

WHO WORE THE TROUSERS, WILLIAM OR CATHERINE BOOTH?

By
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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes the impression is given that Catherine Booth was a stronger and more forceful personality than her husband. Some hint or even argue that she usually got her way in any issue debated with William, whether it was the role of women, the use of alcohol or some other controversial matter.

For example, Gertrude Himmelfarb (in “First Save the Body ...”) says, “From the beginning, [Catherine] was the dominant force in their relationship. As zealous as he, she was better educated (self-educated) and far more ambitious intellectually. Although she could not prevail upon him to read or study, let alone theorize or dogmatize, she did succeed in asserting her moral and spiritual as well as intellectual authority over him, which he seemed to accept as natural and proper.”

Those comments are, frankly, almost entirely nonsense.

The above observations were made in a review of Roy Hattersley’s *Blood and Fire*, which does promote such ideas. For example, Hattersley calls Catherine the “stronger member” in their marriage. Indeed, he argues that “in thirty-five years of marriage” William Booth “said little and did less with which she disagreed” (*Blood*, 4).

Again, this is nonsense.

William and Catherine Booth each had a very strong personality. But they were very different. William was “the General” in rank and temperament. He was forceful and dynamic, always, or nearly always, in charge. When he entered a room everyone knew it. He was like a gale sweeping all before him. But occasionally he could be full of self doubt, though those periods did not last long.

Jane Short, who lived as a lodger-cum-maid in the Booth household for a number of years and served in The Salvation Army, left no doubt as to the power of the General’s personality. She said, “People who say that Mrs Booth was the greater of the two do not know what they are talking about. Mrs. Booth was a very able woman, a very persuasive speaker, and a wonderful manager; but the General was a *force* - he dominated everything. I’ve never met any one who could compare with him for strength of character. You knew the difference in the house directly he opened the door. You felt his presence in every department of the home life. He was a real master. You could never say No to the General!” (Begbie, *Booth*, vol. 1:345; Bennett, *The General*, vol. 1:364). (It is worth noting that Hattersley tries to discredit Ms Short’s opinions, and omits crucial parts of what she said that do not fit in with his views, *Blood*, 172-75.)

Catherine, by contrast, was outwardly timid, but very strong willed and determined. Temperamentally, she would have rather taken a back seat, but when there were souls to save and injustice to fight, she could not stay in the rear. She had to be in the front line. And when she was roused, heaven help anyone who opposed her.

When I was editing their letters, I was staggered, frankly, even shocked, at how often and how vigorously they argued. They loved each other dearly, but that did not stop either of them telling the other off in very strong terms. Catherine sometimes told William to make up his own mind on a subject and then told him what that “mind” should be. William, almost as often, made up his own mind, even though it contradicted Catherine.

On one occasion (perhaps two) in the early years they had a sharp disagreement over the purchase of a piano. In one missing letter about this William seems to have given his beloved a right royal roasting and Catherine had to eat humble pie, something she very rarely did. “I did wrong”, she confessed, “and I am real grieved ... Forgive me. I did not think I was acting without you” (*Letters*, **CM 36**).

In their writings it is true that Catherine often comes over as the stronger of the two. But this, I believe, was simply because she was a better writer than her husband. William wrote only when he had to do so. He much preferred speaking and action. Catherine, by contrast, had the temperament, learning, desire and ability to write and to write effectively. For example, her letters are much longer, stronger and more involved than his. It would be a mistake to base our view on who was the more forceful simply on their writings.

CATHERINE’S INFLUENCE OVER WILLIAM

Alcohol

It is clear that Catherine influenced William on at least two issues, women’s ministry and the use, or more accurately non-use, of alcohol. With regard to alcohol, she certainly influenced him, though it must be recognised that William did not usually drink alcohol anyway. He had signed the pledge when he was six or seven, though his mother later persuaded him to take it for medicinal use (Bennett, *The General*, vol. 1:23). It was only a short step from that to total abstinence, though without doubt Catherine’s *very* strong stand on this issue, (caused presumably by her father being an alcoholic, *Letters* **CM 34**, *f.40r-v*) made it impossible for him to adopt any other course (see for example, *Letters*, **WB 22**, *f.18r*; **CM 11**, *f.79v* – read the relevant footnote too; **CM 27**, *f.12v*; **CM 28**, *f.10r*; **CM 71**, *f.43r*; **CM 74**, *f.61r-v*; **CM 94**, *f.160v*; [**WB 89**]; [**WB 91**]; **CM 120**, *f.56r-v*; **CM 122**, *f.64r-65r*; but see **CM 93**, *f.132v* – read the relevant footnote too).

Women’s Role and Ministry

It is often argued, and correctly, that The Salvation Army’s extensive use of women preachers was mainly because of Catherine’s stand on women’s ministry in the church. On 9 April 1855, so ten years before The Salvation Army was born, Catherine made her views clearly known in a letter to her soon-to-be husband (*Letters*, **CM 122**), after earlier hints. She set the stage by saying, “there is nothing so inspires my admiration as a noble stand for right in opposition to paltry prejudice & lordly tyranny (sic). I would not falsify my convictions on any subject to gain the plaudits of a world” (*f.64v*).

She was

ready to admit that in the majority of cases the training of woman has made her man's inferior, as under the degrading slavery of heathen lands she is inferior to her own sex in christian countries. But that naturally she is [in] any respect, except in physical strength & courage, inferior to man I cannot see cause to believe, & I am sure no one can prove it from the word of God, & it is on this foundation that professors of religion always try to establish it. I would not alter woman's domestic position (when indeed it is scriptural), because God has plainly fixed it. He has told her to obey her husband, & therefore she ought so to do, if she profess to serve God; her husband's rule over her was part of the sentence for her disobedience, which would, by the bye, have been no curse at all if he had ruled over her before, by dint of superiority. But God ordained her subjection as a punishment for sin, & therefore I submit. But I cannot believe that inferiority was the ground of it... I believe woman is destined to assume her true position & exert her proper influence by the special exertions & attainments of her own sex. She has to struggle through mighty difficulties to[o] obvious to need mentioning, but they will eventually dwindle before the spell of her developed & cultivated mind ...

May the Lord, even the just & impartial one, overrule all for the true emancipation of woman from the swad[d]ling bands of prejudice, ignorance & custom, which almost the world over have so long debased & wronged her. In appealing thus to the Lord I am deeply sincere, for I believe that one of the greatest boons to the race would be woman's exaltation to her proper position mentally & spiritually. Who can tell its consequences to posterity? (f.65v-67r.)

She went on quoting the Scriptures and the Methodist commentator Adam Clarke, then continued,

Oh, blessed Jesus! He is indeed "the woman's conquering seed". He has taken the bitterest part of her curse "out of the way, nailing it to his cross". In him she rises to the dignity of her nature. In him her equality with her earthly Lord is realized, for "in him there is neither male nor female", & while the outward semblance of her curse remains, in him it is nul[l]ified by love being made the law of marriage – "husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church & gave himself for it". Who shall call subjection to such a husband a curse? Truly, he who "was made a curse for us" hath beautifully extracted the venom, for what wife who loves the Lord can feel it a burden to "reverence" a husband thus like him, and glory to his name while his death did this, & his precepts are so tender & so easy...

But I must conclude. I had no idea of writing so much when I began, but I do not regret it. I have long wanted to put my thoughts on this subject on paper, & I am sure thou wilt not value them the less because they are on such a subject. I have not written so much to thee as for thee. I want thee to feel as I do if thou canst, but if not, be as honest in thy opinions as I am, & I will honour thee for them. If you gain anything by what I have writ[t]en, I should praise God on hearing it, otherwise I do not desire you to answer this (f.70r-71v).

Timid she may have been by nature, but with a pen in her hand she was very powerful. This letter must have stunned William Booth, not so much by its contents as by its power. But the contents clearly presented the belief that women had equal rights with men and the right to minister in the church as they did. However, it needs to be noted that Catherine also believed that the man was the senior partner in the home, providing he carried out his duties in a scriptural manner.

William wrote one possibly two letters in reply, but only part of the first is extant. Even this makes it clear that in the face of Catherine's lengthy tirade it was William's turn to be timid. His reply (*Letters*, **WB 95**) was rather defensive and contradictory.

Your letter and contents came to hand yesterday... The remarks on Woman's position I will read again before I answer. From the first reading I cannot see anything in them to lead me for one moment to think of altering my opinion. You combat a great deal that I hold as firmly as you do, viz. her equality, her perfect equality, as a whole, as a being. But as to concede that she is man's equal, or capable of becoming man's equal, in intellectual attainments or prowess – I must say that is contradicted by experience in the world and my honest conviction. You know, my dear, I acknowledge the superiority of your sex in very many things; in others I believe her inferior. Vice versa with man.

I would not stop a woman preaching on any account. I would not encourage one to begin. You should preach if you felt moved thereto; felt equal to the task. I would not stay you if I had power to do so. Altho' I should not like it. It is easy for you to say my views are the result of prejudice; perhaps they are. I am for the world's salvation; I will quarrel with no means that promises help.

William Booth was ever the pragmatist. Sadly any further answer he made to her letter is lost. But it is clear that he later changed his mind on women's standing and role, and Catherine was the catalyst for that change.

In Darkest England

William Booth originally intended The Salvation Army as solely an evangelistic organisation, with social ministries generally viewed as a means to "saving souls". When he published *In Darkest England* in 1890 and launched the scheme of that name it is clear he had changed his mind. From then social services were an essential part of Army work.

The question has to be asked, did Booth change his own mind, or did someone do it for him? It is quite possible, even likely, that the change of heart was the result of his extensive experience of the poor and deprived, and his thinking and praying about these social issues. But if someone did persuade him to make these major changes to the Army, and they were significant changes, who could that be?

There were a number of people who helped in the writing of that book and the launching of that scheme, including Bramwell Booth, Frank Smith and W.T. Stead. I think it could be stated with certainty that none of these would have had a hope of changing Booth's mind on this issue. The only person who could possibly have done so was his wife. In the period

immediately before the book was written and during the time of its writing Catherine was on her death bed. Catherine could be very persuasive. Not that she was, by any means, always successful in persuading her husband, as shall be seen. But one suspects that a dying Catherine would have been very persuasive.

As far as I am aware, this issue has not been explored before (though in *The General*, vol. 2:293-94 I did suggest that Catherine *may* have influenced William in this direction), and it may be an idea that leads nowhere. However, I intend to examine this issue and write it up in another paper that, God willing, will appear on this site.

WILLIAM'S INFLUENCE OVER CATHERINE

The Booths and the Congregationalists (Independents)

Catherine Booth was a great admirer of Dr David Thomas an English Congregationalist, whom she heard often, and Charles Finney, the unorthodox American Congregationalist.

From about 1852 she for the most part stopped going to Methodist services and went to hear David Thomas preach instead. There are very few people mentioned in her letters more often than Dr Thomas. She believed that he had both a “noble nature” and a “splendid genius” (CM 122, f.64r), and greatly valued his thought-provoking sermons, which were calmly delivered. When William married Catherine, it was David Thomas who conducted the ceremony.

Catherine said that on 5 December 1852 Mr Thomas preached “an excellent sermon” (*Letters*, CM 6, f.40r – see also CM 12, f.88r, where she says the same thing). She was “blessed” when she heard him the following week and sent William “a short sketch” of that sermon (CM 7, f.51r). She heard him again a further two weeks later and “liked him much” (CM 11, f. 79r). These are just a few of her many comments of appreciation of David Thomas’s pulpit ministry. She also regarded him as “one of the nicest men [she] ever conversed with” (CM 28, f.150v).

When William was preparing to leave the Methodist Reformers to join the Methodist New Connexion early in 1854, she hoped that he would be able to hear Dr Thomas “often” (CM 80, f.93v). This was an unrealistic expectation and the suggestion does not seem to have pleased her future husband (CM 84, f.109v).

Finney was a different kettle of fish. Opportunities for the Booths to hear him were few, and they may not have heard him at all, though they read his books. In addition, Finney was better known and much more controversial than Thomas. The Booths, especially Catherine, greatly admired him, but they appeared to have been selective in what they adopted of his theology (see, *The General*, vol. 1:318 & vol. 2:18-19). But he was a Congregationalist, and Catherine was becoming more and more sympathetic towards Congregationalism.

For a time Catherine seems to have been convinced that William should become a Congregational minister. On three occasions she tried to persuade him or at least suggested that he might leave the Methodists and join the Congregationalists (Independents). She believed that by entering the Congregational ministry William would introduce into it “all that was good and hearty and soul-saving in Methodism”. In 1852, apparently at her suggestion, he enquired about joining the Independents, but after much heart-searching he

decided not to join them because he disagreed with their Calvinism, though not all of them were Calvinists by this time (Begbie, vol.1:139-42; *The General*, vol. 1:108-12).

Catherine raised the issue again briefly when William was having trouble with the dysfunctional Methodist Reformers early in 1853, though after receiving his response (now lost) she quickly backed off (*Letters*, **CM 17**, f.118r-v; **CM 19**, f.119r-v; *The General*, vol. 1:122-23). At that time, William thought that compared with Methodism “Independency ... is powerless to effect any great good” (**WB 28**, 156r).

In November that year Catherine said that she would rejoice if he decided to go to college, something he had so far avoided, and she referred to Cotton End, the Congregational college, as a possibility (*Letters*, **CM 67**, f.33v). But William rejected the suggestion and said that he had “very little sympathy with the spirit of Congregationalism” (*Letters*, [**WB 45**]).

Catherine mentioned Congregationalism often enough to suggest that she was very keen that her husband-to-be joined that ministry. William considered the possibility once, decided against it, and seemed unwilling to consider it again. In the end they went William’s way not Catherine’s.

Revivalistic or Traditional Services?

As has been seen Catherine liked the studious, sedate services and preaching of the Congregationalists. William favoured the more rousing revivalistic services that were coming into favour at that time, particularly in certain sections of Methodism.

A good example of this is their very different opinions of the evangelist Isaac Marsden. William was deeply impressed by Marsden. Booth thought that “no one could hear him who had any belief in the great truths of the Bible without being deeply impressed and stimulated”. Marsden, in fact, seems to have played a part in Booth’s eventual conversion (*The General*, vol. 1:35).

Catherine, by contrast, did not like him at all. She described his preaching as “injudicious and violent”. She did not believe that the gospel needed “such roaring and foaming to make it effective”. In fact, she said that she “would not attend one of his prayer meetings on any account” (*Letters*, **CM 29**, f.4r-v). Marsden was very different from David Thomas, whose well-reasoned preaching she much preferred.

A close examination of early Christian Mission and Salvation Army services shows them to be much closer to Marsden than to Thomas. At times they were quite wild. By then, it appears, Catherine was more accepting of the theatrical from the pulpit, or more accurately the platform, in such buildings as the Effingham Theatre and the People’s Mission Hall (see, for example, William Booth, *Reach the Masses*, 21-23, 38-52; *The General*, vol. 2:22-28, 49-51; Walker, *Pulling*, 94-105, 177-78, 187-94). Those early meetings were much more in line with what William Booth liked, or was at least happy to accept, than the preferences of his more conservative wife. Pamela Walker says that those early mission services “so closely resembled music-hall performances ... that observers sometimes failed to distinguish between them” (Walker, *Pulling*, 59). Catherine had to adapt to this and full credit to her she did. But in this respect William led the way.

Conclusion

One can see from all this that William and Catherine Booth each learned from the other. Each one made major contributions to their family life and to The Salvation Army. If William was the boss, the General, he was a boss, a husband, who listened to his wife's views, greatly respected them and learned from them. Each influenced the other, and each was prepared to listen to the other, and if sometimes sparks flew, at least in their letters, those sparks were quickly doused.

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