

Sojourner Truth - "Ain't I A Woman?" (Two Versions)

In 1851 at the Akron Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, Sojourner Truth - a former slave who would soon become one of the best-known speakers of her generation - made what seems to have been an unplanned speech to those assembled there. The *Anti-Slavery Bugle* of Salem, Ohio, which covered the event, included this in its report:

One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the Convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gesture, and listened to her strong and truthful tones.

She came forward to the platform and addressing the President said with great simplicity:

"May I say a few words? (Receiving an affirmative answer, she proceeded.) I want to say a few words about this matter. I am for woman's rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now.

As for intellect, all I can say is, if woman have a pint and a man a quart - why can't she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much - for we won't take more than our pint'll hold.

The poor men seem to be all in confusion and don't know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's rights give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and there won't be so much trouble.

I can't read, but I can hear. I have heard the Bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept - and Lazarus came forth.

And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and woman who bore him. Man, where is your part? But the women are coming up blessed by God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard."

Twelve years later, Frances Gage - a well-known reformer, abolitionist, and feminist in her own right - recounted the event. Gage was present at the convention, and was in fact the President to whom Truth addressed her initial request to speak. The version Gage recorded has become much better known, and is the one most often replicated, laminated, and recited when we speak of Truth today:

Several ministers attended the second day of the Woman's Rights Convention, and were not shy in voicing their opinion of man's superiority over women. One claimed "superior intellect," one spoke of the "manhood of Christ," and still another referred to the "sin of our first mother."

Suddenly, Sojourner Truth rose from her seat in the corner of the church. "For God's sake, Mrs. Gage, don't let her speak!" half a dozen women whispered loudly, fearing that their cause would be mixed up with Abolition.

Sojourner walked to the podium and slowly took off her sunbonnet. Her six-foot frame towered over the audience. She began to speak in her deep, resonant voice: "Well, children, where there is so much racket, there must be something out of kilter, I think between the Negroes of the South and the women of the North – all talking about rights - the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this talking about?"

Sojourner pointed to one of the ministers. "That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody helps me any best place. And ain't I a woman?"

Sojourner raised herself to her full height. "Look at me! Look at my arm." She bared her right arm and flexed her powerful muscles. "I have plowed, I have planted and I have gathered into barns. And no man could head me. And ain't I a woman?"

"I could work as much, and eat as much as man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne children and seen most of them sold into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain't I a woman?"

The women in the audience began to cheer wildly.

She pointed to another minister. "He talks about this thing in the head. What's that they call it?"

"Intellect," whispered a woman nearby.

"That's it, honey. What's intellect got to do with women's rights or black folks' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?"

"That little man in black there! He says women can't have as much rights as men 'cause Christ wasn't a woman." She stood with outstretched arms and eyes of fire. "Where did your Christ come from?"

"Where did your Christ come from?" she thundered again. "From God and a Woman! Man had nothing to do with him!"

The entire church now roared with deafening applause.

"If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back and get it right-side up again. And now that they are asking to do it, the men better let them."

Name: _____

Sojourner Truth - "Ain't I A Woman?" (Two Versions)

What are FIVE specific SIMILARITIES in these two accounts of the speech?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

What are FIVE specific DIFFERENCES in these two accounts of the speech?

6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

How might we account for these differences? (Be reasonable and specific.)

- 11-12. _____

Why is the second version so much more popular?

13. _____

Which version is most likely more accurate? Why do you think so?

14. _____

Which version is more historically useful? Why do you think so?

15. _____
