

## EVANGELICAL ROOTS OF FEMINISM

The historical process sometimes plays strange tricks on us. Later developments and history written from within a new situation often obscure the character of earlier events and alter our present self-understanding. Feminism is a good case in point. The contemporary "women's liberation" movement derives largely from secular sources and is often characterized by fierce opposition to the church and the assumption that Christianity has been a major force in the oppression of women. This sense of conflict has affected the way in which history has been written. Such history then reenforces the feeling among Christians, especially "conservative" or "evangelical" Christians, that feminism is anti-Christian in character and to be resisted as a pagan ideology that if embraced would undermine a biblically based life-style and world-view.

Actually the contrary is more nearly the case. Though Christian and biblical themes have been used to "keep women in their place," biblical Christianity has been a major force in the elevation of women. This has been clearest when Christianity has been introduced by missionaries into other cultures, where, as in the first century, Christianity has brought a new value to women and a new equality with men. Such elevation has not always incarnated all the values of feminism as we know it today, but it has often tended in that direction. But beyond this more general contribution of Christianity to women, I would like to argue that, historically at least, feminism has particular affinities with that branch of Christianity identified as "evangelical" and that the roots of feminism as it emerged in pre-Civil War America are clearly to be found in "evangelicalism."

This is not to insist that there are not other forms of feminism rooted more in other traditions or thought forms. There is obviously also an Enlightenment grounded feminism that found expression in eighteenth century Europe, in some circles of nineteenth century America, and in our own day. Nor would I want to suggest a strict cause and effect relationship between evangelicalism and feminism. Historical causation is, of course, infinitely more complex, and not all evangelicals do become feminists. I shall be satisfied to argue that evangelical soil is a natural one for the growth of feminism and that, as a matter of fact, feminism has often sprouted there.

We must also understand the sense in which we are using the word "evangelical." In our culture and time this word tends to gather its nuances primarily from the American fundamentalist/modernist controversy. When rooted in this model, the word "evangelical" is identified more with "orthodoxy" and "conservatism." For this study we must move back to recover the connotations of the word a century or two ago. There evangelicalism is grounded more in the Evangelical

Revival of eighteenth century England and the great "awakenings" of eighteenth and nineteenth century America. In that context an "evangelical" is one concerned primarily with the personal appropriation of grace--with conversion and the "new life" that follows the "new birth." The emphasis is on a "vital" or "revived" Christian faith rather than orthodoxy or doctrine. Christian faith that is "unrevived" or lacks "vitality" comes in several varieties--including orthodox! In fact, the evangelicalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was equally opposed on the left by infidelity and paganism and on the right by orthodoxy and traditionalism. We often forget this and the fact that this form of evangelicalism was in many ways a "progressive" rather than a "conservative" form of Christianity that was able to affirm and incorporate into its life new thought forms and cultural patterns.

With these comments in the background I would like to discuss in three steps the inter-relationships between evangelicalism and feminism. In the first place I will indicate some features of the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century that contributed to a new role for women in the church and derivatively in society. In the second place I will suggest how these themes were transformed into feminism in the pre-Civil War conjunction of revivalism and social reform (especially abolitionism). And finally, I will attempt to confirm this argument by sketching how this feminism was incorporated into those forms of evangelicalism that are closer to our own experience.

## I - The Evangelical Revival

It is possible to argue, of course, that any new role given to women in the Evangelical Revival was a product of that burst of vitality that occurs in the early years of any new Christian movement. One can draw parallels with the early years of Christianity where in New Testament times women seem to have had a greater role than during later, more institutionalized periods of Christian history. This sort of analysis no doubt has a great deal of validity, but I would like to suggest three features of the Wesleyan Revival that helped open the way for a new role for women. These would be an implicit egalitarianism, a turn toward Christian experience, and a certain pragmatism that encouraged experimentation with new cultural patterns.

Most students of the Evangelical Revival have noticed John Wesley's turn to the poor and disenfranchised of English society. This crossing of class barriers combined with a new sense of self-worth instilled in converts from lower classes had a major impact on the development of English society. This impact is especially evident in the later development of the labor movement in the early years of the nineteenth century. Bernard Semmel has even argued recently in The Methodist Revolution that it was Methodism that mediated in a non-violent manner to English

society the modern radical and egalitarian ideas of the French Revolution.<sup>1</sup> Though Wesley was himself a conservative Tory, he helped set in motion forces that went beyond his own convictions to make a major impact on the social structure of English society.

Whatever one thinks of Semmel's thesis, one is forced to recognize in the Evangelical Revival a certain egalitarianism that can be variously correlated with Wesley's "optimism of grace," his witness to unlimited or universal grace, his turn toward Christian experience, and related themes. Any movement that is seriously motivated by the conviction that the most important fact about any person is human sinfulness and the need of transforming grace is already a long way toward a very basic and fundamental egalitarianism. The classic statement of this is found in a letter from the Duchess of Buckingham to Lady Huntingdon, the patron of the Calvinistic wing of the Evangelical Revival:

I thank your ladyship for the information concerning the Methodist preachers. Their doctrines are most repulsive, and strongly tinged with impertinence and disrespect toward their superiors, in perpetually endeavoring to level all ranks, and do away with all distinctions. It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting, and I cannot but wonder that your ladyship should relish any sentiment so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.<sup>2</sup>

The point of this is that the Evangelical Revival contained within it forces that would undermine traditional social patterns, structures of authority, social class distinctions, hierarchical assumptions, etc. In the social fluidity that resulted women could find new roles. As other social patterns dissolved, those that delineated the appropriate spheres of women's activity were weakened. When this took place, people were able to look back to Scripture and discover that some of those elements that had been assumed to be a part of a Christian view of life were more assumed cultural patterns than essential features of the Faith.

A second factor in the Evangelical Revival that opened up a new role for women was a turn to Christian experience. For Wesley true Christian Faith that manifests itself in "repentance,

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1. (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

2. This may be found in Aaron C. H. Seymour, The Life and Times of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon (London, 1844), I, 27, or more readily in Oscar Sherwin, John Wesley: Friend of the People (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1961), pp. 40-1.

and love, and all good works" is not a "speculative, rational thing, a cold, lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head; but also a disposition of the heart."<sup>3</sup> This emphasis shifts the fundamental question away from orthodoxy and doctrine to religious experience. Though of course "orthodox" and a defender in theological controversy of such doctrines as "original sin," Wesley never tired of pointing out that the devil himself is orthodox. In Wesley's words: "neither does religion consist in orthodoxy, or right opinions . . . . A man may be orthodox in every point . . . . He may be almost as orthodox--as the devil . . . and may, all the while, be as great a stranger as he to the religion of the heart."<sup>4</sup>

These stark and perhaps extreme statements indicate the extent to which Christian experience dominated the Evangelical Revival. Such a position naturally contributed to a weakening of the traditional sources of religious authority--the trained clergy and the established church. In fact the implications of Wesley's position became clear very early and he was barred from church after church as a destroyer of traditional authority and assumed patterns of church order. The clergy and people of the Church of England did not readily take to the suggestion that they were at most "almost Christians" rather than "altogether Christians."

This elevation of the personal experience of grace in the soul contributed to providing a new role for women in the Evangelical Revival. If the basic concern is the experience of Christian Faith, women, who have been denied access to theological training and positions of authority in the church, are now full participants in the religious life of the community. If religious instruction is more concerned with the "experimental" outworkings of faith in the life and progression along the "stages in life's way," the qualifications for Christian leadership are based more on spiritual maturity and insight than upon theological training or ecclesiastical ordination. Women, judged by such criteria, may more easily qualify for positions of leadership in the church. In fact, women, whose socialization has perhaps contributed to greater sensitivity to feelings and the emotional life, may even excel in these new patterns. Wesley recognized this very early on by appointing women to positions as "class leaders."

But there was also another important factor in the Evangelical Revival that contributed to opening up leadership to women. There was a certain pragmatic quality to the leaders of the Evangelical Revival. They were open to experimentation with new patterns of ministry and church life (field preaching, class meetings, etc.), and were willing to let the validity of these new forms be judged in part by the results that they

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3. Sermon entitled "Salvation by Faith" (preached at St. Mary's Oxford, June 18, 1738), I,4 (available in various editions).

4. Sermon entitled "The Way to the Kingdom," I,6.

produced. Albert Outler has even argued that it was the response to Wesley's field preaching, a practice that he at first loathed, that confirmed him in the practice and was a decisive factor in contributing to his achieving "spiritual equilibrium" and "assurance."<sup>5</sup> The fact that field preaching worked, that people were actually brought to faith, tipped the balance for Wesley and drove him in new directions.

This factor was apparently important in opening up Wesley to the practice of allowing laymen to preach. When Thomas Maxfield began to expand his class meeting assignment into a form of exposition that developed into "preaching," Wesley faced a crisis. Both his mother and the Countess of Huntingdon, however, cautioned him. ~~Wesley~~ Wesley affirmed in a letter that Maxfield is "as surely called of God to preach as you are. Examine what have been the fruits of his preaching, and hear him also yourself."<sup>6</sup>

Once this principle was established, it was difficult to avoid extending it to the case of women, though it was some time before this logic was totally worked out. Thirty years after the incident with Maxfield, Wesley responded to an enquiry about "female preaching" from Mary Bosanquet, who was later to marry Wesley's "designated successor" John Fletcher and then take over many of the parish duties of her husband after his death. He wrote: "the strength of the cause rests there--on your having an extraordinary call. So I am persuaded has every one of our lay preachers, otherwise I could not countenance his preaching at all."<sup>7</sup> At the end of two more decades Wesley had moved a little further, and what was so "extraordinary" before had become a little more common. In 1787 he wrote to Sarah Mallet from the Manchester conference, "we give the right hand of fellowship to Sarah Mallet, and have no objection to her being a preacher in our connexion, so long as she preaches the Methodist doctrines and attends to our discipline."<sup>8</sup>

This was still a long way from the full ordination of women or feminism as we know it today, but the forces that would produce those steps had been set in motion. In the early years of the next century, Methodist commentator Adam Clarke would go on to say of women that "under the blessed spirit of Christianity, they have equal rights, equal privileges, and

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5. variously in Albert Outler (editor), John Wesley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

6. variously reported, but cf. John S. Simon, John Wesley and the Methodist Societies (London: The Epworth Press, 1923), p. 25.

7. letter of June 13, 1771, to Mary Bosanquet in John Telford (editor), The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), Vol. V, p. 257.

8. This letter, now apparently lost, is variously reported. Cf. Phoebe Palmer, The Promise of the Father (Boston: Henry V. Degen, 1859), p. 117, relying on Zephariah Taft, Biographical Sketches of Holy Women.

equal blessings, and , let me add, they are equally useful."<sup>9</sup> Such sentiments were to grow and develop into feminism and the full ordination of women on the American scene, especially under the influence of evangelist Charles G. Finney. But the seed of later developments were sown in the Evangelical Revival--so much so that Robert Wearmouth, a close student of the social impact of the movement, has claimed that "the emancipation of womanhood began with John Wesley."<sup>10</sup>

## II - Pre-Civil War American Revivalism

The Great Awakenings in America saw of the emergence of some of the same practices as in the British Evangelical Revival. Women preachers, for example, appeared in the last decades of the eighteenth century among the Free-Will Baptists. But it was especially the revivalism of Charles G. Finney that expressed the values and ethos of the Wesleyan Revival. Here was the same "arminianizing" of theology, the same affirmation of human potentiality under the transforming power of grace, the same thrust toward perfectionism, the same turn toward the poor and disenfranchised, the same emergent egalitarianism, and the same pragmatic element. And it was the revivalism of Finney that brought in its wake both the full ordination of women and the rise of feminism.<sup>11</sup>

The most controversial of the "new measures" used by Finney in his meetings was that of allowing women to pray in "promiscuous" or mixed assemblies. Finney's convert and assistant Theodore Weld later claimed credit for this practice. The same week of his conversion in 1825, Weld encouraged women to speak and "seven females, a number of them the most influential Christians in the city, confessed their sin in being restrained by their sex and prayed publicly in succession."<sup>12</sup> But Finney's commitment to the practice was revealed shortly thereafter in the New Lebanon Conference called to reconcile Finney and his followers with the more conservative revivalists of New England. Though allowing women to speak in public assemblies was the major bone of contention, Finney refused to back down.

The first coeducational college in the world was Oberlin College, founded to perpetuate Finney's blend of revivalism and reform. Finney himself was the school's first professor of

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9. Comment on Galatians 3:28 in Adam Clarke, The Holy Bible etc. (various editions).

10. Methodism and the Common People of the Eighteenth Century (London: Epworth Press, 1945), p. 223.

11. The extent to which feminism followed in the wake of Finney's revivals has not been adequately noticed in the literature. Cf. however Alice Rossi (editor), The Feminist Papers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

12. Gilbert Barnes and Dwight L. Dummitt (editors), Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké, 1822-1844 (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1965), p. 432.

theology and second president. Asa Mahan; Oberlin's first president was so proud of this record that he suggested for a tombstone epitaph the fact that he was "the first man, in the history of the race, who conducted women, in connection with members of the opposite sex, through a full course of liberal education, and conferred upon her the high degrees, with had hitherto been the exclusive perogatives of men."<sup>13</sup> Later feminists found the early leaders of Oberlin inconsistent and Oberlin's approach still too conservative. But Oberlin did make a major contribution to the women's rights movement by graduating a number of the early feminists. Among these were Lucy Stone, who gained notoreity for her egalitarian marriage and and refusal to change her name; Antoinette Brown, the first woman to be fully ordained; and Betsy Cowles, president of the second National Women's Rights Convention.

But it was the anti-slavery struggle that really enabled the evangelical openness to a new role for women to be transformed into an actual "evangelical feminism." Here too we must notice the correlation of this anti-slavery movement with Finney's revivalism. Earlier interpretations of the abolitionist movement tended to emphasize Enlightenment and Unitarian aspects, but in the 1930's Gilbert Barnes discovered a trunk of letters belonging to Theodore Weld, his wife Angelina Grimke Weld, and her sister Sarah Grimke. This material enabled him to reconstruct the history of abolitionism in his book, The Anti-Slavery Impulse, where he argued that

the agitation was accomplished not so much by heroes of reform as by very numerous obscure persons, prompted by an impulse religious in character and evangelical in spirit, which began in the Great Revival in 1830, was translated for a time into anti-slavery organization, and then broadened into a Congressional movement against slavery and the South.<sup>14</sup>

This interpretation of the abolitionist movement concentrates on the careers of Theodore Weld and the Grimke sisters, Quakers who had been converted out of southern Episcopalianism in Presbyterian revivalism.<sup>15</sup> The Grimke sisters had shaken New England in the 1830's by taking to the lecture platform in their attack on slavery. The ensuing controversy about women speaking in public was a major factor in splitting the abolitionist movement in 1840. In the

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13. Asa Mahan, Autobiography, Intellectual, Moral and Spiritual (London: T. Woolmer, 1882), p. 169.

14. Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond (editors), Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld, and Sarah Grimke (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1965), pp. xvi-xvii.

15. The religious development of the Grimke sisters is not yet well understood. The best treatment is by Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin, The Emancipation of Angelina Grimke (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974).

process Weld and the Grimke sisters were pushed to develop a feminist defense of the right of women to speak in public. This step was taken by Sarah W. Grimke in Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, first published in 1837.<sup>16</sup>

It was not just historical accident that abolitionism and feminism should be so closely intertwined. Just as the recent rebirth of feminism emerged largely out of the civil rights struggles of the 1960's, so 19th century feminism was a product of the abolitionist struggle in the 1830's. There would seem to be several reasons for this.

In the first place, abolitionism picked up and gave extra impulse to the egalitarian thrust of revivalism. Those who were willing to critique slavery on the basis of a doctrine of human equality found the principle to have broader application. Those who had marshalled the courage to attack one social institution found it easier to broaden that attack. Contemporaries certainly noticed this tendency. Calvin Colton, a consistent and vigorous critic of the interrelated forces of revivalism, abolitionism, and temperance movements, argued in Abolition a Sedition that the members of the New England Non-Resistance Society, for example, had "levelled all distinctions in society of rank, color, caste, and sex; and the doctrines of Abolitionism, carried out, have legitimately led them to this."<sup>17</sup> Here we see surfacing the tension between conservative and modern social views that lay beneath the controversies over abolitionism and revivalism. For Colton "it is to the conservative power of Christianity that we owe our greatest blessings."<sup>18</sup>

But beyond this more general aspect of the extension of abolitionist egalitarianism into the relationship of the sexes, the women found more specific parallels between their situation and that of the slave. Sarah Grimke signed her letters "Thine in the bonds of womanhood," and suggested that "the cupidity of man soon led him to regard women as property,"<sup>19</sup> pointing out that in some countries women were sold into marriage just as slaves were sold in slavery. One letter sketched the laws of the age which left "women very little more liberty, or power, in some respects, than the slave." Sarah Grimke claimed that "in all ages and countries, not excepting enlightened republican America, woman has more or less been made a means to promote the welfare of man, without due regard to her own happiness, and the glory of God, as the

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16. (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), collecting letters first published during 1837 in the Spectator and the Liberator, reprinted New York: Burt Franklin, 1970).

17. (Philadelphia: Geo. Donohue, 1839---reprinted New York: AMS Press, 1973), p. 73.

18. Ibid, p. 57.

19. Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, p. 13.

20. Ibid, p. 82.



end of her creation."<sup>21</sup>

But perhaps more important still for these people so deeply grounded in evangelical and biblical religion were the parallel problems in the interpretation of the relevant biblical texts. The abolitionists regularly had to face conservatives who built on biblical instances of slavery and on biblical admonitions to obedience of slaves a "bible defense of slavery." The abolitionists were forced to develop in opposition a "bible argument against slavery" that appealed to an egalitarian "spirit" of Scripture over against the status quo supporting "letter" so often thrown up against them. The conjunction of the issues seemed supported by the Scriptures themselves. Biblical admonitions to slaves stood parallel to those to women-- usually within the same chapter. But perhaps even more important was the conjunction of the issues in Galatians 3:38, a passage to which both abolitionist and feminist exegetes made reference: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

The significance of these hermeneutical moves was not always immediately realized and advocated as such, but later writings frequently reveal the systematic development of the parallel issues. John Foster's biography of Mrs. Maggie Newton Van Cott, the first woman licensed to preach in the Methodist Episcopal Church, contains a preface by the Rev. David Sherman on "Woman's Place in the Gospel." There Sherman self-consciously argued that the contemporary movement for "women's rights" was in fact the culmination of New Testament teachings. Just as in the case of slavery, where "while yielding for a time to the form of the institution, the apostles laid down principles which cut away the foundations of the system,"<sup>22</sup> so the "same method was adopted in the case of woman."<sup>23</sup> In this

the apostles began the elevation and education of woman, and left the movement to flow on so far and in such channels as Providence and the current of events might open for it, thus preparing the way for a much broader and grander work than<sup>24</sup> they themselves were permitted to perform.

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21. Sarah Grimke, Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, p. 12.

22. David Sherman, "Woman's Place in the Gospel," in John O. Foster, Life and Labors of Mrs. Maggie Newton Van Cott (Cincinnati: Hitchcock and Walden, 1872), p. xxxiv.

23. Ibid, p. xxxv.

24. Ibid, p. xxxvi.

### III - Feminism in Later Evangelicalism

Post-Civil War developments brought about profound reorientations within the evangelical traditions. The rise of evolutionism, biblical criticism, modern science, etc. in America split these progressive revivalistic currents into two camps--those that played out the earlier themes in a more liberal direction and those that pulled back from such new directions. Among the latter groups attention was now directed more against enemies on the left than on the right, resulting in a tendency to join hands with conservative and traditional groups whose style and ethos became more and more dominant. (The style and concerns of Old School Presbyterianism, for example, replaced New School Presbyterianism at a number of points.) Unmanageable social forces--industrialization, urbanization, cultural pluralism, secularization, etc.--forced the evangelical traditions to turn more in upon themselves and to withdraw from some forms of broader cultural engagement. These forces, worked out over the next century, began to erode the commitment of the evangelical world to progressive social movements.

The relationship of evangelicalism to feminism was affected to great extent by these currents. We are most aware of that major strand of feminism that moved in a more liberal and secular direction. But it is also true that there was preserved in the evangelical world a a major strand of feminism now largely forgotten. Those traditions of evangelicalism that most completely incarnated the pre-Civil War heritage of revivalism tended to also maintain longer a commitment to social reform and a strand of feminism. This could be illustrated very widely, but I will focus on only half a dozen examples of this post-Civil War evangelical feminism, attempting to show how it was based on the same dynamic and argument as the early strands of pre-Civil War feminism.

Perhaps the first of these evangelical feminist traditions to emerge was among the Wesleyan Methodists. This denomination emerged in the early 1840's as an abolitionist protest against the Methodist accommodation to slavery. As such this body more than any other shared the convictions and ethos of early Oberlin College. Early founders of the denomination had resisted the efforts of William Lloyd Garrison to broaden the abolitionist movement to include "women's rights," but later events showed a lessening of this tension. The first women's rights convention was held in the Wesleyan Church in Seneca Falls, New York. And it was Wesleyan Methodist Luther Lee who preached in 1853 the ordination sermon for Antoinette Brown, an Oberlin graduate who was the first woman to be ordained. The Wesleyans began to ordain women in the 1860's, and after a period of controversy and struggle in the church, the practice gained a fair amount of acceptance.

Lee's sermon on "Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel" reveals a perspective that can only be called feminist. Arguing

exegetically that the New Testament not only describes the ministry of women but speaks of them as ministers and hermeneutically that the Pauline prohibitions on women were only of local significance, Lee rested most of his weight on Galatians 3:28 to affirm:

I cannot see how the text can be explained so as to exclude females from any right, office, work, privilege, or immunity which males enjoy, hold or perform. If the text means anything, it means that males and females are equal in rights, privileges<sup>25</sup> and responsibilities upon the Christian Platform.

A Presbyterian/Congregationalist example of such feminism grounded in revivalistic abolitionism may be seen in Jonathan Blanchard, the founding president of Illinois's Wheaton College. Blanchard had been extremely active in the abolitionist movement, and had close connections with Oberlin College and the Wesleyan Methodists. In Cincinnati Blanchard served the sixth Presbyterian Church, earlier pastored by Asa Mahan, the first president of Oberlin. This church was popularly called the "nigger church" in mockery of its abolitionist stance. While in Cincinnati, Blanchard debated the question of slavery with N. L. Rice. In these widely publicized speeches Blanchard insisted that "the first alteration which Christianity made in the polity of Judaism was to abrogate this oppressive distinction of sexes" in which "women had almost no rights; they were menials to their husbands and parents."<sup>26</sup>

Blanchard (and probably Lee as well) preserved the teaching that "the husband is the head of the wife," but others went beyond this to advocate a completely egalitarian marriage relationship. One of these was B. T. Roberts, founder of the Free Methodist Church in 1860. The word "free" in Free Methodist had several meanings--among them abolitionism and "free pews" in opposition to pew rentals that excluded the poor. Though the denomination did not capitulate to the full ordination of women until 1974, Roberts and several other early bishops were distinctly feminist in conviction. Roberts book Ordaining Women was one of the best and most radical defenses of a feminist perspective in the late nineteenth century evangelical traditions.

In Ordaining Women Roberts wrote that

we cannot ascertain the truth of an opinion

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25. Luther Lee, Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel (Syracuse, N. Y.: Published by the author, 1853), p. 4. This sermon is also available in a modern edition of Five Sermons and a Tract by Luther Lee, edited with an introduction by Donald W. Dayton (Chicago: Holrad House, 1975).

26. Jonathan Blanchard and N. L. Rice, A Debate on Slavery (Cincinnati: Wm. H. Moore, 1846 & several modern reprints), p. 433.

by enquiries about its age. Let us decide that as the church did, for ages, misinterpret the teachings of the Bible on the subject of slavery, so it may now fail to apprehend its teaching on the question of women's rights.

Roberts argues explicitly on the hermeneutical level, claiming that one's starting point must be Galatians 3:28:

Make this the key text upon this subject and give to other passages such a construction as will make them agree with it, and all is in harmony. The apparent conflict is at an end.<sup>28</sup>

Baptist A. J. Gordon provides an interesting variation on this theme. Gordon, the major figure behind Gordon College and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, shared the same revivalist and abolitionist social origins. His son and biographer Ernest indicates that A. J. Gordon "had been bred in the strictest sect of the abolitionists" and had "known William Lloyd Garrison, a frequent visitor in his boyhood home."<sup>29</sup> This biography also indicates, as we have come to expect, that with regard to women A. J. Gordon "advocated their complete enfranchisement and their entrance into every political and social privilege enjoyed by men."<sup>30</sup>

But in spite of these facts Gordon did not ground his argument for the ordination of women upon Galatians 3:28 and a doctrine of the equality of women, but upon his doctrine of the Holy Spirit. This is developed in an essay on "The Ministry of Women" in the Missionary Review of the World (1894) that Gordon wrote in response to criticism of the practice of allowing women to speak at some of the missionary conventions in which he was involved. Gordon's basic text here is not the Galatians passage, but the second chapter of Acts, and especially the prophecy from Joel that is quoted there--that "in the last days, saith God, I will pour forth of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy."

In the midst of this argument Gordon makes some very interesting suggestions. He affirms, for example, the "value of experience as an interpreter of Scripture. The final exegesis is not always to be found in the lexicon and grammar."<sup>31</sup> In addition to being in the Word, the "Spirit is also in the Church,

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27. B. T. Roberts, Ordaining Women (Rochester, N. Y.: Earnest Christian Publishing House, 1891), p. 13.

28. Ibid, p. 55.

29. Ernest B. Gordon, Adoniram Judson Gordon: a Biography (New York: Revell, 1896), p. 35.

30. Ibid, p. 116.

31. A. J. Gordon, "The Ministry of Women," Missionary Review of the World VII (December, 1894), 910-921, also available as "Gordon-Conwell Monograph #61," the edition used here. This quote is on p. 12 in this format edited by the Rev. Pamela Cole.

the body of regenerate and sanctified believers."<sup>32</sup> Though Gordon wished to give priority to the written Word, he also wished to give a certain weight to the voice of the Spirit speaking in the experience of the church. The particular "experience" that Gordon had in mind was that "in every great spiritual awakening in the history of Protestantism the impulse for Christian women to pray and witness for Christ in the public assembly has been found irrepressible."<sup>33</sup>

Gordon's argument for the right of women to preach found particular reception in the rising tide of "pre-millennial" eschatology, and Gordon himself was a prominent figure in the prophecy conferences that lay behind this new current. In this movement there was a particular emphasis on the imminence of the return of Christ and the fact that people were living in the "last days." The uncertainty of many in interpreting the "last days" of the Joel prophecy in Acts 2 was resolved by arguing that the "last days" just before the return of Christ would be accompanied by a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit that would restore the phenomena (of women preaching, etc.) that characterized the Pentecost era that inaugurated the "last days" in another sense. It was this complex of ideas that fed into Pentecostalism and provided the grounding that was used in classical Pentecostalism to defend the practice of women preaching. This argument also had the advantage of turning the fact that women had not had a major role in the church in the meantime into a form of apologetic argument for why it had now become appropriate.

But the main outline of Gordon's argument had actually been developed over thirty years earlier by lay evangelist Phoebe Palmer, editor of The Guide to Holiness and probably the major force behind a mid-nineteenth century reaffirmation of the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian Perfection that produced by the turn of the century perhaps a hundred different church and quasi-church bodies. This tradition also had its origin in pre-Civil War revivalism and was perhaps the tradition that most clearly perpetuated Charles G. Finney's "new measure" revivalism. Early editors of the Guide to Holiness were abolitionist, but Phoebe Palmer was less socially radical and shied away from controversy. She found the "Pentecostal" justification for her own work more congenial and argued it extensively in her 1859 treatise The Promise of the Father.<sup>34</sup>

But in spite of Phoebe Palmer's reticence, her successors took her argument in a distinctly feminist direction. Mrs. J.

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32. A. J. Gordon, "The Ministry of Women," p. 12 (in the Gordon-Convail Monograph edition).

33. Ibid.

34. Phoebe Palmer, The Promise of the Father; or, A Neglected Specialty of the Last Days (Boston: H. V. Degen, 1859). This 421-page work became the fountainhead of innumerable works through the rest of the century.

Fowler Willing would argue at the turn of the century in the pages of the Guide that "The Pentecost laid the axe at the root of the tree of social injustice. The text of Peter's sermon that marvelous day was the keynote of woman's enfranchisement."<sup>35</sup> And Alma White, who claimed as the founder of the small Pillar of Fire denomination to be the first woman bishop in the history of Christianity, was an ardent feminist, basing her convictions largely on this argument. Her group published for years a paper called Women's Chains that argued for suffrage and defended the right of women to enter any profession.

In this perfectionist tradition, the "Pentecost" argument included within it another theological premise that should be recognized. In its emphasis on the doctrine of sanctification, this tradition often came close to arguing that the pre-fallen state of men could be completely restored by the transforming grace of God. In this argument, then, any elements of the curse laid upon women in the fall would not apply in the church, the company of the redeemed and restored. Seth Cook Rees, for example, was to argue that "as the grace of God and the light of the Gospel are shed abroad . . . woman is elevated, until at Pentecost she stands, a second Eve, by the side of her husband."<sup>36</sup>

Such convictions (and the practices that they supported) continued and flourished in some evangelical traditions until at least World War II. Since that date feminist convictions in evangelical traditions have radically declined. We have already suggested some of the reasons for this. As Evangelicals were more and more distanced from the abolitionist controversies, they tended to fall back into biblical literalism. The forces of "fundamentalism" and "traditionalism" replaced the "evangelical spirit." Those groups that were produced by the spiritual movements and revivalism of the 19th century became more institutionalized, and with the decline of that first burst of "spiritual vitality" also gave up the practice of women preachers and feminist convictions. The increasing professionalization of the ministry and the growth of evangelical seminaries tended to exclude women. And by and large there was a general accommodation to American culture that cut the nerve behind such deviant practices. In short, the evangelical traditions became much like those against which their foremothers and forefathers had protested.

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35. Mrs. J. Fowler Willing, "Women and the Pentecost," Guide to Holiness 68 (January, 1898), p. 21.

36. Seth C. Rees, The Ideal Pentecostal Church (Cincinnati: Martin Wells Knapp at the Revivalist Office, 1897), p. 41.