
Ann Lee

1736–1784

D&C 49: Introduction

As a child in Manchester, England, Ann worked twelve hours a day in a clothing factory, cutting velvet and shearing fur for hatmakers. As she matured, Ann obtained employment in a Manchester infirmary, where “she was distinguished for her neatness, faithfulness, prudence, and good economy.”¹

Her interest in religion began when she attended revival meetings held under the direction of James and Jane Wardley. Ann joined the Wardleys’ movement by confessing her sins and acknowledging that dancing, shaking, clapping, and whirling caused sin to fall from believers. Ann vowed to take up her cross against evil and said, “I love the day that I first received the Gospel. I call it my birthday.”²

In 1762 Ann married Abraham Standerin. To their union were born four children, three dying as infants and the fourth at age six. The loss of her children led to Ann’s belief that marriage and sexual relations was the root of evil. Although she remained married, Ann declared herself a celibate.

Her unusual stance on marriage led to her religious persecution and imprisonment. Rather than change her religious views, when Ann left prison she was considered a martyr by fellow Shakers. Her leadership among the Shakers was secured when she claimed to see a vision of Adam and Eve “defy[ing] God and commit[ing] the forbidden sexual act. Then she witnessed their expulsion from the garden by an enraged Deity. All at once it

¹ F. W. Evans, *Shakers. Compendium of the Origin, History, Principles, Rules and Regulations, Government, and Doctrines of the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing: With Biographies of Ann Lee . . .* (NY: D. Appleton and Co., 1859), 21.

² Evans, *Shakers*, 23–24.

became crystal clear to Ann Lee there was one single cause for humanity's separation from God: sex."

Rather than label Ann Lee as delusional, her followers praised her as she "took up her cross against the carnal gratifications of the flesh" and pronounced herself the "Female Christ" chosen to spread truth throughout the world. "I feel the blood of Christ running through my soul and body!" she claimed.³ From then on, she was known to her followers as Ann the Word or, more affectionately, Mother Ann.

To escape a pending second imprisonment, in 1774 Ann and her followers—six men and two women—set sail for America aboard the vessel *Mariah*. After arriving in the New York Harbor, her husband Abraham Standerin ended their marriage.

In the wilderness of Niskeyuna near Albany, New York, Ann and her loyal followers established a communal form of living, forbidding the touching of the opposite gender. Before long, Ann was imprisoned in the Old Court at Albany for her claim to be the "Female Christ." While confined, she preached through prison grates to curious crowds who gathered to listen. When released from prison, Ann attracted an ever larger group of followers and established Shaker societies in six areas in New England. In Petersham, Massachusetts, Ann was suspected of being a man due to her large stature. To prove whether she was a man or not, Ann was kidnapped and stripped of her clothing.

Her last days were spent among loyal followers in Niskeyuna near Albany. One follower reported, "Mother sat in a chair almost all day and sang in unknown tongues the whole time, and seemed to be wholly divested of any attention to material things."⁴ Ann told her disciples that Shakerism (The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing) would flourish in Ohio. Twenty-one years after Ann Lee died, the Shakers established several communities in Ohio, the most successful being in Lebanon and North Union.

³ Evans, *Shakers*, 24–25, 33–35.

⁴ Evans, *Shakers*, 140.