Abolition and Women's Rights

Summary: *In the first decades of the 1800s, a growing coalition of Protestants made arguments grounded in scripture for the abolition of slavery. This group laid the foundation for later social movements, including the Women's Rights Movement. Although cooperation between churches gave momentum to these campaigns, political and religious arguments also led to internal divisions, often along racial and geographic lines.*

Both the movements for the abolition of slavery and for women's rights were powerful expressions of 19th century Protestant moral reform. A few Christians raised protests against slavery prior to the Revolution, but many more began to question its compatibility with Christianity in light of the political ideals enshrined in America's founding documents and the advocacy of Africans Americans themselves. Early antislavery advocates began to call for gradual emancipation, sometimes linking emancipation to the repatriation of slaves to Africa. Strong critics like the Black Bostonian David Walker sounded a more prophetic note with denunciations of the hypocrisy of American Christianity and slavery.

The abolitionist movement gained momentum in the North in the 1830s with calls for immediate emancipation. Black abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, white evangelicals like Theodore Dwight Weld, and white religious radicals like William Lloyd Garrison led a broad coalition that sought to convince churches that slavery was a sin and to enlist them in the antislavery cause. The success of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, aided the movement by creating a sympathetic portrait of slaves, which, while patronizing, appealed to the moralistic sentimentality that typified the piety of much of the Protestant middle class.

The antislavery movement created major divisions in American Christianity, prefiguring the civil war toward which the nation was moving. Methodists split along north/south lines in 1844 over the question of whether a slaveholder could be a bishop. Similar controversies led to a split among Baptists in the following year. Other churches witnessed the emergence of pro- and antislavery splinter groups, while the Catholic, Episcopal, and Lutheran churches deliberately remained as removed from controversy as possible, although the latter two would also experience fractures. Most churches never unambiguously denounced slavery, and full emancipation came only as the result of the Civil War. But the role of Christian leaders and organizations in the fight against slavery nonetheless provided an inspiration for Protestant social reformers later in the century.

The Women's Rights Movement also grew out of a fusion of Enlightenment ideals and Protestant moral reform. Many women joined the abolitionist ranks only to be excluded from leadership roles in some antislavery organizations. This led a small group to convene the "Woman's Rights Convention" in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York. In subsequent decades, the movement grew into a coalition of theological liberals such as Susan B. Anthony and evangelicals such as Frances Willard. The prohibition of alcohol, a goal favored my many female activists, was achieved with the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919. And women's suffrage, another central goal of the movement, was achieved with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

The ordination of women was also an outgrowth of the Women's Rights Movement. In 1853, Congregationalist Antoinette Brown Blackwell became the first woman to be ordained in the United States. However, few other churches followed this example. Continued Christian resistance to women's rights led Elizabeth Cady Stanton to publish *The Woman's Bible*, a pioneering work of feminist criticism. A much broader movement for women's ordination and a more systematic feminist critique of Christian practice came only during the second half of the 20th century.