

THE LEGACY OF OUR FEARLESS SISTERS

By Mayzie Mayfield

My younger sister, Madalyn, cared about women's rights long before I did. Her favorite movie has been *Mary Poppins* since she was small. She was especially enraptured by Mrs. Banks marching about 33 Cherry Tree Lane singing: "We're clearly soldiers in petticoats, and dauntless crusaders for women's votes!"

Madalyn proclaimed, "I would have been a suffragette! Women *should* vote!" Imagine her confusion when our father told her that no, she would not have been a suffragette. He thought that, while women may be able to vote *now*, the push required to gain suffrage was wrong. While his reasoning was unclear, I think it had to do with his ideas about the "natural order" of women and men—that men are to lead and hold authority while women are to submit and follow. While my sister still hummed the tune of freedom in her heart and was more outspoken in her dissent with my father, my fear of authority led me to keep quiet until I moved out of my childhood home to go to college. We spent crucial time conflicted and confused because although we were told that God loved us, we were also told that our ability to shape society was incidental at best. What was the truth?





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Jehovah's Prerogative

The Seneca Falls Convention, held July 19–20, 1848, was one of the precipitating moments for the women's rights movement in the United States. The convention was the movement's formalizing event, with women boldly standing before their society declaring that they would no longer be ruled by the civil, cultural, and spiritual prejudices of their time.¹ Faces were seen and names were recorded; there was no turning back.

It was there that the Declaration of Sentiments, a document that enumerated the rights women sought, was ratified.² As part of addressing the "social, civil, and religious condition of women,"³ the Declaration of Sentiments listed the harm caused to women by the legal, social, and religious structures of the time, such as:

- He has made her, in the eyes of the law, if married, civilly dead.
- He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.
- He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.
- After depriving her of all rights as a married woman, if single and the owner of property, he has taxed her to support a government which recognizes her only when her property can be made profitable to it.
- He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and her God.
- He has endeavored, in every way that he could to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.⁴

Though not a comprehensive list of their complaints, these examples convey the reality that women were not treated as full participants in society during the twentieth century. When compared to Galatians 3:28, the rights that women at Seneca Falls demanded were entirely reasonable.

Indeed, there was support in the Christian community for the women's rights movement during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and women of faith such as Lucretia Mott (1793–1880), Anna Howard Shaw (1847–1919), and Mary Church Terrell (1863–1954) were prominent leaders. Women and men of Christian faith, Black and White, viewed women's rights and Black rights as inextricably linked. They saw their shared identity as God's children and recognized that they all deserved dignity.⁵ In theory, Christians across all social demographics should have been the most supportive of equal rights for everyone.

But history shows us that anywhere patriarchal power is threatened, the freedom God gave women as human beings made in his image is hindered. Religious leaders were some of the most outspoken in their opposition to the women's suffrage movement, even claiming that it would "destroy society."⁶ Many argued that the division of women and men into the domestic and social spheres was part of the natural order of humanity, ". . . the ideal relation between the sexes. It has the sanction of divine authority and the test of human experience."⁷ There was also an emphasis on the alleged weaker nature of women—weaker in the ability to work outside the home, to perceive the common good, and to not act beholden to their emotions.⁸ Women's suffrage was also viewed as a sign that "selfishness and materialism" had crept into society, since women wanted democratic recognition as individuals rather than as a member of their husband's household.⁹ While detractors focused on women's supposed deficiencies, the suffragettes emphasized the healing and the liberation God offers *all* people.¹⁰ As suffragette Carrie Chapman Catt (1859–1947) wrote, "But if it was right, as all men say, for man to attempt to regain the ideal, is it not also right for woman to attempt to regain her ideal of equality? More than this, *Christ came to redeem the world.*"¹¹

In spite of the biblical basis that women's rights opponents claimed to have, this was not the first time women sought legal equality for themselves. The Bible itself cites a powerful moment in history when women stood before their political leaders to demand equal treatment.

Five Fearless Sisters¹²

Historically, women were largely excluded from the political sphere in the Ancient Near East.¹³ Even the law given by God to the Israelites carried the tension of liberation and constraint for women. Some may even come away from the text believing that women were excluded or less important in God's eyes because of the way the laws were applied. While this history is complicated, the events of Numbers 27 reveal God's intentions beyond the strict letter of the inheritance laws.

At this point, God has commanded Moses and Aaron to perform a census of families by men; any land owned was to be divided and passed down the paternal line through the generations. Women were subsumed in their father's or husband's homes, and they could not inherit property. This seems to foreshadow the complaints in the Declaration of Sentiments centuries later, of women who were civilly irrelevant, unable to own property, submitting to laws interpreted and enforced by men. Because God declared the census, it seemed like God's prerogative was to keep women out of civil affairs. However, something changed when Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milkah, and Tirzah spoke up.

The five fearless sisters' confrontation of their inheritance laws echoed into the future as a song continued by the women confronting laws in the United States at the Seneca Falls Convention. Moses and Aaron, Israel's civil and spiritual leaders, were present as the crowd of Israelites assembled. Most weighty of all, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milkah, and Tirzah appeared before the Tabernacle, God's dwelling place among the Israelites. The sisters had realized that following the letter of the law would erase their family line from Israel since their father died with no sons. They demanded recognition as individuals, pointing out that their father's sins were not theirs (Num 27:3). Rather than accept the law as-is, the sisters boldly stood before their society to advocate for themselves and women like them. The five fearless sisters' public statement addressed the civil, social, and religious norms of their time.

And what was God's response, or "Jehovah's prerogative," as later women would write?¹⁴

What Zelophehad's daughters are saying is right. You must certainly give them property as an inheritance among their father's relatives and give their father's inheritance to them. Say to the Israelites, 'If a man dies and leaves no son, give his inheritance to his daughter. (Num. 27:8-9)

This short narrative communicates that God has something to say about the inclusion of women in civil life. And not only does God have something to say—Jehovah's prerogative is to say, "Yes!" to women's advocacy and inclusion in all spheres of life.

Our Legacy Will Pass On

From the vantage point of 2025, women know that God's amendment to inheritance law did not undo all the injustice cited in Scripture, just as ratifying the Declaration of Sentiments and passing the 19th amendment in the United States in 1919 did not end women's struggle in the modern world. Despite being a crucial legal victory, the rights of women in the church and in society have continued to be a contentious battleground. Women could not have a credit card or bank account until 1974,¹⁵ marital rape is still permissible by loophole in twelve U.S. states,¹⁶ and the gender pay gap persists across both gender and race lines.¹⁷ There is even a movement in the United States to *repeal* the 19th amendment, one of the logical conclusions to complementarian beliefs and defended by some prominent complementarians.¹⁸ Outside of the United States, Afghani women are severely oppressed under the Taliban.¹⁹ Only thirty-six countries have a woman as the Head of State or Government.²⁰ Ten percent of the world's women live in extreme poverty.²¹ Yes, sisters (and brothers)—there is still much work to do.

How could it have been different for my sister, for me, and for countless women throughout history if the five fearless sisters were celebrated as role models? Nineteenth and twentieth century women's rights activists were so deeply convicted of the righteousness of their cause that they stood in picket lines, were beaten and jailed, and used their homes to pass out pamphlets, mobilize their networks to discuss ideas, and change the world. They emulated the courage that Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milkah, and Tirzah showed when they took a deep breath and risked *everything* for justice. These groups of courageous women understood civil rights as not only a sign of earthly citizenship, but an indicator of divine citizenship. If women and men are truly made in God's image, then that must be brought to bear on our civic and civil liberties.

We are all on earth for a brief time, and though our legacy may last but a few generations, God's mercy, God's willingness to mend injustice, and God's prerogative to include women in all spheres of life endures from generation to generation. Let us turn to the five fearless sisters and their heirs, the women of Seneca Falls, as stewards of "Jehovah's prerogative"

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to include women. Let us inherit the legacy of all the women who came before us, boldly taking a stand, confident in what the Lord has given us—whether in the eyes of the church or the law.

Sisters, it is our turn now. My prayer is that we continue to follow the same God who emboldened Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milkah, and Tirzah; the same God who gave Lucretia Mott, Anna Howard Shaw, and Mary Church Terrell courage; the same God who still desires for women all over the world to be seen as full citizens of this world and the one to come.

When our time in this land is done, may our daughters' daughters look back and sing with Mrs. Banks,

"So, cast off the shackles of yesterday!
Shoulder to shoulder into the fray!
Our daughters' daughters will adore us
And they'll sing in grateful chorus
"Well done! Well done!
Well done, Sister Suffragette!"

Notes

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