In later years Mrs. Gage recalled how Sojourner "had taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty turning the while tide in our favor." And for many years after that day, Sojourner tramped the hills and plains of the Midwest and East lecturing for abolition and for women's rights. After the slaves won their freedom, she spoke for women's suffrage. Her earnest talk captured the hearts of many, and her audiences grew in size as her reputation spread.

When she got too old to walk from town to town preaching, she settled in Battle Creek, Michigan, in a house near one of her daughters. From then until she died in 1883, hundreds of admirers came to Michigan every year to visit Sojourner – the seeker of truth.