



Calvary, Suffrage, and the Early Evangelicals

The achievements of the early evangelicals are stunning for any generation! Advancing the gospel included promoting abolition, suffrage, and temperance. Their example is an opportunity for celebration but also reflection given the distance some have journeyed from the theological and social commitments of the early evangelicals. Let's begin by defining the word "evangelical."

The early church used the term evangelical when referring to the "gospel," a word later reclaimed by Protestant reformers to center Calvary over the indulgences sold by the church. During revival and reform movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "evangelical" was associated with "intense periods of unusual response to gospel" that were "linked with unusual efforts at godly living." To identify as an evangelical was to make both a theological and a social commitment as summarized in Galatians 3:26–28:

So, in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Regardless of ethnicity, social class, or gender, God gifts and calls believers according to God's pleasure (Rom. 16) and often contrary to human bias. As slaves and women became believers, they used their gifts as leaders and reformers committed to Christ and to making the world a better place. These were the priorities that embodied the leadership of Harriet Tubman (1822–1913), Amanda Berry Smith (1837–1915), Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), and Frances Willard (1839–98), the president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).

Considered the largest women's organization of its day, the WCTU was an army of women evangelists and activists relentlessly advancing evangelism, abolition, suffrage, and temperance. Its leader, Francis Willard, was committed to suffrage before attending (and becoming president of) North-Western Female College, today's Northwestern University (IL). Willard believed God intends Christian women to advance the well-being of their families through their political vote. Exposing global trafficking, prostitution, and the need for laws against rape, Willard pioneered global anti-trafficking beside a young missionary physician—Dr. Katharine Bushnell (1855–1946)—head of the WCTU's "Social Purity Department." These women recognized that without the vote, women and children were prey to poverty and abuse as alcohol consumption soared during and following the Civil War. For this reason, Willard lobbied for public drinking fountains in order to keep men out of bars.

Always an advocate of women in ministry, Willard encouraged women to pursue careers not limited to work among other women, as she herself had often felt confined. She believed God had work for women as evangelists and in every branch of church work and public life. She fiercely opposed the prejudice and laws that kept women from using their God-given gifts in *any* sphere. Advocating for women's full humanity, equality, and leadership as a biblical and social obligation of Christians, Willard wrote:

All my life I have been devoted to the advancement of women in education and opportunity. I firmly believe God has a work for them to do as evangelists, as bearers of Christ's message to the ungospelized, to the prayer-meeting, to the church generally and the world at large, such as most people have not dreamed. It is therefore my dearest wish to help break down the barriers of prejudice that keep them silent.

Inspiring women worldwide, Francis Willard was of the most popular women in the U.S. in her day. When she died, 30,000 came out to mourn her loss and flags were lowered to half-mast in Chicago, Washington D.C., and New York. In Philadelphia's Congress Hall, where each state displays a picture of their most honored resident, Willard is the only woman exhibited.

Decades after her death, the WCTU continued to promote women in ministry as leaders in the suffrage and temperance movement. Like Willard, these women were allies to the most vulnerable members in our world, especially women and children.

To learn more about the work of the WCTU, watch our interview with Jo Anne Lyon—CBE Board member, former Superintendent of the Wesleyan Church, and daughter of a determined WCTU leader—at the QR code found on page 21 of this issue.

Notes

1. Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 16–18.
2. Michael Mahr, "'Half the Time Unfit for Duty': Alcoholism in the Civil War," *The Medical Record* (blog), *National Museum of Civil War Medicine*, September 2, 2021, <https://www.civilwarmed.org/alcoholism/>.
3. *Glimpses of Fifty Years: The Autobiography of An American Woman* (Chicago: Woman's Temperance Publication Association, 1889), 360 quoted in Francis Willard to Mrs. Dwight L. Moody, September 5, 1877, Francis Willard, General Commission on Archives & History, <https://gcah.org/resources/worship-resources/celebrating-our-united-methodist-heritage/voices-from-our-past/frances-willard/>.