



TABOO TOPICS

*We Should Talk
About: Religion
and Politics*

By Sheri
Bradley



An old adage states that, in an effort to keep the conversation polite and to avoid any potential disagreements or arguments, individuals should not discuss politics or religion in mixed gatherings. Listening with an open mind and having an honest exchange of ideas about emotionally charged topics can be difficult. Politics and religion are tightly connected; despite efforts to keep politics out of the church, we find that our religion often informs our political positions. This can be complicated as Christians across the political spectrum may believe in their own political and religious perspectives to the point that they think anyone with differing opinions may not be Christian at all. This is nothing new or unique to this generation; it was also true during the women's suffrage movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The national movement to gain the vote for women in the United States was formalized in 1848, but legal victory was not achieved until 1920. At the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, sixty-eight women and thirty-two men came together and signed the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments. This document called for women to be granted the right to vote, thus formally launching the American women's suffrage movement, but voting was not the only complaint in this declaration. Penned

by the collaborative efforts of Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), Lucretia Mott (1793–1880), Martha C. Wright (1806–1875), Mary Ann M'Clintock (1800–1884), and Jane C. Hunt (1812–1889), this document also highlighted women's lack of economic freedom, opportunities to pursue education, rights in a divorce, and the ability to hold a ministry role in most churches. The religious beliefs of these women deeply informed their political stance. All but one of them were members of the Quaker church, a faith tradition that upholds the equality of men and women.¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton was not a Quaker like her fellow declaration writers, but her position was still formed by the biblical principles.

These women used biblical principles to support their fight for equality and their right to vote. Stanton rejected the Bible “as a guide to salvation” but still took it upon herself to study the Bible and used many biblical narratives to make her political point.² She highlighted several biblical texts that applauded women's roles and strength, including Deborah's leadership (Judges 4–5), Huldah's prophetic wisdom and authority (2 Kings 22:14–20; 2 Chron. 34:22–28), Vashti's refusal to be paraded in front of a drunken party of men in obedience to her husband (Esther 1), and Esther's courage in confronting her husband, the king, on



behalf of her people (Esther 4–7). Stanton also cited God’s creation of both genders in the divine image and joint commissioning of Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:26–28) as well as Paul’s statement of gender quality in Christ (Gal. 3:28).

Despite these biblical statements of equality and examples of strong women leaders, others tried to use the Bible and their religious ideas to counter women’s equality. Many believed that allowing women to vote would “undermine traditional teachings regarding the family, gender roles, and sexuality.”³ They suggested that if a woman cast a vote on her own, she would not be submitting to her husband. Those opposed to suffrage argued that the biblical texts instructed all women to keep silent and in submission to men, but this interpretation is more in line with the political culture of ancient Rome. Women in ancient Rome were not permitted to “attend, speak in, or vote at political assemblies.”⁴ Women in that culture were generally expected to be silent and remain at home in submission to their husbands, having little to no political voice. Jesus’s own interactions with women and Paul’s commendations of them should indicate that any such prohibitions were specific to certain contexts and not applicable for all times and all cultures.

Jesus sent a Samaritan woman out to evangelize her village (John 4:1–42), and an angel commissioned Mary Magdalene as the first person to proclaim Jesus had risen from the dead (Matt. 28:1–7; Luke 24:1–12). Paul commended several women for their work in ministry, including Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia, and many others (Rom. 16). Opponents of the suffrage movement and women’s equality found it difficult to do the same.

In 1903, R. C. Bell, a preacher in Texas, published an article in opposition to women’s suffrage. He claimed that women were not created for life in the public arena, and they would be disobeying God’s law and their own nature if they entered public life. Therefore, any women working in the public arena in any capacity should go home to their fathers or husbands so as to not bring “ridicule and shame” upon themselves.⁵ In 1920, several preachers and Bible college professors signed a petition opposing women’s suffrage that was published in the *Nashville Banner*. They claimed that women voting would “revolutionize our entire mode of life and will in our opinion have an evil effect not only in our homes, our churches and our families, but will affect the whole social fabric of our present generation and of generations yet unborn.”⁶ One of the ministers who signed the petition was J. C. McQuiddy (1858–1924),

who said, “As the modern woman is demanding not only suffrage, but also political equality, it is clear that she cannot hold office and perform the duties of politics and remain at home at the same time.”⁷ According to McQuiddy and many other naysayers, women can’t have it all, and men need women to stay at home to take care of all their husbands’ needs because the Bible allegedly says so.

The suffrage movement was intertwined with the temperance movement, a fight to reduce or ban alcohol consumption so men would properly support their families instead of spending their time and hard-earned money in the saloon and going home drunk, where abuse was prevalent. Christian women often took the lead in “preaching in the streets in front of the saloons and hotels against alcohol and for women’s rights” because they could not affect any real political change without a vote.⁸ Female preachers grew in number, and they were often given the entire Sunday morning church service for the purpose of communicating their message. This habit of allowing women to preach in the church was disconcerting for men who felt they were losing their patriarchal hold on the families and culture through the church.

Even though many conservative Christians in that day opposed alcohol and its effects on both the home and society, some church leaders believed women gaining a vote and a voice was more detrimental than saloons and rampant alcohol use. E. W. Herndon (1836–1904), a preacher, Christian periodical editor, and medical doctor, was so opposed to women voting that he proclaimed, “If the saloon cannot be destroyed except by women’s suffrage, we say let the saloon stay.”⁹ These are the words of an otherwise intelligent, educated man, but he is not the only church leader to hold such harsh views of women, nor were such comments limited to the nineteenth century.¹⁰

Politics and religion can be polarizing, dividing families and communities, but they are important topics to discuss. These topics are often intertwined as our deeply held religious beliefs inform what we believe about our role in culture and participation in civil matters. When beliefs about women are based on misinterpretations of Scripture, this can lead to political injustice against women in society. Women’s suffrage was a political movement that grew out of the suffragettes’ deep belief that God created women in the divine image as co-stewards of creation, called to work alongside men. The church and society as a whole flourish when everyone, regardless of gender or race, is valued and invited to contribute their gifts and perspectives. God

created both male and female to reflect the divine image together, so something is missing when part of that divine reflection is ignored and devalued. God values women and their voices—even when they are discussing politics and religion.

Notes

1. “How do Quakers practice equality and equity?” *Quaker.org*, <https://quaker.org/equality-and-equity/>.
2. Kathi Kern, *Mrs. Stanton’s Bible* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 44.
3. George M. Marsen, “The Rise of Fundamentalism” in *Turning Points in the History of American Evangelicalism*, Heath W. Carter and Laura Rominger Porter, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), 87–88.
4. Mark Cartwright, “The Role of Women in the Roman World,” *World History Encyclopedia*, February 22, 2014, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/659/the-role-of-women-in-the-roman-world/>.
5. R. C. Bell, “Woman’s Work,” *The Way* 5, no. 16 (August 6, 1903), 775–777.
6. Quoted by John Mark Hicks, “Suffrage, Tennessee, and Churches of Christ,” *John Mark Hicks Blog*, August 18, 2022.
7. J. C. McQuiddy, “Woman Suffrage,” *Gospel Advocate*, July 22, 1920, 715–716.
8. Bill Grasham, “The Role of Women in the American Restoration Movement,” *Restoration Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (January 1, 1999), 217.
9. E.W. Herndon, “Woman’s Suffrage,” *Christian Quarterly Review* 7, no. 4 (October 1888), 607–609.
10. Consider John MacArthur’s statement that the church would be “in trouble” if women ever led. John MacArthur, “Does the Bible Permit a Woman to Preach?” *Grace to You*, November 3, 2019, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/81-56/does-the-bible-permit-a-woman-to-preach>. Or consider Mark Driscoll’s infamous tirades against women. Mark Driscoll, “P*ssified Nation by Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill Church,” *Midrash Mars Hill*, December 5, 2000, https://archive.org/details/PussifiedNation_201707/mode/2up. Mark Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformission Rev.: Hard Lessons from an Emerging Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

The church and society as a whole flourish when everyone, regardless of gender or race, is valued and invited to contribute their gifts and perspectives.



Sheri Bradley holds a doctorate from the Webber Institute of Worship Studies. She has served as a worship minister, professor of worship, author, and hospital chaplain. Sheri is the author of *Valued by God: Elevating the Value of Women’s Voices in the Church*.