

“This Work is God’s Cause”: Religion in the Southern Woman Suffrage Movement, 1880–1920

EVELYN A. KIRKLEY

As I began researching religion and woman suffrage in the South I asked a prominent historian of southern religion if he knew of any sources. I had assumed that religion and woman suffrage had an intimate relationship in the South, since historians have amply documented the close connection between southern religion and culture. After scratching his head for a moment, however, he commented dryly, “There really aren’t any sources. That will be a short paper.” He went on to explain that religious arguments were seldom used in the struggle for woman suffrage, that natural rights ideology and the social benefits of moral women voting were more common defenses than ones based on Scripture. Even antisuffragists relied on the threat of black women voting and the superfluity of women voting when they were represented by their husbands at the ballot box more often than explicitly religious arguments.

Undaunted by this discouraging word, I continued to research this topic. Unfortunately, I found that he was right. Religious arguments were not the primary line of defense for pro- and antisuffrage advocates but more often the third or fourth if on the defensive line at all. Attacks on the Bible by suffragists did not appear in the South as in the North, nor were frequent diatribes preached against the sins of Eve and her suffragist daughters.¹ Protestant Christianity in the South did not intersect with woman suffrage as historians have shown it did with other social issues, such as slavery, prohibition, or evolution.² Despite the reputed religiosity of the South, despite the “cultural captivity” of southern churches, the Bible was not the formidable weapon I would have expected for suffragists and their opponents.³ For weeks I searched in vain for some helpful little nugget.

1. For an example of how negatively some northern suffragists viewed the Bible, see Elizabeth C. Stanton and the Revising Committee, *The Woman’s Bible* (1895, 1898; reprint, New York, 1972).
2. Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago, 1977); Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (Gloucester, Mass., 1968).
3. John L. Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1972).

Ms. Kirkley is assistant professor of American church history in Colgate Rochester Divinity School/ Bexley Hall/ Crozer Theological Seminary, Rochester, New York.

After protracted mining, I am happy to say, I did hit pay dirt, and I concluded that although my historian friend was partly right, he was also wrong. I did find nuggets of Protestant Christianity buried in the struggle for woman suffrage, cropping out in veins I did not anticipate and absent where I expected to find them. While religion played a different role in the woman suffrage movement than with other social issues, it did have a significant impact, manifesting itself in at least three ways. First, religion was used in both pro- and antisuffrage arguments, if not as the primary argument, at least as an element. Second, it played an important role in the motivations of individual suffragists. Third, and most important, suffragists made the vote a religious crusade, imbuing it with respectability and righteousness. Their partial success in baptizing woman suffrage as a religious cause shows both the unquestioned dominance of evangelical Protestant Christianity and its power to legitimate a social issue, even an unpopular one. Ultimately, woman suffrage in the South was simultaneously supported and hindered by religion.

At this point a few clarifications are necessary. First, "the South" refers to the states of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Florida, and Louisiana. Of these states only three ratified the Nineteenth Amendment: Arkansas, Kentucky, and Tennessee.⁴ Second, this paper does not address the movement of black women for suffrage.⁵ The leaders of the southern suffrage movement, the people making speeches, writing articles, and leaving diaries that reflected their religious concerns, were overwhelmingly educated, wealthy, white women. Epitomes of the *Southern Lady*, these women had a strong sense of family, prominent social position, and ideas born of privilege.⁶ Their racism was evident in their exclusion of black women from the movement and in their arguments that allowing white women to vote would offset black voting strength and that woman suffrage would not alter voting qualifications for black women.⁷

Third, this paper encompasses the years 1880 to 1920, with a few references to the late 1870s. Although the question of woman suffrage filtered into the South after the Civil War with the influx of Yankees, suffrage associations did not form until the 1880s. After an initial flurry of interest many local and state associations lay fallow until after the turn of the century.

4. Aileen Kraditor, "Tactical Problems of the Woman-Suffrage Movement in the South," *Louisiana Studies* 5 (1966): 307 n. 26.
5. For attitudes of black women toward suffrage, see Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill, 1985), p. 126, chap. 4; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter* (New York, 1984), pp. 123-131, 159-164.
6. See Anne F. Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (Chicago, 1970).
7. While nearly every article on woman suffrage in the South describes the racial issue, see Kraditor, "Tactical Problems," for a helpful, concise discussion.

A radical stand to take in 1880, equal suffrage was almost respectable by the 1910s. By 1913 every southern state had an active suffrage association, most of them affiliated with the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), the group originally founded by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. From 1913 to 1920, as victory seemed imminent, agitation began in earnest and southerners debated the issue in print and in their state legislatures.

1.

Religion figured most obviously in the southern woman suffrage movement in arguments for and against it based on the Bible. While not the first line of defense, both sides did use the Bible to buttress their positions. Antisuffragists turned to Scripture more often than suffragists. However, when suffragists did argue their case from the Bible, they did not attack it as oppressive to women but reinterpreted it to favor woman suffrage. They felt the Bible simply had to be understood correctly to reveal God's true message of equality.

Both suffragist and antisuffragist exegetes grappled with the creation story, confronting what was for them the central issue: did God create women and men equally or not? If God created humanity equally, female subordination became a human invention, not the divine plan. If God purposefully created the sexes differently and unequally, then man's sphere in the world and woman's in the home were divinely ordained and therefore unassailable. Suffragists adopted the former view, agreeing that Eve "may justly be considered the first suffragist."⁸ Virginia Clay-Clopton, president of the Huntsville Equal Suffrage League and later of the Alabama Equal Suffrage League, lyrically described the creation of woman:

When Eve, the first created mother of men sprang into existence, in the full splendor of her youth and beauty fresh from the hand of her Maker imbued with the divine spark that cannot die and dowered with a deathless soul, *surely* she was the perfection of womanhood, endowed with the gift of Life, empowered with physical and mental faculties all & keenly alive awakened to a realization of astounding fact that she was capable of wonderful power of thinking and speaking and acting! There is no record of any restriction as to her social status, no discussion as to Equality or Inequality, no line of demarcation as to position in regard to Adam, the ban of *inferiority* came later from men self-styled "lords of creation" who assumed it without authority from God.⁹

Other suffragists were not as sanguine. While Laura Clay, Kentucky suffrage leader, agreed with Clay-Clopton that "woman like man . . . was made in the image of God, and in the beginning was given coequal status on

8. Virginia Clay-Clopton, undated fragments, Clement C. Clay Papers, Manuscript Collection, Duke University Library, Durham, North Carolina (hereafter cited as CCP).

9. Clay-Clopton, undated address at Alabama Second Equal Suffrage Convention, CCP.

earth," Clay contended that "because of original sin in the Garden of Eden, she lost her privileged place." However, "under the new dispensation opened by Jesus Christ, who made no distinction in the worth of souls, whether male or female," woman regained her Edenic status.¹⁰ Essentially, southern suffragists believed that Christ and the vote would usher in the New Eden. A North Carolina suffragist prophesied, "Let the male and female of God's creating appear. Let us feel the divine energy of spirit bringing us into newness of life and let us stand side by side—equal partners in all that is worth living for—thus shall we stand a new man and a new woman."¹¹

Besides connecting Christ and creation, suffragists supported their arguments with other biblical passages. Because "Jesus Christ was the first Emancipator of Woman," argued Clay-Clopton, woman's "right to Equality is Divine."¹² Belle Kearney, leader of Mississippi suffrage forces, exhorted women: "'Let the oppressed go free,'—into the larger liberty where God meant that all His creatures should *live* and *grow* and *shine*."¹³ Many suffragists referred to biblical characters as evidence of women's political abilities, particularly Deborah and Miriam.¹⁴ With high drama Clay-Clopton recounted the story of Judith, a patriotic young widow who served her country by seducing and beheading an enemy leader. Citing this story "as one signal instance illustrative of the possibilities & capabilities of Woman's work," she challenged her audience to imitate Judith's courage and strength. If "the thousands of clearheaded and noblehearted women of America" united "in one grand resolve," they could accomplish great things, presumably not including widespread male decapitation.¹⁵

Suffragists also turned scriptural passages against their opponents. In answering the claim that Paul's epistles opposed woman suffrage Walter Clark, chief justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court, cleverly argued, "No one will presume to criticise Paul, who was one of the greatest men in our history, but it is permissible to quote what Peter, the chief of the apostles said of him: '*Our beloved brother Paul*' (note the courtesy of this fisherman of Galilee) '*hath said many things hard to be understood, which the ignorant and the unlearned do wrest to their own condemnation.*' 2 Pet., ch. III:15,16."¹⁶

10. Paul E. Fuller, *Laura Clay and the Woman's Rights Movement* (Lexington, 1975), p. 64.

11. *Daily Observer*, Charlotte, North Carolina, 1 November 1914.

12. Clay-Clopton, "Women in Politics," undated address, CCP.

13. Belle Kearney, *A Slaveholder's Daughter* (New York, 1900), p. 42.

14. Elizabeth C. Stanton et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 6 vols. (Rochester, 1881–1922), 5:64, 69 (hereafter cited as *HWS*); *News and Observer*, Raleigh, North Carolina, 3 February 1915, 1 August 1920; Walter Clark, "Ballots for Both," address at Greenville, North Carolina, before the Equal Suffrage League, 8 December 1916, p. 11, Pamphlet Collection, Duke University Library (hereafter cited as *PC*); *Daily Observer*, Charlotte, North Carolina, 11 November 1914.

15. Clay-Clopton, undated address, CCP.

16. Clark, "Ballots for Both," p. 11.

He also quoted the words of Gamaliel in Acts 5:38–39: “Refrain and let them alone; for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to naught. But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it, lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.”¹⁷ Since woman suffrage was of God, it was useless to oppose.

Surprisingly, suffragists did not use Galatians 3:28 to support their claim of woman’s equality. At least two factors explain this absence. First, the claim that “there is neither slave nor free” echoed antebellum abolitionist arguments and hit too close to home in the postbellum, racially stratified South. Suffragists routinely denied the racial implications of women’s enfranchisement. Second, the statement that “there is neither male nor female” threatened southern suffragists. They did not want to erase gender differences, only gender inequality. Having distinct ideas of maleness and femaleness, they did not care to blur the two. They did not want to become men; rather, they reaffirmed their identities as pious, genteel women.¹⁸

To antisuffragists, woman suffrage violated divine creation, which ordained a male-above-female hierarchy which humanity could oppose only at its own risk. Suffragists threatened the divine plan by tampering with the separate spheres God had designed for women and men. Joseph Brown of Georgia summarized this theology when addressing Congress in 1887: “I believe that the Creator intended that the sphere of the males and females of our race should be different, and that their duties and obligations, while they differ materially, are equally important and equally honorable, and that each sex is equally well qualified by natural endowments for the discharge of the important duties which pertain to each, and that each sex is equally competent to discharge those duties.”¹⁹

Some antisuffragists were not as generous as Brown in asserting an “equally honorable” sphere to women as to men. A 1915 pamphlet claimed that “the Bible, as no one will deny, is the basic rock upon which all Christian governments are founded, and the secondary relation of woman is clearly set forth through the entire volume from Genesis to Revelation.”²⁰ In 1920 J. C. McQuiddy of Tennessee argued that “Eve wanted to eat the apple and for that disobedience God had placed woman in the home to bring up children with the ‘understanding’ that ‘thy desire shall be thy husband and he shall rule over thee.’”²¹ A letter to the editor of *Banner* in 1913 bluntly said that

17. Walter Clark, “Equal Suffrage,” address at Richmond, Virginia, 30 January 1914, p. 18, PC.

18. Although I have not examined every southern suffrage tract and speech, no reference to Galatians 3:28 was made in the hundred or so sources I consulted. On the ideal of the evangelical southern woman and the importance of gender differences among southern evangelicals, see Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, pp. 97–124.

19. *HWS*, 4:94.

20. A. A. Lyon, *Suffragettes and Suffragettism*, as quoted in A. Elizabeth Taylor, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Tennessee* (New York, 1957), p. 79.

21. *Gospel Advocate*, 22 July 1920, as quoted in Taylor, *Woman Suffrage Movement*, p. 114.

women “are commanded to be under obedience. To what? To man. God is a man, and made man to rule. We all know that.”²²

From this view of creation antisuffragists deduced woman’s proper place in society. A Mississippi lawyer rhapsodically exhorted woman “to stay where God Almighty had placed her—the queen of the home, the moulder of character, with all of her high privileges and great responsibilities.”²³ In addition to being a wife and domestic queen, according to the southern Presbyterian leader Robert L. Dabney, “God has assigned to her a private sphere sufficiently important and honorable to justify the whole expenditure of angelic endowments: the formation of the character of children.”²⁴ Therefore, the true Christian woman had no time for voting. She was a queen in the home, a princess in the Sunday school, and an angel in the sick room, but participating in public affairs transgressed the law of God. To Dabney and other southern churchgoers, “to allow women access to all careers and the right to the ballot would be dangerous alterations of the divinely ordained hierarchical structure of society.”²⁵ According to an 1899 article in the Southern Baptist *Religious Herald*, if “woman becomes *emancipated* from the care of the young and the making of the home, she has entered into the worst of all bondage, which comes always to every one who disregards the law of his own life. They only ‘walk at liberty’ who have learned to obey the divine precepts, as written in their being.”²⁶

Because antisuffragists spoke only “divine precepts,” they lost no time in denouncing suffragists as un-Christian. J. C. McQuiddy chuckled in 1920, “If any are disposed to find fault with this [antisuffragist] position, they are disposed to complain of the will of God Almighty, and not the will of man; and that is just what Mrs. Catt and the leaders of woman suffrage are doing.”²⁷ One antisuffrage broadside quoted long passages from *The Woman’s Bible* as proof of the heretical, blasphemous notions that woman suffrage would bring to the South: the “freedom of women through the overthrow of the Religion of Christ.”²⁸

Some antisuffragists devised ingenious solutions to the woman suffrage

22. Taylor, *Woman Suffrage Movement*, p. 76.

23. *Clarion-Ledger*, Jackson, Mississippi, 13 September 1890, as quoted in A. Elizabeth Taylor, “The Woman Suffrage Movement in Mississippi, 1890–1920,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 30 (1968): 4.

24. Robert L. Dabney, “The Public Preaching of Women,” *The Southern Presbyterian Review* 30 (1879): 708, as quoted in Rick Nutt, “Robert Lewis Dabney, Presbyterians, and Woman’s Suffrage,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 62 (1984): 343.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 348.

26. *Religious Herald*, 5 January 1899, as quoted in Anne F. Scott, “Women, Religion, and Social Change in the South, 1830–1930,” in *Religion and the Solid South*, ed. Samuel S. Hill, Jr. (Nashville, 1972), p. 104.

27. *Gospel Advocate*, 22 July 1920, as quoted in Taylor, *Woman Suffrage Movement*, p. 114.

28. Broadside, undated, Bennehan Cameron Papers, in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

problem, while others predicted the dire consequences that would result from it. One author creatively suggested the South as a haven for antisuffragists, urging southern men to “continue to be able to afford now and for the future a refuge for the husbands and fathers persecuted by the suffragettes of the West for being men.”²⁹ In the *The Sewanee Review* Robert Holland prophesied that “her rights-ism is simply sex-atheism, and can only generate atheistic minds, though it pray over them a thousand hollow prayers. A Church of rank, order, ceremony, faith, reverence, resignation, has no common term with the character that sees in God’s House only a squatter’s shack of equal tenants, who can be equal only in the squatness of their beliefs.”³⁰ Topping them all for hysterical predictions of the future of female enfranchisement, a Georgia antisuffrage pamphlet stated bluntly that woman suffrage “would eventually lead to the ruin of American homelife; the destruction of our moral code; the lowering of woman’s power and influence; and the final undoing of our government. The women who ask for it are simply the unconscious agents of God’s worst enemies.”³¹

Opponents of suffrage believed they had only to bring God’s judgment upon the apostates. For them, gender was an insuperable barrier. The vote was not only inimical to woman’s performance of her God-ordained role but also destructive of southern society. Giving women the ballot would result in social disintegration as a consequence of disobedience to God. Yet despite their shrill predictions of the downfall of Christianity, antisuffragists did not arouse widespread support with scriptural arguments. Those arguments were but one missile in their rhetorical arsenal and not their most persuasive one.

Despite differences in rhetoric, the assumptions of both suffragists and antisuffragists were surprisingly similar regarding scriptural interpretation. These similarities tended to blur other distinctions between them. Seeking to tip the balance of scriptural authority in their favor, both sides studied the Bible carefully. Eschewing higher criticism, both understood the Bible as inspired by God and literally true. Both saw creation establishing the divine pattern for human society, and both sought to adhere to that pattern. Suffragists declared that pre-Fall Edenic equality was the ideal, while antisuffragists stated that because of Eve’s responsibility for the Fall, God had irrevocably decreed woman’s subordination to man. Both believed that God had a blueprint for Christian society, antisuffragists arguing that it had already been accomplished in the divinely ordained gender hierarchy, suffragists claiming that it could not be realized without woman suffrage.

29. *Daily Observer*, Charlotte, North Carolina, 1 November 1914.

30. Robert A. Holland, “The Suffragette,” *Sewanee Review* 17 (1902): 282.

31. Eugene Anderson, “Unchaining the Demons of the Lower World,” undated pamphlet published in Macon, Ga., as quoted in A. Elizabeth Taylor, “The Last Phase of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Georgia,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 43 (1959): 16.

Although both sides sought scriptural support for their positions, the Bible could not be unequivocally harnessed to buttress one side against the other. In challenging the suffragists the antisuffragists questioned the beliefs of faithful female churchgoers. Suffragists attacked the opinions of church leaders. Both sides found that they could not use scriptural weapons without cutting themselves in the process.

2.

While scriptural arguments reveal a public expression of religion in the suffrage movement, the personal convictions of the suffragists demonstrate its private side. An unscientific survey of woman suffrage leaders in the South reveals their religious affiliation concentrated in the Protestant denominations. A group of twelve suffrage leaders whose childhood or adult religious affiliation could be ascertained yielded five Methodists, three Episcopalians, one Baptist, one Presbyterian, one Quaker, and one Unitarian.³² The number of Methodist women bears out Anne Scott's and Virginia Shadron's speculations on the preponderance of Methodist women in reform movements in general.³³

Suffragists expressed the relationship between their individual convictions and their commitment to suffrage in three ways. First, some women were faithful Christians but were not particularly motivated by their religious convictions in the woman suffrage movement. Committed to both church and suffrage, they nevertheless kept these realms of their lives separate. The best example of this type is Caroline Merrick, Southern Methodist, Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) leader, and first president of the state suffrage association in Louisiana.³⁴ On the one hand, she was a devout Christian, flavoring her writing with evangelical sentiments such as "God knows best" or "O, Lord, forget not these particles in Thy universe,—for we are being tossed to and fro,—and bring us to a resting place some where in Thy eternal kingdom!" On the other hand, she summarized her commitment

32. The Methodists were Sue White (Tenn.), Caroline Merrick (La.), Belle Kearney (Miss.), Gertrude Thomas (Ga.), and during her childhood, at least, Elizabeth Meriwether (Tenn.). The Episcopalians were Laura Clay (Ky.), Madeline Breckinridge (Ky.), and Virginia Clay-Clopton (Ala.). Of the remaining four, Kate Gordon (La.) was a Unitarian, Martha Schofield (S.C.) was a Quaker, Pattie Jacobs (Ala.) Presbyterian, and Elsie Riddick (N.C.) Baptist. I doubt if this sample is representative of woman suffrage workers in general, but only of leaders. Suffrage ranks mirrored the general religious composition of the South, with Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians numerically dominant.
33. Scott, "Women, Religion, and Social Change," pp. 108–109, 120 n. 49; Virginia Shadron, "The Laity Rights Movement, 1906–1918: Woman Suffrage in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South," in *Women in New Worlds*, ed. Hilah F. Thomas and Rosemary S. Keller (Nashville, 1981), pp. 266, 274.
34. Caroline Merrick, *Old Times in Dixie Land* (New York, 1901), p. 8; Edward T. James, ed., *Notable American Women, 1607–1950*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 2:530–531 (hereafter cited as *NAW*).

to woman suffrage by stating that women “are a man-neglected, God-forgotten lot, here in Louisiana, when they ask simply for a reasonable recognition, and justice under the Constitution now being constructed, and under which they must be governed and pay taxes.”³⁵ Both a faithful Methodist and suffragist, she did not connect the two; her religious convictions did not inform her suffrage career. She was motivated by a commitment to justice rather than a commitment to Jesus.

Other suffragists not only separated their religious and social convictions but simultaneously weakened their connection to the church. These women were raised in religious homes but became disillusioned with the church and channelled their energies into woman suffrage. Reverend Samuel L. Morgan, a Baptist minister in North Carolina, described the alienation these women experienced in the church: “I went with Isabella [his wife], Mrs. Fizer, etc.—she the able Cor. Sec. of W.M.C. of S.C.—to confer with the preachers about organizing women of churches for moral reform. The women felt chilled by superior attitude of men. Isabella rightly feels that abler women in the church are likely to revolt from man-made church conventions and give their energies to extra-church movements where women can act and feel free.”³⁶ Unable to reconcile the subordination expected of them in the church with the freedom they felt participating in suffrage activities, some suffragists tried to sever their relationship with the church.

Freethinker Elizabeth Meriwether of Tennessee best represents this type. With devout Methodist parents, Meriwether grew up with daily family prayer, regular church attendance, and circuit-riding preachers staying at her home. Even as child she questioned her parents’ belief in a literal Bible, incurring punishment for her doubt that a loving God would create Satan or that God would love a man who was willing to murder his own son. “As I grew into womanhood,” she reported, “while appealing more and more to my intellect, to my appreciation of their great moral truths, to the wonderful literary skill with which they reveal those truths, the Scriptures commanded less and less of my unquestioning Faith.” She became an atheist, unable to resolve how a “good God would create a human being with the power to feel and to suffer if He knew before creating that being that it’s [*sic*] fate was hell for all eternity.”³⁷

After her youthful rejection of Christian dogma she focused her energies on woman’s rights. In 1871 she voted illegally, and in 1876 she rented a theater in Memphis and addressed the subject of woman’s rights in a free lecture to a “large, if not enthusiastic” audience. She embarked on a suffrage speaking

35. Merrick, *Old Times*, pp. 156, 157; 223–224.

36. Samuel Lewis Morgan diary, 20 June 1919, Samuel Lewis Morgan Papers, in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

37. Elizabeth A. Meriwether, *Recollections of 92 Years, 1824–1916* (Nashville, 1958), pp. 7, 34–35, 20–21; 7–8, 13–14; 35.

tour in New England in 1881 and in Texas and Arkansas in 1883, working with prominent northern suffragists Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Isabella Beecher Hooker. She retained only a minimal relationship with Christianity, attending a Methodist church “occasionally” and enjoying reading the Bible but cautioning, “Do not imagine it is religion that prompts what I am now saying; I can not say that I think God had anything to do with the Bible; it was written by men.” At the age of ninety-two she commented that “it is strange that I, reared by exceptionally orthodox parents, with the example of two good and loving sisters before me, should have so little religious faith, but so it is—not from any wish of mine, but simply because such is the nature of my brain and being.”³⁸

Unlike the first two types, a third group of suffragists experienced a much closer relationship between their religious beliefs and suffrage activity. Fulfilling their deepest religious yearnings, they discovered a ministry working for the divine cause of woman’s rights. Laura Clay and Belle Kearney represent this group. A devout Episcopalian with a “child-like unwavering faith in God and the Bible,” Laura Clay’s “loyalty to and support for her church never wavered.”³⁹ Neither did her conviction that she was called to work for woman’s rights. An 1874 diary entry reads, “To do what I can to help on the great cause of Woman’s Rights seems to be that sphere of activity in His service to which God has called me.”⁴⁰ She served as president of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association and as auditor of the NAWSA.⁴¹ Her faith helped her through setbacks in the campaign because she believed that God “would give suffragists the victory in good time and ‘in the meanwhile for us to doubt would be disloyalty, to falter would be sin.’”⁴² Juxtaposing religion and suffrage, she stated, “I have learned to realize more that this work is God’s cause, . . . and He is the leader of all our campaigns.”⁴³

Belle Kearney’s divine call led her to become a temperance lecturer, president of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association, and a Mississippi state senator, the first woman in the South to hold such an office.⁴⁴ As a teenager she joined the Methodist church, but her faith faltered in the aftermath of the Civil War. At fifteen she “grew to despise Christianity and sneered at every profession of trust in a Supreme Being.” Ten years later, while reading the Bible, she “*found Jesus Christ*,” and felt “‘satisfied’ for the awakening ‘in His likeness’ had come. The hunger was gone. The unrest was

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 220, 225–226; 221–225; 36, 32, 217.

39. Clavia Goodman, *Bitter Harvest: Laura Clay’s Suffrage Work* (Lexington, 1946), p. xv; Fuller, *Laura Clay*, p. 8.

40. Laura Clay diary, 26 July 1874, as quoted in Goodman, *Bitter Harvest*, p. 19.

41. *NAW*, 1:346.

42. Fuller, *Laura Clay*, p. 99.

43. Laura Clay to Harriet Upton, 26 June 1906, as quoted in Goodman, *Bitter Harvest*, p. 48.

44. *NAW*, 2:310.

stilled. The questioning answered. Peace, joyous and ineffable, that the world can neither give nor take away, swept through my being."⁴⁵

After this conversion she dedicated her life to Christian service. Upon hearing Frances Willard in 1889, "a vision arose before me of the glad day when not one woman only, but women of all lands shall have entered into the *human* heritage—as man's equal in society, church, and state." With this vision she consecrated herself as a temperance and suffrage lecturer, preaching in churches and schools throughout the South. As a suffragist she placed her faith in God to lead her ministry, praying, "'Here am I, Lord. Send me!' give me the strength of body and mind and spirit to work for the incoming of Thy Kingdom."⁴⁶

Regardless of how they related personal conviction and suffrage activity, all these women found in suffrage an outlet for religious yearnings. None of them was able to leave evangelical Christianity behind entirely; even the ones who tried tended to reconceive suffrage work in religious terms. The varying relationships between their religious and suffrage activities, as well as the ministry of their suffrage leadership, indicate the depth of evangelicalism's influence in the South. Their stories reveal a powerful manifestation of religion in the southern suffrage movement.

3.

Biblical arguments regarding suffrage and the personal convictions of suffragists constitute the most direct avenues to religion in the movement. Less tangible but more important is the religious quality of the movement, its pervasive flavor of a religious crusade, manifested in several ways. First, woman suffrage in the South had religious roots. Anne F. Scott has traced its heritage to women's missionary groups and the WCTU. In the upheaval after the Civil War southern women began expanding their sphere of activity beyond the home into society. They organized mission groups to save the heathen abroad and moral reform groups to aid the hurting at home. The church may have disapproved of their activities but could hardly censure work done in the name of the Lord. According to Scott, "The postwar church, still preaching Paul's doctrine that women should be silent in the churches and holding firmly to the antebellum image of the southern lady, inadvertently provided Christian women with a road to emancipation."⁴⁷

From local church aid societies women moved to denominational missionary groups and the WCTU and from there to suffrage associations. These groups "provided a school for women leaders of considerable significance in the shaping of southern society and even southern politics in ensuing

45. Kearney, *Slaveholder's Daughter*, pp. 46, 130.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 136, 165, 269.

47. Scott, "Women, Religion, and Social Change," p. 116.

decades.”⁴⁸ Participants developed leadership skills, knowledge of the political system, and the capacity to do their own thinking. In these groups women’s “intense soul searching which had characterized southern religion before the war” was “transformed into a demand for social reform” and inspired “a sort of unself-conscious radicalism which would have turned the conservative southern male speechless if he had taken the trouble to listen to what the ladies were saying.”⁴⁹ According to Scott, “The public life of nearly every Southern woman leader for forty years began in a church society.”⁵⁰

Woman suffrage in the South was particularly affected by the religious tenor of the WCTU. Caroline Merrick wrote that it had a “holy purpose” and established a “religious standard.”⁵¹ Belle Kearney described it as the “golden key that unlocked the prison doors of pent-up possibilities, . . . the generous liberator, the joyous iconoclast, the discoverer, the developer of southern women.” The WCTU led “steadily to the highest pinnacle that can be reached in civil government, namely, the political emancipation of women.” “Knowing that they were fulfilling a divine commission and were backed by the power and love of God,” temperance workers “suffered to carry the blessed tidings of this later dispensation to the souls of the sorrowing and the heavy-laden.”⁵² Women with these sentiments worked in suffrage as well as in temperance, influencing the movement with their enthusiasm.

Second, imbued with this fervor, suffragists sought the support of ministers, desiring to baptize the movement as a religious crusade. Ministerial approval lent credibility and opened lines of communication to large numbers of people. Suffragists collected prosuffrage sermons and solicited endorsements from ministers; in 1902 the NAWSA established a Committee on Church Work to carry out these activities.⁵³ Southern state conventions had similar committees, such as the Bible Study department of the Mississippi suffrage association and the Church Work and Christian Citizenship departments of the Georgia state group.⁵⁴ In 1915 every minister in Kentucky, “‘Roman Catholic, Jewish, Unitarian, and every one representing any Protestant denomination,’ received a letter asking that he use his moral influence and preach at least one sermon for the cause.”⁵⁵

48. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

49. Anne F. Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible* (Urbana, Ill., 1984), p. 215.

50. Scott, “Women, Religion, and Social Change,” p. 110.

51. Merrick, *Old Times*, p. 172.

52. Kearney, *Slaveholder’s Daughter*, pp. 118, 189.

53. Aileen Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890–1920* (New York, 1965), p. 94.

54. *HWS*, 6:328, 123.

55. Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, *Madeline McDowell Breckinridge: A Leader in the New South* (Chicago, 1921), pp. 208–209.

The strategy was effective, for, nationally, “clergymen supported woman suffrage in far greater proportion than did men of any other profession.”⁵⁶ Ministers even opened their pulpits to women suffrage activities. Virginia Young, president of the state association in South Carolina, spoke on the subject in a Baptist church in Marion in 1891.⁵⁷ In 1910 in Kingston, Tennessee, a Methodist Church hosted a woman suffrage debate.⁵⁸ Not only did they open their churches to suffrage meetings, but some ministers involved themselves in the movement. In Biloxi, Mississippi, Belle Kearney organized a suffrage group with a Methodist minister as president.⁵⁹ In 1915 a Universalist minister addressed a May Day suffrage meeting in Atlanta, while a rabbi spoke to a similar demonstration in Richmond.⁶⁰ In Memphis “the influence and aid of sympathetic local political leaders, Protestant ministers, reformed Jewish rabbis, and Memphis newspapers were the most beneficial elements in helping the feminists achieve their final success.”⁶¹

Some ministers, of course, opposed the movement, and suffragists lost no time criticizing their lack of insight. “In addition to sarcasm and ridicule from cartoonists and magazine editors,” a Tennessee writer lamented, “suffragists had to withstand ‘sneers from the pulpit, whence should have come their strongest protection.’”⁶² In 1894 the Arkansas Woman Suffrage Association resolved, “Inasmuch as the churches are largely made up of and supported by women, we think it inconsistent and unkind for ministers to oppose our movement.”⁶³ One minister’s opposition inadvertently promoted the cause. During the NAWSA 1895 convention in Atlanta, a local Baptist minister “felt called upon to denounce all woman suffragists from the pulpit, not only with severity but with discourtesy, and had been so misguided as to declare that the husbands of suffragists were all feeble-minded men.” This attack on their husbands stirred delegates “to a degree of wrath which no amount of abuse leveled against themselves would have aroused.” The local Atlanta hosts, “even those who were not in favor of suffrage, felt mortified by this unprovoked insult to their guests.” At the convention itself several speakers criticized the preacher’s remarks and each time received a rousing round of applause.⁶⁴

56. Kraditor, *Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, p. 94.

57. *HWS*, 4:922.

58. Taylor, *Woman Suffrage Movement*, p. 32.

59. Taylor, “Woman Suffrage Movement in Mississippi,” p. 12.

60. A. Elizabeth Taylor, “Revival and Development of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Georgia,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 42 (1958): 352; *HWS*, 6:666.

61. Grace E. Prescott, “The Woman Suffrage Movement in Memphis: Its Place in the State, Sectional, and National Movements,” *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 18 (1964): 105.

62. Taylor, *Woman Suffrage Movement*, p. 32.

63. A. Elizabeth Taylor, “The Woman Suffrage Movement in Arkansas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 15 (1956):27.

64. *HWS*, 4:237.

Third, besides courting ministerial support and rebuffing attacks, suffragists used religion in their meetings, speeches, and articles. The Mississippi state convention of 1906 invited a Methodist minister to open its meeting with prayer.⁶⁵ At its 1917 and 1918 meetings the Equal Suffrage League of North Carolina opened its sessions with prayer given by its own members.⁶⁶ Suffragists spoke and wrote on religious topics. In 1896 Laura Clay wrote a lecture called "The Bible for Equal Rights," which "became a regular part of her repertoire and was given to church and rural gatherings throughout her career."⁶⁷ Her sister, Sallie Clay Bennett, published an article called "The Authority of Women to Preach the Gospel of Christ in Public Places" in 1903.⁶⁸ In 1898 and 1899 Mississippi suffragists distributed over 300 copies of a pamphlet, "Woman's Place under the Gospel."⁶⁹

Suffragists employed religious imagery as well. The Kentucky Equal Rights Association adopted John 8:31–32 as its motto: "If ye abide in my word . . . ye shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free."⁷⁰ Elizabeth Meriwether composed a "confession of faith" that summarized suffrage demands and sent it to suffrage and temperance groups throughout Tennessee, adding, "The King's business requires haste."⁷¹ In 1911, at the NAWSA convention in Louisville, Mrs. Herbert Mengel proclaimed, "We are ready for a real baptism in the militant spirit, for while we are interested in the growth of suffrage in the South, we have hardly pushed it as we might have done."⁷² Rooted in women's missionary groups and the WCTU, evoked in prayers, speeches, and the desire for ministerial support, evangelical Protestant Christianity permeated the southern suffrage movement. Suffragists worked diligently to achieve an imprimatur from the South's unofficial ecclesial establishment and approval from laity.

4.

The manifestations of religion in the southern suffrage movement suggest some interesting conclusions. While religion did not figure in the dominant arguments for and against suffrage, suffragists and antisuffragists alike used the Bible to strike a resonant chord with their audiences. Scriptural arguments were icing on the cake of the constitutional rhetoric of suffragists and separate spheres ideology of antisuffragists, pressing home the righteousness

65. *Ibid.*, 6:327.

66. Suffrage Association of North Carolina, *Proceedings of the Annual Convention of the North Carolina Equal Suffrage League* (1915, 1917, 1918), pp. 5, 10 (1917), 3 (1918).

67. Fuller, *Laura Clay*, p. 78.

68. Kraditor, *Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, p. 89.

69. Taylor, "Woman Suffrage Movement," p. 9.

70. Fuller, *Laura Clay*, p. 32.

71. *HWS*, 4:928.

72. *Herald*, Louisville, Kentucky, 22 October 1911, as quoted in Carol Guethlein, "Women in Louisville: Moving Toward Equal Rights," *Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 55 (1981): 166.

or ungodliness of suffrage. More central to the movement but more subtle was the role played by suffragists' private convictions. Although they diverged from one another in the precise relationship of their suffrage work to their church affiliation, some relationship existed, a strong one for those women who felt called to become suffrage evangelists. The most significant expression of religion occurred as suffragists sought to wage a religious crusade. They intentionally and explicitly sought the sanction of ministers to win more souls to the cause.

These uses of religion indicate the power of Protestant Christianity in the South as a legitimating force. Religion added credibility to a movement that was perceived with suspicion. Not only was woman suffrage associated with Yankee abolitionism, but it opened the possibility of black women voting. By connecting it with religion suffragists hoped to defuse it of those connotations. They appealed to the Bible and to organized religion and thus established equal suffrage as a credible social movement. They did not critique the church but appropriated it. By identifying their cause with religion they increased its acceptability and in the process gave it a decidedly conservative cast. This strategy worked to gain a greater public hearing for an unpopular cause.

Yet southern suffragists were not devious; they did not plan to co-opt religion to their cause for sinister reasons. Most suffragists were sincere Christians who believed that suffrage either was divinely sanctioned or at least did not conflict with their beliefs. Their Christian convictions motivated them to work for a cause in which they believed, and enmeshing that cause with those convictions is understandable. Seeking religious legitimization for suffrage in the strongly Christian South made sense for both personal and political reasons. Although antisuffragists perceived them as threatening the very fabric of southern society, suffragists did not challenge the authority of God or the Bible, because they believed in that authority and wanted to show its confirmation of their cause.

At the same time this strategy did not jeopardize their privileged status. Southern suffragists remained true Southern Ladies, "described by their contemporaries as beautiful, charming, poised, intelligent, and brave."⁷³ They also embodied Christian devotion, since "precisely the virtues which were attributed to the perfect woman were those demanded of the perfect Christian."⁷⁴ In working for the vote they did not alter the stereotype of the ideal Christian white woman. Instead, they helped create a climate of respectability that attracted other Christian white women.

To that extent they succeeded. Through the legitimating power of religion they did create a climate in which to advocate woman suffrage was not a radical idea but a cause that a respectable lady might adopt and act on its

73. Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible*, p. 214.

74. Scott, "Women, Religion, and Social Change," p. 94.

behalf in a ladylike way. But to another extent, of course, they failed. Despite their wholehearted efforts they did not gain widespread support, at least among state legislatures. Only three southern states (and border states at that) ratified the Nineteenth Amendment.

Yet even this failure points to the power of religion in the South. Evangelical Protestantism was so well entrenched by the end of the nineteenth century that the suffrage movement could not shake its stranglehold. Woman suffrage did not threaten the southern way of life to the extent that earlier social issues had, such as slavery. No antisuffrage ethic developed; no Civil War was fought over women voting.⁷⁵ Compared to their involvement in slavery, southern churches did not take a united stand on woman suffrage. Religious arguments did not have to be vehemently made, because the issue did not shake the foundations of southern culture, the predictions of antisuffragists notwithstanding.

Strong religious opposition to woman suffrage did not arise because evangelical Protestantism maintained strong, unchallenged views of women. Ironically, suffragists perpetuated these views in their lack of critique of the church, their efforts to gain its support, and their allegiance to the ideal of the southern woman. As long as women continued to pack the pews each Sunday, religious leaders did not worry. Suffrage leaders, trying to win popular and legislative support for their movement, certainly did not advocate rebellion from ecclesiastical authority; instead, they wooed it. Motivated by their own convictions, they rightly saw religion as a key determinant of southern values and tried to take advantage of it. Apparently, they realized their failure to garner its unambivalent support, in that their most frequent arguments sounded judicial and human rights themes rather than religious ones.

Religion, then, played a significant role in the southern suffrage movement, both positively and negatively. On the one hand, religion supported the cause: legitimating it, attracting pious women, and gaining a wider hearing for a suspect issue. Christian women expressed their sincere belief that the Bible demanded equality by waging a religious crusade for suffrage. On the other hand, religion undermined the struggle for suffrage. Preached from evangelical pulpits, divinely ordained gender inequality was so deeply rooted in the South that suffragists could not overturn it. Ultimately, suffragists were in a no-win situation. Legitimizing suffrage by linking it with Christianity meant not attacking the assumptions of the latter. But if suffragists had rejected religion outright, claiming woman's rights inevitably contradicted the Bible, they would have repudiated the single most important source of authority to southerners. Although flawed, the strategy they chose reflected not only the best way they saw to win popular and legislative support but also their personal convictions that "this work is God's cause."

75. On the development of the slaveholding ethic and its relationship to southern religion, see Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, pp. 136–184.