THESIS

"GOD MAKES USE OF FEEBLE MEANS SOMETIMES, TO BRING ABOUT HIS MOST EXALTED PURPOSES": FAITH AND SOCIAL ACTION IN THE LIVES OF EVANGELICAL WOMEN IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

"GOD MAKES USE OF FEEBLE MEANS SOMETIMES, TO BRING ABOUT HIS MOST EXALTED PURPOSES": FAITH AND SOCIAL ACTION IN THE LIVES OF EVANGELICAL WOMEN IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

Historians of women's history and of African American religious history interpret Evangelical Christian theology in widely differing ways. Women's historians often have emphasized its complicity with the socially conservative, repressive forces with which women's rights proponents had to contend as they sought the betterment of American society. Historians of African American women and religion tend to highlight Christianity's liberating role and potential in the African American experience. These different historiographical emphases prompt reconsideration of religious conservatism and its effect on social activism, particularly as refracted through the lens of race and gender. Considering the ubiquity of Christian religiosity in the rhetoric, the epistemology and the moral culture that informed social discourse in nineteenth-century America, individual religious belief and its effect on women's social activism as they sought to define and expand their role in American society is an important element of historical analysis and deserves much greater attention by the scholarly community.

This thesis is an attempt to draw together themes from various bodies of historiography in order to clarify the interconnectedness of religious belief, gender roles, and race relations in the history of the United States. It examines the lives and beliefs of ten American women, white and black, who adhered to the commonplace, conventional theology of Protestant Evangelicalism and who engaged in the reformist tendencies of the nineteenth century. During the nineteenth century, Protestant Evangelical Christianity became a socially useful and politically relevant

means of integrating faith and daily life in the context of an evolving ideology of human rights, and served as a path through which Americans, both white and black, were able to appropriate and make effective use of the individual authority that had been idealized in the rhetoric of the American Revolution. Although the actions of nineteenth-century Evangelical women were not always intended to bring about political change, their collective embodiment of an outwardly-focused, socially-active Evangelical faith contributed momentum to the creation of a pattern of discourse within which marginalized Americans of later generations operated as they pressed for legal and political equality as American citizens. This thesis, by examining the ways in which the faith of conservative, Evangelical women empowered them to effect positive change in their own and others' lives, revisits the issue of religious conservatism and its effect on social activism, probing the question from the angle of empowerment rather than from limitation.

DEDICATION

To my children, with confidence that God, by His grace,
is bringing about His most exalted purposes through them.

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Introduction

Following the creation of the United States, American society experienced multi-faceted social reform and religious change which, along with a newly formulated and only partially applied notion of human rights, affected nearly every social relationship in the now independent former colony. Reflecting the adolescent status of the new nation in relation to its British political parent, the early national period was characterized by a search for and consolidation of a unique national identity.[1] Individually and corporately, Americans, especially those living in the roughly one hundred year period surrounding the founding decade of the United States, had to wrestle with how to apply ideals enshrined in the American founding documents to specific circumstances, to work them out in the concrete reality of their own lives as well as in the abstract as a national community. Inevitably, different regional, religious, racial, gender, and class contexts complicated this application.

The lived experience of identity construction, while it was shared in the broadest sense, was profoundly diverse. For some, the benefits of the American Revolution were immediate. For others, they were non-existent, or at least unclear. White men during the American Revolution, for example, by throwing off the structures of power which formerly had bound them in a patriarchal relationship to their civic rulers, assumed a new authority in relation to a state that was "of, by, and for the people." But for their wives and daughters, political independence from Britain provided little immediate change to the patriarchal structures which they encountered in their own homes and which excluded them from direct participation in their new government.[2]

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[1] Kerriann Yakota, Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary American Became a Postcolonial Nation (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[2] Linda Kerber, No Constitutional Right to be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 32.

Similarly, for non-white men and women, especially those who were enslaved, the notion of human rights and political independence meant next to nothing since the Constitution validated the idea of racial inequality by making provisions for maintaining the institution of slavery. The very nature of identity construction, however, means that the process of figuring out and refining the salient features of identity continues through time, and over the course of American history most of these inconsistencies between ideology and application were noted and contested. In fact, the United States can perhaps best be understood historically as a body of people who have grappled with the meaning of America's political ideals as they were particularized in different American contexts over time.[3]

Much of the diversity of experience in this process of constructing an American national identity centered on the issue of an individual's relationship to authority in all of its social incarnations. Drawing on the Enlightenment ideal of autonomy, or individual self-rule, the framers of the new American government crafted an American ideal in which the autonomous individual was the *raison d'être* for the new government.[4] In a government "of, by, and for the people" every individual citizen could participate directly in the governance of the nation, rather than having decisions made by authority figures higher in the social hierarchy. While a government of autonomous individuals was the ideal, the reality was that with many of the hierarchical structures of the colonial era still in place, those who were not considered heads of families had an indirect, mediated relationship to the state. Nevertheless, the universal language

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[3] Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007). Hereafter referred to as *Human Rights.* See pp. 116-126 for Hunt's analysis of how the framers of the new American government had to negotiate the difficult task of particularizing universal language when they declared the existence of human rights in the context of the new nation.

[4] For a fuller discussion of the role of autonomy in the framing of human rights language see Hunt, *Human Rights*, 27-29.

used in the American founding documents made room for questioning such inconsistencies between reality and the vaunted ideal, as has been done throughout American history.[5]

As the American national identity took shape and its high-flown political rhetoric worked itself out in real time, the relationship of individuals to each other and to institutions of church and state inevitably changed as more and more classes of individuals contested their exclusion from citizenship and its benefits. Such contestation, which sometimes was overt and sometimes was not, took place in the personal relationships and social structures through which individuals experienced hierarchy and authority: as citizens in relation to a government "of, by, and for the people," as wives and husbands, as slaves and slaveholders, as congregants and pastors. However, the changes that came about were slow in coming. The Enlightened political language of the founding documents proclaimed the leveling of "all men" to equals, but most Americans in the years immediately following the Revolutionary period experienced little real change in their circumstances. Patriarchal authority figures in the early national period retained their authority in relation to those over whom they had authority, and to a large degree gained even more authority as they took on the role of autonomous political actors in relation to the state.[6] For this reason, for Americans who were somewhat less than immediate beneficiaries of the human rights rhetoric that drove the American Revolution, any leveling that would include them within the scope of people considered to be free and equal was more vigorously contested and harder won than a simple reading of the documents would suggest. Nevertheless, increasing

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[5] Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (1984):620-647, accessed March 31, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1856119. Baker summarizes and analyzes the inchoate nature of the United States political system as it existed in the years surrounding the American Revolution, highlighting the role that women played in the political life of the maturing nation.

[6] Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies*, 32.

numbers of previously "unimaginable" citizens were able, over the course of American history, to carve out a space for themselves in the "imagined community" of the United States.[7]

Women, and perhaps especially black women, offer an interesting avenue through which to explore the changing nature of the individual experience of authority during the first century of the American nation. At the beginning of the American nation as such, women were not considered viable candidates for citizenship in the newly declared nation because of their subordinate role in the patriarchal family. But by the middle of the nineteenth century, this idea was being challenged in myriad ways, not only ideologically, but legally as well. A woman's rights movement demanded greater equality for women in the home, the professions, the church, and civil society. Laws reflecting this contestation of women's role in the civic body, such as women having achieved the franchise in 1920, indicated that overall women's circumstances were quite different by the twentieth century than they had been 150 years earlier at the founding of the nation.

Though these changes were true for black as well as white women, racial considerations greatly affected how black women experienced them in particular. At the time of the American Revolution, the majority of black Americans, male and female, were enslaved. But, in steps – excruciatingly incremental ones – their enslavement gave way to the moral demand to expunge the hypocrisy inherent to a society that proclaimed "all men are created equal" even as it deemed enslaved people to be a mere three-fifths of a person. Though legal freedom was a vast improvement on legal enslavement, Black women nevertheless were forced by entrenched racial

[7] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). Anderson's notion of an *imagined community* has become indispensable to current thinking about national identity issues and Lynn Hunt makes a convincing case for a sliding scale of conceivability regarding to whom human rights applied in Chapter 4, '"There Will Be No End of It': The Consequences of Declaring," in *Human Rights*, 146-175.

prejudice to wait nearly a half century longer than white women did to reap the benefits of the more general changes in women's social circumstances. They had been granted the right to vote along with white women in 1920, but most black women in the South were denied access to the ballot box because of their race. It was not until the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s that black women began to gain significant access to educational, professional, and political opportunity.

As the patriarchal structures of the colonial era shifted to accommodate the American ideal of autonomous individual citizens, and the scope of the ideal expanded to include women, women's use and experience of authority changed. Though the ramifications of these changes were still being contested by the late twentieth century, the trajectory of ever-greater gender and racial parity from an initial position of exclusion prompts the question of how women throughout the nineteenth-century experienced, negotiated, and appropriated authority in the social relationships that were being reconfigured during their lifetimes.

While the transformation in American women's circumstances that occurred between the founding era and the twentieth century is often thought about in terms of rights, and is often framed as a journey away from religiously-influenced constraint toward secularly-informed free participation in the polity, the well-documented role of Christian sensibilities in motivating American women to press for the moral and social reforms that led eventually to changes in women's political and legal status prompts a reassessment of the extent to which religious and secular impulses converged or diverged in women's lives.[8] Much of the historiographical attention that is given to the religiosity of nineteenth-century America focuses on a generic

[8] One example of religion being framed as an essentially "conservative," i.e. restraining, force in the "progress" toward increased secular rights for women is Kathi Kern, *Mrs. Stanton's Bible* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001). See pp. 84-85 in particular.

Christian moralism rooted in a common Protestant heritage. What seems to be less studied and less understood is the way in which particular religious beliefs or sets of beliefs may have influenced either individual or collective social action. More often than not, when a historian or sociologist sets out to study the role of religion, religious beliefs are studied much less than religious ritual and other outward indicators of religious practice.[9] Whether this neglect of the role of belief in influencing human behavior results from the difficult nature of analyzing such an intensely personal aspect of living or whether it results more from a latent scholarly bias against lending credence to a worldview that accepts the existence of the supernatural, the fact is that what an individual believes influences that individual's behavior.[10]

This fact in relation to the significant part that American women played in contesting and redefining the definition of citizenship during the reform-minded nineteenth century prompts the question of the role that particular religious beliefs themselves may have played in the lives and in the thinking of women whose religiosity and its connection to their social activism has been noted, but not sufficiently explored. In particular, considering how important the questioning, negotiating, and appropriating of various forms of social authority was to this process of contesting the political and social status quo, what was the relationship of individual women's religious beliefs first, to the ways in which these women engaged in social action and secondly, how they experienced and confronted authority as they did so?

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[9] Robyn L. Driskell and Larry Lyon, "Assessing the Role of Religious Beliefs on Secular and Spiritual Behaviors," *Review of Religious Research* 53, no. 4 (2011): 386-404, accessed May 6, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23055568. Driskell and Lyon conclude that both secular and religious behaviors are influenced to a large extent by religious beliefs, and call for more research exploring the connection in greater detail.

[10] Also see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), especially Chapter 3 "Translating Life-Worlds into Labor and History," 72-96, for an extended critique of Western, secular, academic thinking which, influenced by Enlightenment thought, generally accepts that history is a continuum of development, with modernization being the equivalent of "progress" made as people and systems become increasingly reasonable. Such a system of thought has a difficult time accounting for "anachronisms" such as superstition and religious beliefs existing alongside modernization, yet defying the "reason" that makes modern progress possible.

This thesis attempts both to deepen our understanding of the connection between inward, religious belief and outward, secular action in the lives of nineteenth-century American women and to prompt greater scholarly consideration of the nuances of meaning that religious beliefs contribute to human behavior. Although both white and black women figure in this study, the majority of women under consideration are African American. Of the reasons for this focus, not least of which is a relative richness of sources thanks to recent interest in African American women's history, some of the most important have to do with the state of historiography on the topics of women's history, African American history, and American religious history.[11]

First, women are of particular interest in the question of how active American citizenship came to be redefined from consisting only of propertied white males to include all competent adult Americans without regard to class, sex, or race. Women, and perhaps black women especially, were remarkably effective in negotiating for themselves positions of ever greater authority as actors in the public sphere and, as a result, gaining increasing legitimacy as full citizens of the United States. Considering the fact that inconsistencies between American political ideals and social reality still exist, however, and that change is both desirable and possible, it behooves students of history to give careful attention to the ideological and religious mechanisms which contributed to women's success in pressing for and achieving significant social change over time. One purpose of this thesis is to examine connections between religion and ideology as they played out in the lives of women who, in spite of – or perhaps because of – their commonplace, conventional religious beliefs were instrumental in effecting great change in the world around them.

[11] Many of the primary sources have been made available for research through the efforts of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in editing and publishing the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers.

A second reason for the focus on women, and black women in particular, is that within the historiography of women's history there is a certain measure of ambiguity surrounding the role of religiosity in women's social activism and their path to secular rights. Some historians of women's history are inclined to think that religion was more constraining than it was empowering for women.[12] Others, particularly historians of the African-American experience find that religion was on the whole a very positive element of women's lives and was a decisive factor in the struggle for civil rights.[13] While this might be merely a difference of historical interpretation among historians who have different biases or emphases, it is also possible that there were in fact essential differences between the religious experiences of American women of different races and thus measurable differences in how individual faith may have affected women's ideology and their social activism. If black women were particularly empowered by religion in a less ambiguous way than were white women, what factors may have contributed to this difference in experience? If this divergence of women's historical experience is in fact more than a problem of historiographical interpretation, this thesis will attempt to plumb the possible reasons that religion and civic activity had a different relationship when considered in the context of race.

Finally, this thesis focuses on the connection between religious beliefs and social action as experienced in the lives of women of different races because of two particular weaknesses in the historiography of American religion. Although there has been no lack of interest in women's role in and experience of religion in America among historians of women, by and large women

[12] Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *Women and Religion in Early America, 1600-1850* (London: Routledge, 1999) is one example of a study that highlights the ambiguity of Christian religiosity in the history and the lives of American women. See in particular Chapter 9, "Voices and Silence: Women, the Spirit, and the Enlightenment," 174-82.

[13] See, for example, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

are little more than minor players in most "mainstream" historical analyses of religion in America. "Women's history" remains its own separate category, often either ignored or, if included, seeming to be almost an afterthought.[14] Additionally, though there is a large body of secondary literature on American religion and an equally extensive body of research on African American religious history, there seems to be little communication between the two. This thesis is an initial attempt at drawing together themes from these various bodies of historiography in order to clarify the interconnectedness of religious belief, gender roles, and race relations in the history of the United States.

The women in this study embody two aspects of American history characteristic of nineteenth-century America. First, these women were devout Christians, each of whose particular faith can be categorized as a version of Evangelical Protestantism. Though not all Americans were Evangelical, or even Christians, Evangelical Christianity particularly suited the tastes and the tenor of the age: it was confident, individualistic, charismatic, and remarkably amenable to republican ideology. Though it began on the fringes of America's formidable eighteenth-century religious establishment, it quickly became mainstream in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and by mid-century constituted "the principal subculture" of American society.[15] By reason of their Evangelical faith and in spite of the fact that they each were exceptional in some way, the women under consideration in this study are representative of a significant portion of the antebellum American population. Embracing the same conventional faith and moral values of many other less exceptional and yet still devoutly Evangelical

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[14] Catherine A. Brekus, "Introduction: Searching for Women in Narratives of American Religious History," in *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*, ed. Catherine A. Brekus (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1-50. Pp. 2-8 in particular address the routine exclusion of women from accounts of religious history written by historians other than those specializing in women's history.

[15] Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), xv.

Americans, they illuminate our understanding of the more conventional, conservative aspects of the American populace.

In character with the reform-minded era in which they lived, these women also engaged in some form of extra-domestic activity through which they engaged with the people and the issues of their time, bringing their own religious beliefs to bear on the problems they faced as Americans and as women. The kinds of activity represented in this thesis vary from woman to woman, and include everything from writing novels and memoirs to teaching or engaging in itinerant preaching and giving abolitionist lectures. These and other activities that reached beyond the concerns of day-to-day existence constituted an avenue through which women challenged conventional notions of their own place in society as well as their proper relationship to social authority.

Following an introductory overview of the historiography and the issues relevant to the current study, this thesis will consider the writings of ten American women whose lives spanned the years 1732-1914. The chapters, which follow a roughly chronological course from the mid-eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century, also are informed by the spiritual chronology of faith as understood in Protestant Evangelical theology. In this conception of spiritual biography, sinfulness and the brokenness of human life is assumed. However, at some point in a person's life he or she experiences conversion, in which unbelief is exchanged for faith, and a life of sin and brokenness for a life of holiness. The authenticity and power of an individual's converting faith is proved throughout the rest of their lives by their ongoing pursuit of holy living. An active life of faithful works proves not only the genuineness of that person's faith, it also speaks to the faithfulness of God in granting his people victory over sin and reassures believers of God's promise of eventual final victory even over death. In this sense, the

purposeful living resulting from Evangelical faith is a witness to the personal, relational quality of a believer's standing with God. Though participation in religious ritual is a part of living any Christian life, the essence of Evangelical faith is not an emphasis on outward form but rather its intensely personal, experiential nature which makes each individual something of an authority on his or her own faith. Such a high view of individual experience contributes to a characteristic self-confidence through which Evangelical believers have authority based on experiential knowledge and thus can challenge interpretations of scripture and of life which differ from their own understanding of it.

Though religious sects that drew on a common Christian heritage abounded in nineteenth-century America, this study focuses specifically on women who remained within Evangelical denominations that were established prior to the nineteenth century: Baptist, Methodist, and Methodist Episcopal Churches, as well as the more traditional Presbyterian, Congregational and Episcopal Churches. The only exception is the African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in 1821 as a response to racist policies enacted within the Methodist Episcopal denomination.[16] The reason for this focus on the older, more established versions of Evangelicalism is that this study seeks to tease out the connections between relatively conservative religious beliefs and the reform-mindedness that characterized much of the nineteenth century. In this study, such beliefs will be referred to as orthodox, conservative, and conventional. Although the usage of these terms has been and will continue to be debated by the academic and Christian communities, for the purposes of this thesis they will stand as representatives of the four Evangelical doctrinal emphases that have remained relatively constant

[16] For fuller discussion of the history and founding of the AME Church see Rita Roberts, *Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform in Northern Black Thought, 1776-1863* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010).

since Evangelicalism's inception during the Protestant Reformation: *bibliocentrism*, *crucicentrism*, *conversion*, and *activism*.[17] Also, because of this denominational and doctrinal specificity, the term Evangelical will be capitalized since it denotes a particular subset of Protestantism and is not merely a descriptor referring to a sect's propensity for evangelism, or the act of proselytizing,

While the women in this study lived at different points in time, and their respective social contexts inflected the ways in which they understood and practiced their theology, the Evangelical faith they held in common lent them an essential similarity in spite of their vast social and chronological differences. For this reason, the chapters of this thesis are organized according to a chronological, yet thematic structure that takes into account these women's religious commonality. Chapter 1, entitled "Beginnings: Acquiring Perspective and Living by Faith in a Broken World," takes as a starting point that the reality of life for most of the women in this study was not particularly pleasant. Some were former slaves. Some were powerless in the face of difficult economic, social, or marital circumstances. All were aware of aspects of their world that could be better. This chapter discusses the ways in which these women experienced and defined a broken world, and the resulting perspective from which their faith and subsequent social action took shape. In particular, it demonstrates a transformation from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century in which the Evangelical ethos of action shifted from an inward to an outward orientation and believers began to see themselves as instruments used of God to work his will in the world.

The chapter begins by exploring the life and experiences of a woman named Abigil Abbot Bailey whose life overlapped the turn of the nineteenth century and whose experiences

[17] David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain:: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

encapsulate the nature of the change that took place in how Evangelical theology was understood and applied from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. With Abigail serving as a pivotal figure through which to explore this change in the Evangelical ethos, the rest of the chapter is a roughly chronological survey of women who lived both before and after Abigail, and whose experiences demonstrate both continuity and change in American Protestant Evangelical Christianity. Though all of these women used similar Evangelical terminology to describe and understand their world, its imperfection, and their solution to the brokenness they experienced and observed, specific terms and concepts took on novel meanings and uses as Evangelical women attempted to live out their faith in the context of antebellum America.

Chapter Two, "Conversion and the Individual: Negotiating Authority Structures and Living the Faith" takes up the question of why and how this transformation in the Evangelical ethos came about, focusing particularly on the atomization of religious authority that was engendered by the Second Great Awakening and that gave women and other marginalized Americans space to appropriate and utilize personal authority derived from a sense of the equality of all before God. Central to the changes in how women used and applied Evangelical theological concepts was a latent individualism in the Evangelical understanding of conversion that was allowed fuller expression in the social and political landscape of nineteenth-century America. Though in both the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manifestations of Evangelicalism believers were called to take action in a way that proved the authenticity and power of their conversion, the context of the nineteenth century prompted Evangelical believers, particularly women, to experience and act on this call in a more public, and often more organized way than their eighteenth-century forbears had done. Whereas faithful Christian action of the eighteenth century was characterized by an internal cultivation of submission to the will of God,

faithful action in the nineteenth century more closely resembled being a willing instrument in the hand of God. Fired by this divine authorization to act in the world, women of all races and classes were empowered to confront and combat injustice when and where they encountered it.

Chapter Three, "Activism and Identity: Considerations of Faith, Race, and Literacy in the Consolidation of the Self," explores American women's social engagement, particularly via a literary path, as refracted through the lenses of race and Evangelical faith. Not only were their identities and their faith affected by the social realities of racial division and prejudice, their use of literacy as Evangelical believers reflected the fact that all aspects of life were filtered through social expectations and proscriptions based on the color of a person's skin. Nevertheless, in spite of considerable racial, social, and economic differences, and the resulting differences of perspective, women of different races who embraced the Evangelical faith not only found an identity that affirmed their humanity and equality, they also were empowered by that identity to live out their faith confidently, and by their faithful obedience to the call to action which that faith entailed, to effect positive change in their world.

Contrary to a typical historiographical assumption that conventional Protestant theology embraced by nineteenth-century American women led them to live conventional, even repressed, lives, I argue throughout this thesis that class, race, and denominational differences notwithstanding, Protestant Evangelical Christianity became a uniquely effective ideological tool that allowed a significant portion of nineteenth-century American women to construct for themselves a more authoritative, and thus increasingly legitimate identity as members of the American body politic. While this was true for American women of both African and European descent, the Evangelical form of Christianity was particularly meaningful and powerful in the lives of black American women, giving them both the rationale and the confidence to assert their

rightful place in a society that systematically disadvantaged them. Though many of the women in this study lived exceptional lives, the Evangelical theology that they embraced was unexceptional for the time and in fact reflected the kind of faith embraced by a considerable portion of Americans. This faith was inflected, however, by the social realities through which women on opposing sides of the American racial divide had to navigate as they embodied a Christian faith in the context of Antebellum America. While for most of these women, as for other Americans who professed a similar faith, the process of identity construction was primarily an exercise of private Evangelical faith, by its very nature, their personal pursuit of holy living had public as well as private ramifications.[18] And though the social change that many of them envisioned remained incomplete, their individual lives, which reflected deeply personal religious beliefs, collectively led to a fundamental reworking of the way in which successive generations of Americans envisioned, contested, and understood both the public and private aspects of the American national identity.

Dilemmas in the Historiography of American Women's History

It is well established in the historiography of American women's history that religiosity in the form of a common Christian moral sensibility was a catalyst for many of the social reform movements that characterized the nineteenth century.[19] However, within this body of research, there is a tendency to attribute much of that catalyzing effect to secularizing, radicalizing

[18] An excellent case study of Evangelicalism's potential for social change is Randy J. Sparks, *On Jordan's Stormy Banks: Evangelicalism in Mississippi, 1773-1876* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994).

[19] For example, Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Women's Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement, 1830-1870* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2000) provides an overview of how social reform movements, particularly abolitionism and women's rights, took shape from a blending of Christian-based morality and secular enlightenment thinking. Also, Sylvia Hoffert, *When Hens Crow: The Woman's Rights Movement in Antebellum America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995) offers a similar argument but focuses her analysis on the nature of rights rhetoric, which borrowed ideas and terminology from Christianity, Enlightenment philosophy, and Romanticism.

impulses that drew reformers and activists away from the more orthodox iterations of Christian theology. Examples of scholarship in which secularization is a key interpretive device abound. Kathryn Kish Sklar in *Women's Rights Emerges within the Anti-Slavery Movement, 1830-1870*, for instance, describes how women reformers of the nineteenth century, beginning with abolitionists Sarah and Angelina Grimké, initially used religious rhetoric to justify women's right to an expanded role in public life. However, in successive generations of women reformers rights rhetoric transitioned to a combination of secular legal and Enlightenment ideas which, while creating an argument that was quite effective, undid the religious moorings of the woman's rights movement.[20]

Sylvia Hoffert makes a similar argument in *When Hens Crow*, pointing to a gradual move away from female public activism characterized by selfless benevolence toward a more individualistic model that combined elements of the Common Sense School of philosophy and Romanticism. The difference that Hoffert identifies between the former benevolent actions of women in missionary and other charitable societies and the goals and actions of the later women's rights activists was a rejection of the religiously-inspired selfless ideal. Rather, drawing on the ideals of Scottish philosophers, women reformers embraced the individualistic idea that pursuing self-interest resulted in social good as long as one's actions did not stray into selfishness. This new, philosophically-driven rather than religiously-inspired model of activism allowed women not only to construct a framework for critiquing the social status quo, but also to assert that by nature women were uniquely qualified to contribute to society and its pursuit of progress.[21]

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[20] Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Women's Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement, 1830-1870: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2000).

[21] Sylvia Hoffert, *When Hens Crow: The Woman's Rights Movement in Antebellum America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

Though religion is only a minor consideration in their research, John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman trace a similar path away from a religious basis for society toward an increasing secularism in *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. D'Emilio and Freedman argue that sexuality during the colonial era was organized around a reproductive paradigm regulated by the family, the church, and the community, but under increased social pressure from a changing economic market and a move toward ever greater individualism this reproductive paradigm began to fragment during the nineteenth century. Social reformers distressed by extra-marital and commercial sex sought to inculcate self-regulation of sexuality through changes in the institution of the family, but they simultaneously turned toward social and political action as well. In doing so, they began to recruit the powers of the state for further – and perhaps more comprehensive – regulation than had occurred when sexuality was regulated by church and family.[22]

As in D'Emilio and Freedman's and Sylvia Hoffert's analyses¸ the role of religion is understated in several histories dealing with women, gender relations, and political change throughout American history. However, a general reliance on a trajectory of increasing secularism remains a dominant feature of most of them. Even Mary P. Ryan's seminal *Cradle of the Middle Class*, which explores in detail the question of religion's role in the formation of the nineteenth-century's ethos of social reform, indicates an underlying assumption that although religiosity had a great deal of importance as the initial impetus for women's social activism and eventual feminism there was a need to move somewhat beyond "the self-effacing baggage of

[22] John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988).

Calvinism" for women to realize their full potential for achieving equality of the sexes and equal political rights.[23]

This trajectory of increasing secularism at the expense of a more religiously informed perception of the world and of social issues is a common way of organizing analyses of American women's history for good reason. Many of the most visible American women activists, especially in the generations which Sklar identified as having moved away from the religious rhetoric of the earlier cohort, over the course of their lives either rejected outright the faith of their childhood or adopted different versions of faith that allowed them to pursue social causes that were important to them. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for example, grew up in a conservative Evangelical Christian home, but "a lifelong negotiation with religious ideas" led her eventually to convert to a kind of religious rationalism and to write her own version of the Christian Bible. *The Woman's Bible,* from which she expunged all language and doctrine that seemed to denigrate women or inhibit their human worth or potential, was her attempt to harmonize Christianity with the views she had developed over a lifetime of activism.[24] Susan B. Anthony, while raised in a progressive Quaker family, revised her religious views throughout her life and finally settled in the Unitarian church, a more liberal faith that allowed her to reconcile her religious and political views.[25] Similarly, Prudence Crandall, a pioneer in educating black

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[23] Mary P. Ryan, "*Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 227.

[24] Kathi Kern, "'Free Woman Is a Divine Being, the Savior of Mankind': Stanton's Exploration of Religion and Gender," in *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Feminist as Thinker: A Reader in Documents and Essays*, ed. Ellen Carole DuBois and Richard Cándida Smith (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 94. Also, Kathi Kern, *Mrs. Stanton's Bible* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[25] Kathleen Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist* (New York: New York University Press, 1988).

women, followed a similar path from a relatively conservative religious background to one of increasing radicalism.[26]

Though religious radicalism was by no means a prerequisite for engaging in social activism, a tendency to eschew religious orthodoxy was fairly common among many nineteenth-century activists, even those who remained quite religious throughout their lives. Angelina and Sarah Grimké, for example, were born into a devout Episcopalian family but both gravitated away from that conservative, mainline faith into Quakerism, which aligned more closely with their intense antislavery sentiments.[27] Lucretia Mott was a Quaker from birth, but in the 1827 controversy within the Quaker faith she sided with the more radical Hicksites rather than with the Orthodox contingent. And even within the Hicksite group, her involvement with social causes tended to place her at odds with the majority of her coreligionists.[28]

Ann Braude notes this affinity between religious radicalism and radical social causes in *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America.* She writes that, "Every notable progressive family of the nineteenth century had its advocate of Spiritualism, some of them more than one." Those families included the Beechers, the Judsons, the Blackwells, and others who were prominent names among social activists of the time.[29] Although most of those within the ranks of Spiritualists came from doctrinally liberal religious groups such as Unitarians, Quakers, and Universalists, the Evangelical tradition was not unrepresented, as the above mentioned members of the Judson and Beecher families

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[26] Susan Strane, *A Whole-Souled Woman: Prudence Crandall and the Education of Black Women* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1990).

[27] Mark Perry, *Lift Up Thy Voice: The Grimké Family's Journey from Slaveholders to Civil Rights Leaders* (New York: Viking, 2001).

[28] Carol Faulkner, *Lucretia Mott's Heresy: Abolition and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

[29] Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 27.

demonstrate. However, while many of the more liberal traditions allowed for an easy blending of Spiritualism with former beliefs and even denominations, Evangelical dogma was diametrically opposed to it and served as the target of most of Spiritualism's criticism of religion.[30]

This animosity of Spiritualists and other theologically liberal groups toward the Evangelical Christian tradition is intriguing, especially considering that the Evangelical tradition was not immune to the liberalizing, anti-authoritarian spirit of the age which gave rise to theological liberalism and radical social causes alike. However, this animosity is demonstrative of an underlying tension that made Evangelical involvement in social causes an ambivalent enterprise. As Julie Roy Jeffrey makes clear in her study of Evangelical women's participation in antislavery efforts in Boston of the 1840s, Evangelicals in the nineteenth-century were quite involved in and passionate about social causes of their day.[31] However, as devoted as the women of Jeffrey's study were to the abolitionist cause, their urgency in forwarding that cause did not extend to issues of women's rights. In fact, the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society separated into two factions, in large part over the combined issues of religious differences and the question of the society's support of other even more radical causes. The two factions represented different socioeconomic classes, which played a part in their distrust of each other, but the main problem seems to have been that the more religiously liberal members of the society were wary of the more conservative Evangelicals. Roy characterizes this difference between the groups of women as stemming from a different understanding of the nature of religion's role in social reform. She writes, "Elite and religiously liberal 'radical' women increasingly adopted an expansive

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[30] Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 46.

[31] Julie Roy Jeffrey, "The Liberty Women of Boston: Evangelicalism and Antislavery Politics," *New England Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (2012): 38-77, accessed July 21, 2014, http://dx.doi:10.1162/TNEQ_a_00156.

understanding of women's role in reform, whereas middle-class and evangelical conservative women viewed their work as flowing from their domestic and religious responsibilities."[32]

Catherine Brekus alludes to the same issue of Evangelical women's social activism being delimited by conservative theology in *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845*, a study of female Evangelical itinerant preachers. These women's "revolutionary vindication of women's right to preach was always secondary to their faith in biblical revelation."[33] As radical as their claim was, they based it on scripture rather than on ideas about natural rights. They did not demand full equality with men in the sense of legal or political status and rights. Nor did they even demand all the rights and responsibilities of male church leadership. "Like many other women of their time," writes Brekus, "they were active participants in the public sphere, but they never challenged the political structures that enforced their inequality in the family, church, and state." Referencing their "biblical" feminism as opposed to secular feminism, Brekus argues that these women, who simultaneously were too radical for many of their Evangelical peers and too conservative for women's rights activists were nonetheless "far more representative of nineteenth-century women than freethinking radicals such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton."[34]

What is missing in this conversation is the question of American women who, like those Brekus writes about, subscribed to a theology that was both conservative for the time and which, though it was tested and perhaps modified by the vagaries of life as well as by a cultural tendency away from received religious tradition, remained relatively constant over the course of their lives. These women may or may not have been recognizably reformist in the sense of

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[32] Jeffrey, "Liberty Women," 39-40.

[33] Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 6.

[34] Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims*, 7.

pursuing large scale social change, but in simply making life choices they made a statement about what religion contributed to the lives and to the identities of ordinary women living during a time of great social, religious, and political change. While it seems clear from much of the secondary literature on women's history that theologically liberal religion complemented and even served as a catalyst for women's involvement in radical social causes, what should historians conclude about women who adhered to a more theologically conservative faith? What sorts of behaviors did such women engage in and in what ways was their faith either empowering or disempowering as they participated in a rapidly changing society?

As Catherine Brekus so aptly points out, socially-active, Evangelical women who were both too radical and too conservative have been forgotten – by feminists who wished that such women had gone further in their willingness to advocate social change, and by the vast majority of evangelicals who wished that women had never been allowed to upset the religious hierarchy to the extent that they did.[35] It also seems that such women – and what their lives say about the nineteenth century – have been largely bypassed in historical scholarship as well. The temptation has been to cast religion, and perhaps conservative religion specifically, as a somewhat limiting factor in the progressive orientation of American women's history. Even Brekus, who goes further than many in examining what conservative theology did for women who believed it with their whole heart states her argument in terms of limitation, asserting that, "To study their lives is to understand both the possibilities and the limitations of biblical feminism."[36]

The notion of women's social and ideological limitation resulting from theologically informed conservatism has haunted women's history since its inception in the mid-twentieth century. Many of the foundational works in women's history built on Barbara Welter's 1966

[35] Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims*, 7.
[36] Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims*, 7.

article, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860.” Welter’s thesis was that women’s role in the American republic was to uphold “the temple of the chosen people” by maintaining the religious values and character with which nineteenth-century Americans’ religious forebears had stamped the nation early in its founding, and which nineteenth-century materialism threatened to undo if left unchecked by religious sentiment. Women were to fulfill this lofty purpose by way of cultivating within themselves and other women “four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.”[37] Welter, in her rollicking style, paints a picture of women constrained not only by social conventions but also by an ideology to which they acquiesced and which left them in a lose-lose situation. For to live up to what they and their contemporaries deemed the highest feminine ideal meant to live in a world in which they were forever childlike – innocent, dependent, and in being submissive, conscious of their intellectual as well as physical inferiority. Their natural, proper sphere was that of the home, and their purview the cultivation and propagation of virtuous character in those within that realm of influence: husbands, children, siblings, friends, etc.

Though separate sphere ideology as first formulated by Welter has been a fixture of women’s history it has not existed without modification by subsequent historians, and it has not been without its challengers.[38] As women’s history in particular has become less and less ghettoized, and the profession of history in general has become increasingly interdisciplinary, more scholars influenced by more disciplines have provided broader, deeper context for understanding gender relations in the past. One such scholar, Mary Kelley, first published her

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[37] Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 152, accessed June 19, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711179.

[38] Carla L. Peterson remarks on the evolving understanding of this concept in her “‘Doers of the Word’: Theorizing African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the Antebellum North” in *African American Religion: An Anthology*, ed. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 380. Hereafter referred to as *Anthology* with the appropriate identifiers and page numbers.

interdisciplinary *Private Women, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* in 1984. In it, she takes as a departure point Welter's demarcation of public/male and private/female spheres, arguing that "literary domestics" such as Catharine Maria Sedgwick and E.D.E.N. Southworth exemplified a paradox resulting from women's increasing visibility in the public sphere in spite of the prevailing separate sphere ideology which confined them to the private sphere. Women in the nineteenth century possessed a deeply conflicted "dual identity" in which they saw themselves as "private women," yet longed for the stimulation (and perhaps recognition) of involvement in "the world beyond the home."[39] Insecure, even guilty, about transgressing their role as prescribed by society, their existence was one "blunted" by "deep inner restraints" and by "the disapproval of the society responsible for embedding those restraints."[40] Kelley portrays even their claims to power of moral influence a "fantasy," a "creation of the powerless."[41]

However, in the new preface of the reprinted edition of *Private Woman, Public Stage* as well as in a later book entitled *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic,* Kelley offers a helpful, necessary qualification to her own and others, including Welter's, conclusions. Rather than understanding nineteenth-century notions of women's domesticity as mere ideology, Kelley builds on the more nuanced idea of discourse which allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how nineteenth-century women understood themselves and their place in their world. Kelley writes,

> Antebellum discursive practices contained both liberatory and regulatory potential. In *Private Woman, Public Stage,* I accorded more importance to the latter. Today, however, the liberating potential of this discourse strikes me as of equal significance. The force of conventions such as these writers and their readers negotiated, the emancipatory

[39] Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (1984. Repr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), xii, 28-29.

[40] Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, 206.

[41] Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage,* 308-309.

possibilities in the system of social markers and meanings they articulated, and the relative autonomy they achieved are just as apparent."[42]

As Welter and other scholars make clear, religion – especially theologically conservative religion – was very much a part of the discourse of domesticity that Kelley identifies.[43] However, equally clear from the research of scholars such as Catherine Brekus and Julie Roy Jeffrey is that just as domesticity as a discourse had as much potential for liberation as for regulation, theologically conservative Evangelicalism could and did provide women adherents with a powerful sense of self and of purpose even while its rhetoric seemed to entangle them in myriad proscriptions regarding their behavior. These two historians are part of a minority of scholars that have emphasized Evangelicalism's potential for empowerment rather than its potential for constraint.[44] Yet, the minority status of this emphasis on evangelicalism's liberating potential disappears when considerations of the African American experience are included in the broad categories of women's and religious history.

As the scholarly community in general and historians in particular have come to recognize the salience of race relations to American history, the historiography of the African American experience has expanded dramatically. Within this body of literature a dominant theme is the significance of the church as an institution to the black community throughout

[42] Kelley*, Private Woman, Public Stage*, xii.

[43] See Sklar, *Women's Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement*; Hoffert, *When Hens Crow;* D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*; and Mary P. Ryan, "*Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) for examples of scholarship that touch on the inverse relationship between conservative religiosity and secularly-motivated social activism.

[44] Other scholarship that falls into this minority are Nancy Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century,*2nd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), and Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Mission for Life: The Judson Family and American Evangelical Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), as well as a recent work by Catherine Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

American history.[45] While much of the older historiography focused on black male leadership, more recent works have highlighted the role and the importance of women in both the history and in its interpretation.[46] While the Christian theology of the nineteenth-century black American church falls under the Evangelical rubric, and can thus be considered theologically conservative, historical treatments of African-American women's history and religious history interpret the Christian religion as an emphatically positive element within the black community. Rita Roberts, for example, posits that Evangelicalism not only was adopted and modified to meet the spiritual and political needs of black Americans living in the nineteenth-century, it also served as an interpretive framework through which they appropriated the republican ethic which was touted in the nation's founding documents but violated in practice.[47] Discussing nineteenth-century black women preachers, Bettye Collier-Thomas underscores the empowerment inherent to the message these women brought to their listeners. Focusing on an egalitarian message of salvation and sanctification for all, these preachers "…empower[ed] their audience by imbuing each person's life with an earthly purpose of Christian service and leadership." Collier-Thomas goes on to say that, "Although none of these nineteenth-century sermons directly addressed gender issues, their content also indirectly empowers women to do God's work, as they refer to biblical women and as they emphasize the importance of doing God's work in addition to prescribed domestic

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[45] See Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr., eds., *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003 and Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau, eds., *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997) for an overview of African-American religious history and the centrality of the Christian church to the life of the black community.

[46] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998) both make the case in their introductory remarks that the historiography of the African American experience had replicated the sexist mistake of other historians focusing on white America and neglected women's role in the history of the nation. These authors' work both represent an attempt to rectify the problem, discussing the importance of lay women in the church and women preachers, respectively.

[47] Roberts, *Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform*, 2-3. Roberts builds her argument on the work of John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753-1833* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

tasks."[48] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues for this empowering effect of Evangelical Christianity on black women even more emphatically than does Collier-Thomas. Linking the importance of the church to black history with the importance of women in the black church she argues that "…women were crucial to broadening the public arm of the church and making it the most powerful institution of racial self-help in the African-American community."[49]

This difference in interpretive emphases between historians of African-American women's and religious history and historians of the dominant culture prompt a reconsideration of religious conservatism – Evangelical Christianity in particular – in the lives of nineteenth-century women whose beliefs and practices ran with rather than counter to the conservative tendencies of their society. For the purposes of this thesis, let us revisit the issue of religious conservatism and its effect on social activism, probing the question from the angle of empowerment rather than from limitation. In what ways did the faith of conservative, Evangelical women, both black and white, empower them to effect positive change in their own or others' lives? What aspects of their lived experience of faith prompted theologically conservative women simultaneously to acquiesce in some cases to cultural restraints they encountered as a result of their gender, their race, or their class but in other situations to defy and even transgress societal mores in pursuit of moral, social, spiritual, and even economic improvement?

Considerations of Race in the Historiography of American Religion

Though the historiography notes a few standout denominations, such as the Quakers, that seemed specifically to have allowed and even encouraged women to speak up for themselves and

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[48] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 4.
[49] Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent,* 1.

for social causes that were important to them, there is a decided lack of emphasis on the role of the institutionalized church or of particular denominations in that overall social move toward an expanded vision of the American imagined community. As mentioned above, a notable exception to this generalized approach to the connection between religiosity and social reform is found in the historiography of the African American experience. In fact, a salient feature of many foundational works of African-American history has been the centrality of the church to the identity of the black American community.[50] In addition to "that *invisible institution* which met in the swamps and the bayous, and which joined all black believers in a common experience at a single level of human and spiritual recognition,"[51] the church as particularized in Evangelical Protestant denominations not only played an extraordinary role in the lives of individuals, it also became an alternate public sphere in which the particular interests of the black community could be discussed and addressed. Over time, it came to serve as a powerful intermediary between individuals and the social structures of the majority race.[52] Although the Baptist and Methodist denominations eventually became the most prominent church institutions within the American black community, Protestant Evangelicalism as a whole profoundly influenced the African-American experience, and was itself influenced in turn.[53] In truth, American history cannot properly be told without taking into account the mutually transformative interactions between the culture of Evangelical Christianity and the culture of black Americans.

[50] For an overview of some of the most important historiography on this topic see *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, edited by Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). Hereafter referred to as *Anthology*.

[51] C. Eric Lincoln, "The Racial Factor in the Shaping of Religion in America," in *Anthology*, 164.

[52] See in particular Eddie S. Glaude Jr., "Of the Black Church and the Making of a Black Public," in *Anthology,* 338-365.

[53] Lincoln, "The Racial Factor in the Shaping of Religion in America," in *Anthology*, especially pp. 176-77. Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); and Randy J. Sparks, *On Jordan's Stormy Banks*, 63-4.

David W. Wills in his essay "The Central Themes of American Religious History: Pluralism, Puritanism, and the Encounter of Black and White," makes clear the importance of this interplay of race and religion to the whole of American history. Although most attempts to construct a grand narrative of American history tend to focus on either the development of secular pluralism as an organizing social value or on the Puritan-derived impulse to understand American destiny as a collective pursuit of a holy commonwealth, Wills suggests that a third crucial theme in American history, often overlooked but no less central for this neglect, is the ubiquitous "gap" between African Americans and European Americans. These two groups of people who intermingled in the United States had cultural roots in different continents. This difference in origin taken by itself would have created a divergence between them as they resettled in the Americas. However, Wills writes, "Since the encounter of black and white occurred within the context of a slave system that broadly and consistently subordinated blacks to whites, the previously existing cultural gap was transformed into a gap that involved power as well as meaning – and above all the relationship between the two."[54] For this reason, versions of American history that leave out or downplay "the encounter of black and white" are inadequate precisely because they privilege one perspective, locating both power and meaning in a one-dimensional, selective re-telling of the experiences and values of the majority race. Wills goes on to say that this "seemingly intractable gap," most obvious and sharply defined in the American South, is the crucial third element of the American story that, in conjunction with the Puritan legacy of New England, and the impulse toward religious pluralism and secular tolerance that originated in the middle colonies, will allow Americans on either side of the gap to work toward a more adequate understanding of ourselves and our shared history.

[54] David W. Wills, "The Central Themes of American Religious History: Pluralism, Puritanism, and the Encounter of Black and White," in *Anthology*, 214-15.

Wills' point that the regional characteristics of Puritan New England, the pluralistic middle colonies, and the racially fraught South must be interpreted as a whole in order to work toward a better understanding of American history underscores that the Christian religion, and perhaps even Evangelical Christianity in particular, is a common thread running through each of these portions of the story. Although Enlightenment secularism had an influential role in the move to expand human rights beyond what the American Revolution had allowed initially, this secularism was – and perhaps still is – in tension with a potent cultural heritage of Christianity. Employing religious rhetoric in novel ways, borrowing scriptural authority both in writing and in speech-making, reinterpreting scripture in new and sometimes subversive ways, and using other similar appeals to Christian sensibilities were common features of abolitionism and women's rights activism in the nineteenth century. However, although this generalized religiosity has been thoroughly discussed in the historiography of social reform, only African-American historiography seems to emphasize the extent to which it stemmed from individuals' connection to and participation in churches as institutions of Evangelical Christianity.

The evangelical label applies to a broad grouping of Christian traditions, usually Protestant, low-church traditions that elevate the role and the importance of individual assent to the beliefs in question. This emphasis on individual assent is evident in David Bebbington's method of identifying Evangelicalism, which focuses on the kinds of beliefs embraced both by individuals and by denominations as a whole. He distills Evangelicalism into a set of four characteristic emphases that have been present, though perhaps with varying degrees of importance, across denominations and over time: *crucicentrism, bibliocentrism, conversionism,* and *activism. Crucicentrism* in Evangelical thought refers to the centrality of Christ's death on the cross and the significance of His shed blood to the Evangelical interpretation of Christianity.

Bibliocentrism, on the other hand, refers to the foundational place that the Christian Bible holds in Evangelical thinking, preaching, and rhetoric. It can mean simply having a high regard for the Bible, but the phrase can also indicate the belief that the Bible alone is the authoritative, final word of God and as such is inerrant and infallible. *Conversionism* is the belief that individuals must be converted – that is, actually be changed by their encounter with the Christ of the Christian Bible. Finally, *activism* is living a demonstrably Christian life proceeding out of the same faith that had resulted in conversion. Bebbington maintains that these four doctrinal emphases can be considered the identifying marks of Protestant Evangelicalism. And while the four taken together characterize Evangelicalism as a phenomenon that crossed time and space, the individual components were present to varying degrees in different historical manifestations of Evangelical Christianity. At different points in time and in different contexts, various Evangelical communities emphasized some of the characteristics more than others.[55]

While the characteristic marks of Protestant Evangelicalism contributed to its broad appeal to nineteenth-century Americans in general, two of these markers were of special importance to black Americans: conversion and activism. Cornel West writes that the "existential appeal" of Protestant Evangelicalism among enslaved Americans was particularly related to the conversion experience, which "not only created deep bonds of fellowship and a reference point for self-assurance during times of doubt and distress; it also democratized and equalized the status of all before God." In addition to this ideal yet very real leveling effect, the experience of conversion according to the Evangelical model also meant that the new convert had entered into a "profoundly personal relationship with God." This relationship with the divine "gave slaves a special self-identity and self-esteem in stark contrast with the roles imposed upon

[55] Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 2-3.

them by American society."[56] In the Evangelical model of Christianity a changed life proceeded out of a changed heart, so conversion was intimately connected with activism.

The particular characteristics of the African-American experience meant that this connection was especially pronounced in the black community. In lieu of the social institutions of state from which the majority of black Americans were excluded by practice if not by law, the church served as the primary social institution for the black community and was the best, most inclusive public sphere in which black Americans could participate. Eddie S. Glaude Jr. writes, "This reality of white racial proscription and its consequences compelled African Americans to seek out a space for the free and autonomous worship of God and to secure an institutional setting for the social activity of solving problems confronting their community."[57] Glaude goes on to say that this circumstance-driven focus on the church as the institutional setting for community problem solving meant that for nineteenth-century black Americans "faith in God and obligation to community were inextricably bound together."[58] This emphasis on community action stemming from religious conviction made Christian living into a politically and socially purposeful exercise of faith, and prompted black Americans to act on their newfound, conversion-inspired self-confidence and become agents of change in their communities. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham stresses the political ramifications of this purposeful Christian activism: "Through their [church] conventions, African Americans refuted notions of their inability or unreadiness for equal political participation. Among women, this understanding heightened support of women's suffrage. The political rhetoric espoused at black women's annual meetings included the demand not only for voting rights, but for full inclusion in American public life."[59]

[56] Cornel West, "American Africans in Conflict: Alienation in an Insecure Culture," in *Anthology*, 85.
[57] Eddie S. Glaude Jr., "Of the Black Church and the Making of a Black Public," in *Anthology*, 344.
[58] Glaude, "Of the Black Church and the Making of a Black Public," in *Anthology*, 344.
[59] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "The Black Church: A Gender Perspective," in *Anthology*, 197.

As this characteristic of politically purposeful Christian living among black Evangelical Christians indicates, the consequences of a widespread Protestant Evangelical influence were extremely significant, not only for individuals and for the black community, but also as a momentous development in the story of America as a whole. David Wills hints at the significance of Protestant Evangelicalism to American history by arguing that Protestant Evangelicalism was the first context in which the previously mentioned "gap" between black and white Americans narrowed as the two groups came together in a religiously meaningful, organized, public way. He writes, "Testifying publicly about their conversions, taking part in church discipline, serving as exhorters and sometimes as pastors – even, on occasion, of predominantly white congregations – black Baptists and Methodists participated in the evangelical movement in a way they had participated in no previous colonial religious movement." [60] While this narrowing of the gap proved to be a short-lived phenomenon that characterized the Second Great Awakening but faded as the Awakening receded into history, racially intertwined participation in the early Evangelical movement had several important consequences for black Americans, for American history, and for the state of American religion.

C. Eric Lincoln summarizes these consequences as follows: first, black Americans' participation in camp meetings and other public forms of evangelical worship proved that black people were capable of spiritual and moral development – a question that now seems absurd but which was debated in all seriousness in early national America. Second, while religious experience for Protestant Evangelicals was the deciding factor in determining the authenticity of one's religious state, instruction in doctrines inevitably came along with participation in worship and Christian fellowship. Taken together, conversion, fellowship, and the inevitable instruction

[60] Wills, "Central Themes," in *Anthology,* 216.

in doctrine served to make Christianity more accessible than it had been previously to classes of people who did not have the literacy skills necessary to navigate the period of religious instruction that usually preceded church membership in years prior to the Second Great Awakening. Third, social relationships, including master and slave, that took place within the context of a shared Christianity were affected by Christian teachings and raised doubts about the morality of the institution of slavery. Last, Christianity provided both a social organization and a moral code that eventually would allow black Americans to make and pursue a compelling case for their own liberty and equality.[61] Each of these consequences of Protestant Evangelicalism is important in its own right, but taken together they represent what could be called the democratization of religion in America.[62] For ever-increasing varieties of people, the Evangelical version of Protestant Christianity became a socially useful and politically relevant means of integrating faith and daily life in the context of an evolving ideology of human rights. It also served as a path through which Americans, both white and black, were able to appropriate and make effective use of the individual authority that had been idealized in the rhetoric of the American Revolution. Just as the American collective sifted through the rhetoric and the political discourse of the early national period in search of an authentic American national identity that acted on its own authority rather than continuing its dependent status in relation to its British parent, American individuals grappled with what it meant personally to them to be an American.

For all Americans, the experience of being American was filtered through the realities of each individual's situation: African Americans and European Americans brought fundamentally different experiences to their individual process of identity construction. Women and men also

[61] Lincoln, "The Racial Factor in the Shaping of Religion in America," in *Anthology,* 178.
[62] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

experienced fundamentally different processes in understanding what it meant personally to be an American. Much of this difference in experience hinged upon the individual's possession of and relationship to authority in its various manifestations in American society. While those upon whom the American Revolution had bestowed an additional measure of authority than what they already possessed as heads of families also had to grapple with what that new authority in relation to their government meant, the egalitarian rhetoric of the revolutionary years indicated an underlying general crisis of authority that wedged open the question of where authority should properly reside. Those who were excluded by practice, custom, and sometimes law from exercising the authority of autonomous citizenship were enabled both by the revolutionary rhetoric of republicanism and by a general crisis of authority to contest their exclusion from full citizenship and to press for recognition of their equally authoritative status as individual American citizens.[63]

However, by itself the secularly driven rhetoric of egalitarian republicanism was not enough of a catalyst to initiate and carry out the fundamental social restructuring that such democratization of authority would entail. Much more potent was the combination of revolutionary rhetoric and ideology with the Christian heritage of the American nation. Given its nature, Protestant Evangelical Christianity in the antebellum American context served as a uniquely effective means by which Americans could and did negotiate new understandings of individual and institutional authority, and were able to appropriate for themselves not only the authority required to fashion and then practice a Christianity made on their own terms but also the individual authority necessary to identify as active, effective citizens of their nation who deserved full inclusion in the rights, privileges, and duties of the body politic.

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[63] For further reading on the general crisis of authority in early nineteenth-century America see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 17-46.

This is not to say that there was perfect harmony in how Christian Evangelicalism was practiced among various groups of Americans. In fact, Protestant Evangelicalism has been characterized less by unity of thought and practice than by division based on differing doctrinal emphases and Scriptural interpretations. Oddly, much of this divisive nature stemmed from one of the defining, unifying characteristics of Evangelicalism, particularly in the American context: its emphasis on the ability – even the right – of the individual to experience a relationship with God unmediated by authority figures who ranked higher in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. By elevating the experiential, individual nature of religious faith through its focus on conversion, Evangelicalism demonstrated its modern cast.[64] Individualism, already characteristic of modern American culture, became almost sacralized within the Evangelical tradition.[65] While this elevation of the worth of the individual had many positive consequences for American society, perhaps especially among marginalized groups such as African Americans and women of all races, some of its ramifications were much more pernicious. Namely, it engendered a spirit of division rather than unity that came to characterize the religious milieu of nineteenth-century America.[66]

John Saillant characterizes this divisiveness as the result of a change in how Americans began to understand themselves in the nineteenth century. Whereas in the late colonial and early national period the new nation's precarious status demanded a cohesive set of political and

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[64] For an excellent discussion of how evangelicalism intertwined with and adapted to Enlightenment thought see Catherine A. Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (Yale University Press, 2013).

[65] An interesting study which points to the continued importance of individualism to white conservative Protestant Evangelicals is Michael O. Emerson, Christian Smith, and David Sikkink, "Equal in Christ, but Not in the World: White Conservative Protestants and Explanations of Black-White Inequality," *Social Problems* 46, no. 3 (1999): 398-417, accessed April 17, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3097107.

[66] Modernity has ever tended toward division even in its attempts to unify and connect. See Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) for how "the ambiguities of modernity" held true even, and perhaps especially, in the built environment of modern cities.

religious ideals, which Saillant identifies as republicanism and Calvinism, Americans in the nineteenth century became increasingly confident in their existence as a national, commercial unit no longer in need of such cohesive ideals. In such a sociopolitical climate, writes Saillant, "Christianity was divided into many denominations, and various, even contradictory, interpretations of the Bible were possible…For some nineteenth-century Americans, truth itself was democratic, articulated not in any one person's or group's views but rather arising from the populace at large, with all its clashes and diversity."[67]

This tendency toward division, rooted in the individualism that Evangelical Christianity held dear, was of particular importance for the path of race relations throughout American history. Even as Protestant Evangelicalism during the Second Great Awakening seemed at first to narrow the "gap" between white and black Americans, the very features that allowed such a narrowing to occur set the course for even greater division between the two groups of Americans than had previously existed. In celebrating the worth of human individuals, Christian Evangelicalism proved to be a force of great empowerment for African Americans. What the camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening and later the churches that new converts became affiliated with offered for black Americans was "*acceptance and involvement as human beings*," even for those who were enslaved. "Under the brush arbors, the black slave was a servant among servants, a seeker among seekers, all terrified, sanctified, and exultant together. It was the only moment of his life that his color and his station were not the absolute conditioners of his humanity."[68] Finding this human acceptance in the doctrines and practices of Evangelical Christianity meant that the Christian religion became a place where black Americans' humanity

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[67] John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753-1833* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6-7.

[68] Lincoln, "The Racial Factor in the Shaping of Religion in America," in *Anthology*, 176-77.

was not immediately discounted. As such, the Christianity that African Americans adopted as their own came to serve as both a rationale and a forum for pursuing the recognition of African American humanity – and thus equality – in the larger society.[69] In other words, Evangelicalism, with its emphasis on individualism which allowed for a multiplicity of biblical interpretations, was perfectly suited to the development of a politically useful theology for the black community.

For black Americans, including those who were never slaves themselves, the specter of slavery and growing notions of racial inferiority haunted every aspect of life – even in religion, as empowering as it was for individuals. For this reason, preachers and other leaders of the black community modified Christianity to meet the political and social as well as the spiritual needs of African Americans. "Those of African ancestry living in the United States needed a script, black clerics believed, a story, a means of resistance that countered white claims of black inferiority either because of enslavement or, increasingly, innate characteristics."[70] A version of Evangelical Christianity which emphasized justice and human equality, as well as those portions of the Christian story that pointed to a benevolent God who brought His chosen people out of bondage and wrought vengeance on their oppressors, served as just such a unifying and empowering "story" for African Americans. However, to unify and fully mobilize the black community in pursuit of full equality in their society, most in the community believed that separate institutions, especially church institutions, were necessary. So although white proscription was partly behind the existence of separate congregations even within the same denominations, the most powerful impetus for such segregation came from the particular needs of the black community itself.[71]

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[69] Cornel West, "African Americans in Conflict: Alienation in an Insecure Culture," in *Anthology,* 85; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "The Black Church: A Gender Perspective," in *Anthology,* 197; Eugene Genovese, "Religious Foundations of the Black Nation," in *Anthology*, 304; Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., "Of the Black Church and the Making of a Black Public," in *Anthology*, 344.

[70] Roberts, *Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform*, 39.

[71] Roberts, *Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform*, 40-43.

It is indicative of both the strength and the weakness of Evangelical Christianity that the unique situation of African Americans, who accepted the religion of their oppressors, allowed for the development of a version of Christianity which differed emphatically in many respects from that of white America. This difference, though it is subtle in terms of doctrine, has had profound historical and social ramifications in the outworking of faith, or evangelical activism, that has characterized African American Evangelicalism in contrast to that of Evangelical congregations and denominations that were predominantly white. While Evangelicalism since its inception has always held political implications for believers called to act out their faith in a fallen world, black Evangelicalism took shape in a context which demanded that the inherently political nature of Evangelical Christianity take a more pronounced role than it did in the theology and the practices of Americans who had little or no reason to challenge the political status quo. For this reason, and as the historiography of the African American experience makes clear, political, not just spiritual transformation was the explicit goal of black Evangelical Christianity. In contrast to the Evangelicalism of European Americans, which could, and often – though not always – did prompt political action, political goals were inextricably intertwined with religious convictions and practices for the vast majority of African American Christians.

Discussing the multiple factors that led to segregated black and white churches in antebellum America, Rita Roberts points to the overtly political theology that came to characterize African American Evangelicalism. This theology, which was “simultaneously spiritual and political” could not be promulgated effectively in mixed race congregations since white audiences would not understand – or agree with – a theological emphasis on the injustice of slavery and the necessity of divine retribution against its perpetrators. Roberts argues that this disconnect between the experiences of black and white Americans was at the heart of a racially

segregated Evangelicalism. Believing in the necessity of a separate institution in which to teach a separate theology that spoke to the particular needs of black Americans, the preeminent minister Richard Allen "and his fellow pioneering clerics ensured that black evangelicalism's distinguishing feature was its explicit political agenda. The sacred and the secular were inseparable."[72]

Thus, while Evangelical Protestantism served in some ways to narrow the distance between European Americans and African Americans, in other ways it solidified and entrenched the divisions between them. Over time, the religious, political, and cultural solidarity that Evangelical Christianity lent to the black American community made possible the dissolution of some of the most egregious legal distinctions between black and white Americans, but the culture of segregated religious institutions and theologies which allowed that dissolution to happen has proven to be an enduring division on the American political and social landscape. The historiography of American religion takes note of this socio-religious difference as it existed in more recent times, noting that while Black Protestants and predominantly white conservative Protestants agreed in much of their doctrine and beliefs, the way that those beliefs manifested in political issues throughout the twentieth century were vastly different.[73] It seems likely that historically, this difference which is still felt was born in antebellum America as Americans with widely differing experiences contested, defined, and redefined what being an American meant.

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[72] Peruse the essays in *Anthology* to get a sense of this. Also see Roberts, *Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform;* Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican;* and Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau, eds., *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* for an overview of some of the most pertinent studies dealing with the connections between African American religion and politics.

[73] Mark Noll, "Evangelicals Past and Present," in *Religion, Politics, and the American Experience: Reflections on Religion and American Public Life*, ed. Edith L. Blumhofer (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 105-106. This difference in political behavior among white and black adherents of denominationally similar evangelicalism is also noted and discussed in D. Michael Lindsay, "Ties that Bind and Divisions that Persist: Evangelical Faith and the Political Spectrum," *Religion and Politics in the Contemporary United States* 59, no. 3 (2007): 883-909, accessed May 6, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068454.

As this process of defining what it meant to be American took place during the nineteenth century, women of all different religious, social, racial, and class backgrounds were forced by historical circumstances to engage on a very personal level with crucial public issues of the day. This thesis examines the lives of women who each in her own way sought to make sense of a social context in which the most private aspects of self and identity, including religious beliefs , questions of racial difference, and appropriate social roles for people of different genders were open to public debate. For these women in particular, Protestant Evangelical Christianity became a vehicle through which they were able to experience social authority in novel ways, and by way of this new relationship to authority began to rework what it meant to be a woman in America and a child of God.

Chapter 1

Beginnings: Acquiring Perspective and Living by Faith in a Broken World

Abigail Abbot was born in New Hampshire in 1746. Though she lived in a culture and an age in which religious practice was common, she seems to have had an unusually serious frame of mind and felt religious convictions quite powerfully, even from a young age. She joined the Congregational Church at age seventeen and when she moved shortly thereafter with her family to a new settlement in what is now Vermont, she and her parents became founding members of the Church of Christ in the town of Newbury. Two months after she turned twenty-one, Abigail married a young man whose family lived in the adjacent town, Haverhill. In the memoir she composed in later life, which was published posthumously in 1815, Abigail writes of her new husband, Asa Bailey, "Relative to my new companion, though I had found no evidence that he was a subject of true religion; yet I did hope and expect, from my acquaintance with him, that he would wish for good regulations in his family, and would have its external order accord with the word of God. But I met with sore disappointment…."[74]

In her understated way, Abigail wrote of her "sore disappointment," but the actual details of her circumstances were horrifying. Far from fostering "good regulations in his family" Asa Bailey engaged in numerous affairs and treated his wife abominably. His most egregious infraction of the word of God and the one that eventually led Abigail to seek and receive a divorce from him was his incestuous abuse of one their daughters, Phoebe. The strength of Asa's delusion regarding his daughter was such that he persisted in attempting to seduce her over a

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[74] Abigail Abbot Bailey, *Religion and Domestic Violence in Early New England: The Memoirs of Abigail Abbot Bailey*, ed. Ann Taves (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 57. Hereafter referred to as Abbot Bailey, *Memoirs* with the appropriate page numbers.

period of years – even after Phoebe tried to reject his advances and even after Abigail confronted him about his behavior. He schemed to isolate Phoebe for himself, not only every day at home, but even going so far as to come up with a plan to settle a new farm further west, leaving Abigail at home and taking Phoebe and a few of the other children to help run the house. This plan never came to fruition, since Abigail, well aware of his character, saw through the scheme and refused to accommodate his wishes.

Through all of Asa's duplicity and bad behavior, Abigail sought to reform his heart and character by being as gracious and as forgiving as she could. However, her forbearance reached an end one day when one of the younger children mentioned to an older sister what she had observed take place between their father and Phoebe one year earlier. When the older sister in turn told it to a yet older sister, the elder sister "was so *shocked*, that she fainted." When Abigail was able to bring her out of the faint, the daughters informed her of what had taken place -- none of them doubting that it actually had happened. Abigail wrote, "I had long before had full evidence to my mind of Mr. B's great wickedness in this matter; and I thought I was prepared to hear the worst. But verily the worst was dreadful...I truly at this time had a new lesson added, to all that ever I before heard, or conceived, of human depravity."[75] Following this revelation of the extent of Asa's wickedness, Abigail fasted and prayed, and came to the conclusion that she could not live with him as his wife. She was undecided, however, whether it was more consistent with her faith to insist on an arrangement in which he would leave her and the family never to return, or to make him "a monument of civil justice."[76]

Initially, she decided on the first course of action, and from 1790 through 1792 they worked toward reaching a settlement agreeable to both. However, Asa's actions to this end were

[75] Abbot Bailey, *Memoirs*, 87.
[76] Abbot Bailey, *Memoirs*, 87.

not in good faith. He sold their main farm out from under Abigail, on the understanding that they would sell a second property and that she would receive half of the proceeds. Telling her that he had found a buyer for their other property, he insisted that the sale could only be conducted if both of them were present for the transaction. Though she mistrusted Asa, Abigail had no good reason to refuse to accompany him to see the business through. He told her it was a few days' ride away, but when the trip had dragged on for a week without their having reached their destination, Abigail suspected that Asa was once again dealing treacherously with her. And in fact, his true object was to kidnap his wife and take her 270 miles away from their family into the state of New York where, he told her, the laws"...are far more suitable to govern such women as you, than are the laws of New Hampshire."[77]

Depositing her in a rough cabin at a property he had acquired near the town of Unadilla, Asa left, ostensibly to go bring the children. Abigail, unconvinced that he would do anything of the sort, set out after him, riding the 270 miles by herself on horseback. The journey would have been grueling anyway, but she was still recovering from a case of smallpox and thus was particularly weak. After 11 days of travel, with no money to speak of and bargaining with personal items for fresh horses, food, and a place to sleep, Abigail drew near to Hartford, Connecticut, which was only a day's journey from her home. She was tired, ill, and fearful that she might cross paths with her husband. However, she records in her memoir for that day, "This had been to me a lonesome, gloomy day, traversing solitary wilds, with much bad road, and some extremely bad places. But I was able joyfully to say, 'Yet I am not alone, but the Father is with me.'"[78] Throughout her nearly 26 years of marriage, Abigail Abbot Bailey surely "traversed solitary wilds" and "some extremely bad places," struggling through it all to reconcile her faith

[77] Abbot Bailey, *Memoirs*, 124
[78] Abbot Bailey, *Memoirs*, 168.

with the circumstances in which she found herself. At the end of her life, she had not only remained in the faith she had formally adopted at age seventeen, she also had tested that faith through experience and came away with a deeper understanding of what it meant to have faith in the God who was with her as she lived through and made sense of the "solitary wilds" in which she found herself.

The deeper understanding she achieved, as well as the strength that it imparted to her, is evident in how she describes the way in which her difficult saga came to an end. Upon reaching home, she went with her brothers and several other men from the community and attempted one more time to reach an informal settlement with Asa. When it was clear that he still was unwilling to cooperate, she and the men went to a justice of the peace who swore out a warrant for Asa's arrest. Before they were able to take him into custody, however, Asa bundled the children into a cart and sent them on their way to the same town in which he had left Abigail. Unrepentant though he was "now a prisoner of civil justice," he taunted her about what she intended to do to retrieve the children whom he had sent away.[79] Her answer is quite revealing. First, she told him that "I meant to trust them, as I ever had done, in the hands of the Lord, and I doubted not but he would take care of them."[80] At this response Asa wheedled her about going after them to make sure they were cared for appropriately, but knowing his character as well as she did, Abigail realized that this was all a ploy to use her love for her children to convince her to drop her intention of pursuing a legal settlement and to be content with his plan of setting her up with some of the smaller children at the property where he had previously taken her. "And this cruel purpose I was determined to defeat," she writes, going on to say:

[79] Abbot Bailey, *Memoirs,* 174. The laws at the time still gave automatic custody of children to their father, so even though he was imprisoned, Abigail had no legal recourse in regaining her children or keeping them with her against the wishes of their father.

[80] Abbot Bailey, *Memoirs*, 173.

> I told Mr. B. I had important business, on which I must now attend; and I did not mean to be diverted from it. I told him I had long viewed it a great privilege to cast my cares upon God. And I believed God would give me firmness to pursue my object with him; and also that God would take those children out of his cruel hands, and restore them to me.[81]

She concluded her recounting of this interview with the following words: "I then and ever understood that trusting in God implies the due use of all proper means."[82] Making appropriate "use of all proper means," Abigail finally defeated Asa at his own game, threatening to have the townsmen take him across the border into New Hampshire and try him for a capital crime. Faced with this possibility, Asa capitulated and made a legal agreement in which Abigail received half of their mutual property and Asa permanently vacated their home and the surrounding area. She later filed for a divorce, which was granted the following year in 1793. Abigail's path to a new understanding and application of her faith was long and difficult. But by relying on her God even in the darkest of times, and wrestling with how the tenets of her religion applied to her difficult situation, she not only was able to maintain and even strengthen her identity as an adherent to religious orthodoxy, she also was able to become an agent of change in her own life and in the lives of her family members.

As a white, Congregationalist New Englander, Abigail was situated racially, geographically, and religiously in the bastion of Calvinist, Anglo-American culture. However, the era in which she lived was a transitional one, and her struggle to apply her conservative faith to the exigencies of her life indicate that changes were underway not only in American society as a whole but also in Evangelicalism itself. Abigail identified with the religious establishment of the eighteenth century, and spoke disparagingly of "methodists" whose unorthodox religious practices and valorizing of uneducated clergy offended her sense of order.[83] Nevertheless, her

[81] Abbot Bailey, *Memoirs,* 173.
[82] Abbot Bailey, *Memoirs*, 173-4.
[83] Abbot Bailey, *Memoirs*, 180.

actions and the way in which she took the initiative to use her faith as a tool with which to bring about positive change in her circumstances demonstrate that she was in fact a transitional figure herself.

Though the Methodists that she accused of "impertinences" were indeed a fringe sect during most of her lifetime, they as well as the basic Evangelical tenets that she shared with them were to become the most common variant of Protestantism in the century that followed her death. And offensive though Methodist practices were to Abigail's eighteenth-century sensibilities, the basic doctrinal emphases espoused by her later Methodist and Baptist sisters were conservative in the sense that they largely agreed with those of eighteenth-century Evangelicalism, regardless of denominational quibbles over methods and specific doctrines other than the four central Evangelical beliefs of *bibliocentrism*, *crucicentrism*, *conversion*, and *activism*. However, as Abigail's own actions indicate, the social context in which these later women practiced their faith allowed them to understand and apply those conservative doctrines in new ways. Paradoxically, by way of uniquely nineteenth-century interpretations of older ideas, such women's Evangelical faith was both conservative and yet undeniably radical, providing profound help in enduring the difficulties of life as well as in finding a way to change in their favor and eventually even transform the domestic, religious, and social situations in which they found themselves. Thus, nineteenth-century Evangelical women's adherence to a conservative religious ethic became a unique and potent means of social and personal empowerment.

The memoir that was published following Abigail's death in 1815, and which records and reveals her maturing faith, apparently was composed several years after the incidents it describes, but it drew heavily from a prayer journal that she seems to have kept throughout her

life.[84] Though the prayer diary was lost, the memoir often quotes it directly, and by doing so offers not only a fuller, more detailed account of Abigail's circumstances but also a rich portrait of her inner life and of her faith. The combination of memoir and prayer journal is especially insightful since taken together they show what might be called Abigail's practical theology: the outworking of religious belief in the particulars of her daily life. In contrast to the academic discipline of practical theology, which can be thought of as the study of methods for pastoral ministry and the teaching of theology with the intent to transform listeners, the practical theology considered in this thesis is the personal application of one's religious beliefs to situations, relationships, and problems encountered within one's social context and in everyday life.[85] In this sense, an individual's practical theology can be thought of as the fruition of that person's assimilation of the values and principles contained in the theology of her religion. While practical theology can refer to an individual's intellectual interpretation of theology it also has a visible, material component which is one's embodied interpretation of that theology. In other words, an individual's system of belief will be evidenced by their actions. Practical theology then, as used and discussed in this thesis, is the lived experience of one's faith, in which theological principles are applied to the issues and questions of life.

This chapter explores thematically and semi-chronologically the practical theology of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American women who, like Abigail Abbot Bailey, adhered to a broadly Evangelical faith and throughout their lives remained within the confines of established Evangelical denominations. Such women evince not only the continuity found within Evangelicalism from the late colonial period through the early national and antebellum eras of

[84] Ann Taves, "Introduction," in *Religion and Domestic Violence in Early New England: The Memoirs of Abigail Abbot Bailey* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 2.

[85] Bonnie Miller-Mclemore, "Five Misunderstandings About Practical Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, no. 1 (2012), 12, accessed July 24, 2014, http://www.dx.doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2012-0002.

America, but also the changes that occurred within the Evangelical subculture over that period of time as the social and national context in which these women practiced their Evangelical theology evolved. The Evangelical framework and associated terms by which Evangelicals understood and described themselves and their world remained relatively constant throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and yet the meanings attached to those terms took on new interpretations and were applied differently as nineteenth-century America matured into a society distinct from that of the previous century. Both drawing on and contributing to the reformist tendencies of the new century, the Evangelical call to action took on an outward focus in which believers understood themselves to be instruments used of God in bringing about his will in the world. Thus, interpreting and practicing their theology within the context of the nineteenth-century social milieu, Evangelicals found ways to cope with the complexities of modern life that allowed them, like Abigail Abbot Bailey did, both to become active agents of change in their lives and in their society and yet retain the integrity of their largely orthodox faith.

Continuities in Evangelical Belief from the Eighteenth to the Nineteenth Century

It is clear from the historiography that a steady current of Christian religiosity from the colonial era through the early national period and on throughout the nineteenth century inflected the rhetoric, the epistemology, and the moral culture that informed nineteenth-century social discourse. More than merely reflecting this common Christian religiosity, however, each of the women in this thesis embraced a specific version of Christianity that can be categorized as Protestant and Evangelical. Their Evangelical faith grants them an essential similarity in spite of marked dissimilarity of many other aspects of their lives. The earliest women under consideration were born in the eighteenth century; the latest ones died in the twentieth century. In addition to this diversity of place in time, each of the women were also quite different in the

places they occupied socially and materially. Some were born into white families whose material circumstances and religious and political sentiments placed them at the center of the culturally hegemonic upper class. Others, black and enslaved from birth, fought their way not only out of slavery but even into a social position in which they claimed – and acted upon – the right to pronounce moral judgment on the society that had both allowed and enforced the inequality and oppression they had experienced firsthand. Still others were born free and black, but knew all too well the disadvantages that society attached to their darker complexions. In spite of these vast differences in material and social circumstances, these women held in common a perspective of the world derived from a broadly similar Evangelical faith. Though they represented a variety of denominations, including Baptist, Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist Episcopal, and Episcopal, the scope of whose doctrines were more or less in keeping with that of the religious establishment of the eighteenth century, each of these denominations affirmed the four core doctrines that generally are accepted as the defining elements of Evangelicalism: *bibliocentrism*, *crucicentrism*, *conversion*, and *activism*.[86]

Though the denominations represented by these women may have comprised a range of beliefs and practices, some of which may have outright contradicted each other, these essential points of agreement rendered their particular denominations not only broadly similar, but also fairly conservative relative to many other faiths such as Hicksite Quakerism, Unitarianism, Christian Science, and others that derived from the Christian tradition. As a result of this basic similarity, these women perceived their world through a framework of religious concepts derived from the core doctrines of Evangelicalism that in many ways remained constant even though their lives spanned more than a century. The conservative effect of this relative constancy,

[86] Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 2-3.

however, was offset by qualities that made Evangelicalism innately prone to an individualism that empowered believers to question and to work out for themselves what their doctrines meant and how best to apply those doctrines to their own circumstances. Thus, the paradox of Evangelicalism was its peculiar ability to serve simultaneously as a conservative and a radicalizing force.

As the social context in which Evangelical believers lived made increased room for individualism in the years following the American Revolution and into the nineteenth century, the latent individualistic impulse of Evangelical theology came to the fore, and had profound repercussions both in how Evangelical women such as these handled their personal lives and in how they understood and went about addressing problems that they perceived in their communities and in their nation. Importantly, though Evangelical believers in the nineteenth century experienced and lived their faith in ways somewhat different from their eighteenth-century predecessors, believers throughout both centuries shared a common language rooted in a common perspective.

A Broken World: Evangelical Notions of Sin, Bitterness, and Corruption

First, drawing on the Christian notion of human sinfulness, Evangelical believers understood not only by observation and experience but also by reason of their theology that human existence was characterized by imperfection, by a fundamental and inescapable brokenness. This brokenness began with the hearts, minds, and bodies of individuals, but it also infected all aspects of living. Esther Edwards Burr, born in 1732, called it "corruption," writing to her journaling confidante in 1755, "Tis good for us my friend to go throu evil as well as good report, and very necessary to our knowing our own hearts, and the corruptions in it. Some times

such things bring such Corruptions to our sight as we never mistrusted we had there."[87] As the daughter of the renowned theologian Jonathan Edwards, Esther had been raised in a family well-established as leading members of eighteenth-century New England society.[88] Throughout her short life, she benefited from the myriad connections and other social advantages conferred on her by her family's social capital. Considering the privileged circumstances in which lived, she may have had good reason for "mistrusting" that she had corruptions in her heart. However, because of her Evangelical faith, she was well aware of her all-too-human failings. She wrote to her friend and journaling partner Sarah, "—[R]ealy my dear I am under *many, many* advantages to know and do duty, and the servant that know his Lords will and did it [*not*] was beaten with many stripes – O how great will my condemnation be if I fail of the grace of God! O my dear pray for me!"[89]

Though the failure that Esther seems to have lamented the most had to do with her spiritual condition, she clearly also felt inadequate in many aspects of her life – in the plethora of social obligations she and her husband Aaron Burr had because of his role as a minister and later his job as the president of the College of New Jersey, in the lack of time and energy she was able to devote to her intellectual development, and in the day to day tasks of raising her family and keeping house. In addition to the demands made on her time and energy by these various obligations, Esther did not enjoy good health. Though her fatigue and distress over her perceived inability to fulfill her obligations is a common theme throughout her journal, one series of letters

[87] Esther Edwards Burr, "Letter No. 15 {*June 28, 1755*} Saturday P.M. in *The Journal of Esther Edwards Burr, 1754-1757*, ed. Carol F. Karlsen and Laurie Crumpacker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 128. Hereafter referred to as Burr, *Journal*, with the appropriate entry identifier and page number.

[88] Jonathan Edwards pastored both Congregational and Presbyterian Churches at different points of his life. Though the methods of governance for these denominations were different, they at the time held quite similar theological positions on most other points of doctrine. See George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) for details regarding Edwards' pastorates.

[89] Burr, "Letter No. 12 {*March 30, 1755*} Sabbath P.M.," *Journal*, 104.

in particular offers a small sample of how, in spite of her relatively privileged status, she knew and experienced the frustrations, imperfections, indeed the brokenness, of human life. In November of 1754 she writes, "Two days past I have been employed in writing Letters to Stockbridge and Northampton, and am now down sick with an extream bad cold, and cant write any mor but that Mr Burr is gon to Presbitry. He keeps the stroke going, as soon as come home gon again."[90] Three days later she writes, "The Governor and Lady just went from here. They drank Tea with me…I find in my distress about my friends, and great confusion in the house (this confusion was occasioned by a croud of people here all day, such a day as I have hardly seen since I have been here) I have wrote a most dolefull heap of scrawls as almost all my writing is…It is no wonder for all the time I do get to write I steal."[91] The day following this entry was a Sunday and Esther records the scripture text for the sermon and some of her thoughts about it. She and the others at the assembly were charged to consider "what end we had in view when we came to the House of God and his ordinances etc…" Though her reflection on the sermon caused her both to feel "some longings to meet Christ at his Table" and to regret her spiritual "deadness," that evening she had to stay home from church to care for two members of her household who were "very poorly." Alas, she writes in conclusion, "There is duty at home as well as at the house of God."[92]

As all the demands made on her time and on her energy demonstrate, her social status offered but little protection from the struggles of life. She, like other women who enjoyed fewer

[90] Burr, "Letter No. 9 {*November 6, 1754*} Wednesday P.M.," *Journal*, 60.

[91] Burr, "Letter No. 9{*November 9, 1754*} Saturday P.M.," *Journal*, 61. The distress about her friends she mentions is referring to the uncertain situation in Stockbridge where her parents then were living and working as missionaries to Native Americans. The infighting there among the missionaries and between them and their Native American congregants was related to the international situation and soon would break out into actual fighting in what became known as the French and Indian War.

[92] Burr, "Letter No. 9 {*November 10, 1754*} Sabbath," *Journal*, 61.

advantages than she did, also experienced the helplessness of a mother unable to heal a gravely ill child. When her young daughter Sally came down with an illness accompanied by a high fever, she sought medical help, but she also wrestled her spirit into submission to God's will. "I have *again* and *again*, given her to God and I hope by *faith* – I think if I know my own heart, I can trust her in the hands of the God I have indeavoured to give her to, after death – But O my dear when this Letter comes to hand…pray for me ernestly that I may not be found wanting in my duty to this dear Child whether in *Life*, or *death*!"[93] In a letter to her parents written following her husband's unexpected death from malaria, Esther repeats the same theme of learning and practicing greater submission to God when confronted with the undeniable brokenness of life. She writes in October of 1757,

> I think God has given me such a sense of the vanity of the world, and uncertainty of all sublunary enjoyments, as I never had before. The world vanishes out of my sight! Heavenly and eternal things appear much more real and important, than ever before. I feel myself to be under much greater obligations to be the Lord's than before this sore affliction. The way of salvation, by faith in Jesus Christ, has appeared more clear and excellent; and I have been constrained to venture my all upon him; and have found great peace of soul, in what I hope have been the actings of faith.[94]

A few paragraphs later in the same letter Esther goes on to beg her parents to "request earnestly of the Lord, that I may never despise his chastening, nor faint under this his severe stroke…."[95] She reveals that her request for her parents to pray for her stems from her desire to do nothing but conduct herself in such a way that the honor of her God and of her religion is upheld. "O," she writes, "I am afraid I shall conduct myself so, as to bring dishonour on my God,

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[93] Burr, "Letter No. 13 {*April 2, 1755*} Wednsday A.M.," *Journal*, 105-106.

[94] Burr, "Related Correspondence," *Journal*, 294. Also, more details regarding Aaron Burr's death can be found in Carol F. Karlsen and Laurie Crumpacker, "Introduction," in *The Journal of Esther Edwards Burr, 1754-1757* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 17.

[95] Burr, "Related Correspondence," *Journal*, 294.

and the religion which I profess! No, rather let me die this moment, than be left to bring dishonour on God's holy name."[96]

The possibility of bringing dishonor to God's name, and in "despising his chastening" stemmed from what Esther calls "Nature." Not long after the death of her husband, her little son Aaron, Jr. came down with a life-threatening illness. In another letter to her parents she relates the struggle and the triumph she experienced as she was forced to trust God with yet another beloved family member:

> I was able to Resighn the Ch[ild] (after a severe struggle with Nature) with the gre[at]est freedom – God shewed me that the Child w[as] not my own but His, and that he had a right to recall what he had lent when ever he thought fit, and I had no reason to complain or say God was hard with me. This silenced me. But O how good is God! He not only kept me from complaining but comforted me by ennabling me to offer up the Child by Faith….[97]

This fight to bring her own human "Nature" into alignment with the will of God was a victory for Esther, yet as she says later in the same letter, "But O Sir what cause of deep Humiliation [and] abasement of soul have I on account of remaining Corruption which I see working continually, especually Pride – O how many shapes does Pride Cloak it self in…"[98]

From the difficulties of daily life to the trials of illness and death among those she loved, Esther experienced firsthand what her theology told her: that the "Corruption" of sin to which all humans were subject made family relationships, political institutions, and social realities alike imperfect and defective in some way. From her religion she understood not only that life in this world was defective, but that this defectiveness – the brokenness she experienced – was rooted in humanity's sinful rebellion against God – our lack of submission to his holy, perfect will. God's

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[96] Burr, "Related Correspondence," *Journal*, 294.
[97] Burr, "Princeton Novr. 2. 1757," *Journal*, 295.
[98] Burr, "Princeton Novr. 2. 1757," *Journal*, 296.

just response to such rebellion was punishment – Esther refers to both the French and Indian War as well as to the earthquake in Lisbon in 1755 as the judgment of God – or, in the case of believers, "chastening" designed to bring the believer into greater submission to him and to his will. Even the weather was in the hand of God and could indicate his active displeasure with humanity's sinful corruption. [99]

Though Esther Edwards Burr lived in pre-Revolutionary America, her belief that the source of life's imperfections was the corruption inherent to humanity's sinful and rebellious "Nature," continued to be how Evangelicals of the nineteenth century understood and described their world and the brokenness that they themselves experienced in it. Maria W. Stewart, for example, was born in 1803, more than seventy years after Esther Edwards Burr, but in her speeches and in her autobiographical *Productions* she touched on the same theme that Esther did of inward corruption, noting its outward manifestation. She grew up as a "bound out" servant, and though she eventually gained her freedom and married well, she was widowed scarcely three years into her marriage. She then began her career as an activist, speaking out against slavery and exhorting those of her race to do everything in their power to improve their circumstances.[100] As a black woman addressing an audience of black Americans she discussed in one of her speeches the particular troubles faced by the African-American community. Referencing the fact that few among the dominant race of Americans "bestow one thought upon the benighted sons and daughters of Africa, who have enriched the soils of America with their tears and blood," she called upon her peers to remove the barrier of "*I can't"* and replace it with "*I will."* She then lists a set of social problems, which though she is addressing specifically to "the sons and daughters

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[99] Burr, *Journal*, "Letter No. 10 {*January* 1, 1755}," 76-77; "Letter No. 19 {*December 30, 1755}*," 179; "Letter No. 3 {*May 2, 1757*}, 259; and "Related Correspondence," 294.

[100] Marilyn Richardson, ed., "Introduction," in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3-14.

of Africa," she also applies to the American nation as a whole: "minds blinded by ignorance," "our church…involved in so much difficulty," God having "cut down…the most learned and intelligent of our men." And why do these problems plague America? The answer is unequivocal: "It is on account of sin."[101]

Though Maria W. Stewart's career as an abolitionist speaker was at its height in the 1830s, this same theme of life's imperfections and its relationship to humanity's sinful condition is a common refrain in the writings of Evangelical women who lived throughout the century. Harriet Jacobs writing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in 1860, thirty years after Maria Stewart exhorted her fellow African Americans and a century after Esther Burr pondered the nature of human corruption, refers to life's brokenness as the "bitterness of life," which for the slave was often even greater than the bitterness of death. [102] Though Jacobs' descriptions of her experience at the hands of her proslavery oppressors were meant to underscore the morally corrosive nature of the institution of slavery and thus emphasize the structural factors that contributed to the problem, she nevertheless attributes the "bitterness" that she and other enslaved Americans felt to "fiends who bear the shape of men."[103] Slave owners, slave traders, and even those in the North who "aped the customs of slavery" were prompted by laws and customs to become ever more corrupt and entrenched in their prejudices, but to Harriet Jacobs whose perspective was rooted in Evangelical theology, the heart of the problem was still the same corruption and sin inherent to the human condition that Esther Edwards Burr had

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[101] Maria W. Stewart, "Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart," Boston: 1835, repr. in *Spiritual Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 13. Hereafter referred to as Stewart, *Productions*, with the appropriate page number.

[102] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Nell Irvin Painter (1861; repr. New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 16. Hereafter referred to as Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl,* ed. Painter, with the appropriate page number.

[103] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Painter, 21 and 30.

denounced in her journal a century earlier.[104] Legal slavery allowed weakness of moral character to flourish into selfishness, greed, lust, murder, adultery and all manner of sin committed by those in positions of power against those held powerless by the system of slavery as well as by entrenched prejudice against people of color.

Hannah Crafts, writing perhaps within ten years of Jacobs, confirms the particular bitterness that life in America held for those of African descent, enslaved or free. Speaking of her childhood during which she was a slave, she recalls, "I soon learned what a curse was attached to my race, soon learned that the African blood in my veins would forever exclude me from the higher walks of life. That toil unremitted unpaid toil must be my lot and portion, without even the hope or expectation of any thing better."[105]

The Riches of Christ: Conversion and Hope for the Evangelical Believer

These women, whether slave or free, understood from personal experience that life was bitter, broken as it were by innate human corruption as well as by social structures designed to allow that corruption free rein. Bitter as life was, however, it also was destined to end in death. The inevitability of death was a fact of life that these women knew from experiencing personal loss and that they needed to make sense of. Just as Evangelical theology attributed the difficulties of life to humanity's sin, offering a means of understanding and explaining the suffering with which life was replete, it also offered a means of coping with death and loss. For the Evangelical believer, physical death was inescapable for all, but this undeniable human condition was balanced with the hope that by partaking of Christ's substitutionary death through

[104] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Painter, 183.
[105] Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 6.

faith, those who belonged to him would eventually be raised from the dead just as he was, and thus be able to escape the "second death" of eternal punishment by a just God.[106]

In the lives and writings of the Evangelical women considered in this thesis death is thought of and referred to in continual juxtaposition with the hope that formed the center of the Christian gospel. Jarena Lee, for example, who was born to free parents in New Jersey in 1783, in her narrative published in 1849 speaks often of death and of the unique hope for humanity that she found in the gospel of Christ which she shared with thousands of people throughout her career as an itinerant preacher. She was not raised in a Christian household, but became a Christian in her early twenties while sitting under the teaching of the Reverend Richard Allen, a preeminent Methodist minister who later went on to lead the formation of a separate African Methodist Episcopal Church. Jarena Lee's narrative records her religious experience and can be thought of as her religious biography, primarily detailing her preaching ministry throughout the United States, but especially in the Northeast. Though the primary thrust of her the journal she kept as well as of the pamphlet and the later published narrative was to prove the faithfulness of her God by recording the many instances of his faithfulness to her during her ministry, she also includes biographical details that indicate that she experienced her fair share of life's bitterness.

In spite of the fact that her experience of life's bitterness did not include living through the type of Southern slavery from which Jacobs and Crafts had escaped, she was well acquainted with death, describing the loss of her husband and four other family members in the space of six years as "such baptisms of the Spirit as mortality could scarcely bear."[107] When her husband, who was a Methodist minister, died she was left a widow with two small children, one who was two years old and one only 6 months. She did not include much in the way of exact dates in her

[106] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal*, 25.
[107] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal*, 14.

account, but at some point in the few years following the death of her husband one of the children seems also to have died since from then on throughout her narrative she refers only to her son. Her call to preach, which she had first felt about eight years previously, was renewed about this time as well. As this call pressed heavily on her, and she began to act on it, she records that she often felt she had to leave her son at home while she attended to the duties of her calling as a preacher. She writes, "I now began to think seriously of breaking up housekeeping, and forsaking all to preach the everlasting Gospel."[108] She did indeed follow through on this inclination, taking her son to her hometown in New Jersey to be raised by his grandmother, and embarking on what proved to be a long career as a preacher of the gospel that she loved more than anything else in her life. For Jarena Lee, as for other Evangelical believers, so strong was her belief in the Gospel she preached that even death and difficult circumstances could not prevent her – and perhaps even prompted her – to devote her life to sharing with others the hope that she found in Christ.

In her journal, she describes the inevitability of corruption and death, which even the natural world demonstrated: "Even the falling of the dead leaves from the forests, and the dried spires of the mown grass, showed me that I too must die in like manner."[109] As Jarena's words indicate, for the Evangelical believer, the imperfection of life – its brokenness – extended beyond the realm of human interactions and affected all aspects of creation. However, although this brokenness was pervasive, and the corruption of human living ultimately would end in the corruption of death, the human situation was not without hope since the heart of the Christian gospel was redemption. Jarena Lee portrays the uniqueness of humanity's hope in stark terms, "But my case was awfully different from that of the grass of the field, or the widespread decay of

[108] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal*, 18.
[109] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal*, 8.

a thousand forests, as I felt within me a living principle, an immortal spirit, which cannot die, and must forever enjoy the smiles of its Creator, or feel the pangs of ceaseless damnation."[110] The hope that these Evangelical Christians possessed was that by having a heart and life in right fellowship with the Creator they might "forever enjoy" their Creator's smiles and escape the "ceaseless damnation" which the corruption and brokenness of life anticipated.

Though Jarena Lee was born fifty years later than Esther Edwards Burr and her career was at its height nearly a century after Burr's life ended, there is a great deal of continuity in the way in which these two Evangelical women thought about and described their Christian hope. Burr summarized what she termed "a very good sermon calculated to do good" in one of her journal entries. It described the Christian hope as one of an exchange of poverty and enrichment between Christ and those for whom he was willing to become poor in order that they might be made rich. She includes the scripture passage on which this sermon was based, "the 8 chap of II Corinthians 9th vers, 'For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that tho' he was Rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be Rich."[111] Jarena Lee, though she does not quote this same scripture passage, echoes Burr's sentiment that "Religion, the love of God in the soul…is more than the Gold of Opher; though poor, making many rich."[112]

Just as sin and the brokenness that resulted from it were pervasive, the "richness" of redemption through Christ was thoroughgoing, having both a physical, material dimension as well as the spiritual one, which was primary. The spiritual richness came from repentance and faith, which made possible perfected fellowship with God. Esther Edwards Burr describes this fellowship as a relationship, surpassing even that of family and the closest of earthly friends.

[110] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal*, 8.
[111] Burr, "Letter No. 15 {July 6, 1755} Sabbath, and our Sacrament," *Journal*, 131.
[112] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal*, 62.

When she apparently went into early labor with her son, Aaron, she was alone, without the company and support of her husband, her family, or even her "petecular friends." Nevertheless, she was not alone. She wrote of the occasion to her journaling partner, "—but O my dear God was these relations and more then all to me in the hour of my distre[ss]."[113] Again, Jarena Lee's words echo those of her earlier sister in Christ. Describing how she was able to go on with life as a widow and young mother only because of her faith of God she writes, "I have ever been fed by his bounty, clothed by his mercy, comforted and healed when sick, succored when tempted, and every where upheld by his hand."[114]

This comforting relationship in which one felt the presence of God came about through conversion. Prior to her conversion, Jarena Lee was not only mindful of the fact that death was her ultimate fate, she came to understand that the root of her miserable condition was stated in the scriptural passage which said, "I perceive that thy heart is not right in the sight of God."[115] Jarena's distress over this state of affairs was, according to Evangelical theology, the proper response of sinners to the God who had made them and who had the power either to condemn them to everlasting punishment or to save them from his just wrath through the substitutionary death of his Son. Esther Burr, writing in 1755 nearly a century earlier than Jarena Lee wrote, indicated her essential agreement with this Evangelical perspective as she discussed with her journaling partner the furor among her contemporaries over the possibility of war with the French. "What blessed times it would be if all were as much ingaged in conversation about the grand concerns of their never dieing souls, as they are about their bodies and estates, when they immagine them in a little dainger of being injured."[116]

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[113] Burr, "Letter No. 20 {March 26, 1756}," *Journal*, 188.
[114] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal,* 15.
[115] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal*, 8.
[116] Burr, "Letter No. 10 {January 2, 1755}," *Journal*, 77.

The words and the experiences of other Evangelical women throughout early national and antebellum America corroborate the continuity of this Evangelical emphasis on the necessity of having one's heart and soul "right with God," and the concomitant spiritual danger of remaining insensible to that need. Maria W. Stewart, for instance, emphasized both of these aspects of Evangelical theology in the prayers and meditations recorded in her *Productions* published in 1835. "And, O Lord God, wilt thou in an especial manner have mercy on our unconverted brethren. Soften their proud and rebellious hearts, and be not angry with them forever. O, Jesus of Nazareth, hast thou not died that they might live? Has thou not become poor that they might become rich?"[117] Pleading with God to change the hearts of her unconverted fellow Americans, Stewart makes clear what she sees the danger is in their remaining unconverted: "Open their eyes" she begs, "that they may see that they are going down to hell, as fast as the wheels of time can carry them. O, stop them in their mad career!"[118]

Stewart, like Esther Edwards Burr and other Evangelical believers, understood that this spiritual danger in which the unconverted lived was the result of sin that was present in the human heart. Stewart makes this clear in another prayer. "Wherefore hast thou hardened our hearts and blinded our eyes?" she rhetorically asks of God. "It is because we have honored thee with our lips, when our hearts were far from thee…We have regarded iniquity in our hearts, therefore thou wilt not hear."[119] The solution to spiritual distance from God in this life and the key to being released from condemnation in the next was repentance upon which the redemption of the individual hinged: "Return again unto us, O Lord God, we beseech thee, and pardon this the iniquity of thy servants." [120] Considering the grave, existential danger to which Evangelicals

[117] Stewart, *Productions*, 34.
[118] Stewart, *Productions*, 34.
[119] Stewart, *Productions*, 10.
[120] Stewart, *Productions*, 10.

believed all humanity was subject, from the Evangelical perspective obtaining God's pardon for iniquity was the only way that condemned sinners could be assured that they would be spared the wrath of God in eternity.

Thus, repentance and having a heart right with God was every individual's most important object in life. And for this reason, the spiritual aspect of redemption, which came through repentance and ultimately was about one's eternal fate, had this-worldly consequences as well. Not only was there an immediate spiritual consequence in the form of a relationship with God, there was also a physical, material component of Christ's "richness" that believers experienced. Throughout her *Productions* and in her addresses to her African-American contemporaries, Maria W. Stewart emphasized this two-fold nature of true piety. Using the term "hearken," which implied not just hearing but obeying as well, Stewart connected the obedience of repentance with right living leading to the blessing of God. She asserts, "That day we, as a people, hearken unto the voice of the Lord our God, and become distinguished for our ease, elegance and grace, combined with other virtues, that day the Lord will raise us up, and enough to aid and befriend us, and we shall begin to flourish."[121] Although the connection between having a repentant heart and being "raised up" and "befriended" by God in a material sense was not always as clear as Stewart states it, the theme of right heartedness leading to right living is constant throughout the writings of Evangelical women.

In an anecdote related in *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* Harriet Jacobs summarizes the connections between a pious heart, fellowship with God in this life, right living, and the promise of a right relationship with God upon one's death. Uncle Fred, who had been a slave his whole life had a "piety and childlike trust in God [that] were beautiful to witness." Though it was illegal

[121] Stewart, *Productions*, 17-18.

for slaves to be taught how to read, Uncle Fred, knowing that Harriet, or Linda, as she named herself in the narrative, could read approached her and asked if she would teach him enough that he would be able to read the Bible for himself. His eagerness was so great that after only a few lessons he could "spell out words in the Bible." He paused in his efforts, and smiling at his teacher stated, "Honey, it 'pears to me when I can read dis good book I shall be nearer to God. White man is got all de sense. He can larn easy. It ain't easy for ole black man like me. I only wants to read dis book, dat I may know how to live; den I hab no fear 'bout dying."[122] In this short story about Uncle Fred, Jacobs pulls together the strands of an Evangelical ethic of living. Repentance, faith, and a changed heart led to a richness of life in Christ in which one communed with God and lived one's life in his service and for his glory. With this kind of an ethic of living to drive their thinking as well as their behavior, it is clear that what Jarena Lee said of herself and her life's work as a preacher, many Evangelical women might have said about their lives as well: "Thou God knowest my heart, and that thy glory is all I have in view."[123]

New Interpretations of Familiar Concepts in Evangelical Thought and Practice

While this essentially Evangelical framework for understanding the world remained largely constant from the late colonial period through the end of the nineteenth-century, it was inflected by the context in which it was practiced. As nineteenth-century American culture changed, the ways in which Evangelical women interpreted their theology and practiced their ethic of living began to change as well. In particular, the ways in which they defined the human brokenness they encountered in life and what they understood the solution to be were influenced by distinctive aspects of nineteenth-century culture which were absent in the previous century

[122] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Painter, 81.
[123] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal*, 32.

and which, when assimilated into the Evangelical theological framework, had profound implications for the practical theology of nineteenth-century believers. Much of this change had to do with how certain Evangelical phrases and ideas were interpreted and applied.

The idea of submission to God's will in the face of afflictions, for example, was one such idea that had widely differing meanings from one century to the next. While women in the late colonial period often were involved in benevolent, charitable activities such as visiting "the Widow, the fatherless and the sick," their understanding of human brokenness and redemption in Christ hinged on pursuing submission to the inscrutable will of God and becoming better, more mature Christians as a result of their afflictions.[124] This is a recurring theme in Esther Edwards Burr's journal. Reflecting on her visits to "the Widow, the fatherless and the sick," Burr writes, "There is somthi[ng] to be learnd go where one will if we have but an heart to reflect and improve. I cant but be amazed that *ever* I was disposed to repine at the dispensations of Providence for when the dispensation has been most grievous how much more Mercyfull has God been to me than others that are far better than I."[125] For Esther, her acts of benevolence had more to do with learning a spiritual lesson about God's Providence and divine will regarding her own life and the lives of others than it had to do with materially changing the circumstances of those she visited. However, as optimistic as she was in this particular letter about learning not to "repine at the dispensations of Providence," Esther later indicates in another letter how difficult the struggle was for her not to do so.

At the time that Esther began her journal, her parents were living at the frontier outpost of Stockbridge, MA near the New York border. Esther's father, Jonathan Edwards, was pastoring a church there while working as a missionary to the surrounding population of Mahican Indians.

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[124] Burr, "Letter No. 9 {October 21, 1754} Monday," *Journal*, 57.
[125] Burr, "Letter No. 9 {October 21, 1754} Monday," *Journal*, 57.

Though his spiritual efforts appear to have been well-received, relations between the English and the Indians in Stockbridge soured over internal disagreements within the leadership of the church and the school. These problems contributed to mutual suspicion and fear that led to ever-worsening relations between the two groups as the international situation became the more localized French and Indian War.[126] Esther, along with her family lived in constant fear that her parents would be killed in one of the many attacks and counter attacks as the fighting dragged on. The fear and the worry were constant, but so was her concern that such feelings were inappropriate for a Christian. After receiving bad news about her parents' situation, she wrote in her journal, "O help me to commit em to God who orders all things in mercy, and dont willingly afflict nor grieve any of his Children! I am ready to say some times, why is it? Why does God suffer his own most dear children to be hunted about in this manner! But this is a very wrong temper of mind. I hope I may be enabled to crush it by divine assistance."[127] Submission, for Esther, required the crushing of any tendency toward complaint or questioning of God's will or wisdom in how the events of life played out.

This struggle of the eighteenth-century Evangelical believer to resign oneself to the will of God was shared by Esther's contemporary and fellow New Englander, Mary Fish Noyes Silliman. Her biographers, Joy Day Buel and Richard Buel note that Mary had a particularly difficult time aligning herself with God's will during the winter of 1770-71. She had been a widow for less than three years, at this point, and during the spring of 1770 she had lost her four year old daughter to a disease, probably diphtheria. Adding to her troubles, she was in the midst of a protracted courtship with a man who already had offered to marry her, and thus could provide some stability in her precarious financial situation, but was for some unknown reason

[126] Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 375-413.
[127] Burr, "Letter No. 9 {November 8, 1754} Fryday," *Journal*, 61.

not entirely to her liking. She had not brought herself to the point of saying yes or no, and was beginning to feel the criticism of her acquaintances for her less than honorable dithering. Staying that winter at her parents' home, she fought off depression by finding "some comfort in reading the word of God." Nevertheless, the rare "comfortable day, sweetly resigned to God's will" interspersed a longer stream of days in which she felt "distressed with an unresigned frame of mind & a proud heart. Not willing to bow, not willing to have my character roughly handled."[128]

Both of these women experienced difficult times, both understood their difficulties as trials of faith dealt by the hand of a loving God, and both sought a place of peaceful resignation to God's will. Situated at both the geographical and theological center of the Puritan-influenced dominant culture of eighteenth-century America, these two women exemplify the introspective Puritan ethic in which the resolution of problems lay not in changing one's circumstances but rather in changing one's heart to be aligned with the word and will of God, come what may. This ethic of outwardly passive but inwardly aggressive pursuit of submission to God's will stands in sharp contrast to the way in which nineteenth-century Evangelical believers understood and practiced submission.

Abigail Abbot Bailey, though she was a near contemporary of Esther Burr and Mary Silliman, offers a particularly illustrative example of how this ethic began to change in the nineteenth century. She, like Esther Edwards Burr and Mary Fish Noyes Silliman was a Calvinist Congregationalist, but by the end of her life she had come to an understanding of her faith and of what submission meant that was quite different from how Esther Edwards Burr and Mary Silliman understood and practiced it. Though all three of these women descended from introspective Puritan stock, Abigail's memoir records a spiritual journey in which her earlier

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[128] Mary Fish Noyes Silliman, quoted in Joy Day Buel and Richard Buel, *Way of Duty* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.:1984), 58-64. Hereafter referred to as *Way of Duty*, with the appropriate page number.

practical theology of an inwardly focused obedience and submission to God's will is in dialog with a more outwardly oriented ethic of purposeful obedience in which she both follows her forebears in submitting unconditionally to the will of God, and yet also comes to the conclusion "…that trusting in God implies the due use of all proper means."[129] Ultimately, she not only submitted to God's will, trusting that He was concerned for her best interests, she simultaneously exhausted every possible legal and semi-legal resource to regain her children (which according to the laws of the day were by default in the custody of their father rather than their mother) and to sue her husband for a divorce and adequate settlement of property so that she had some means of support as she continued to raise the children. This form of submission, which entailed an understanding of the believer as an instrument that God used to work his will in the life of the believer as well as in the lives of others, was to become a characteristic way that Evangelical believers in the nineteenth century understood and practiced their Evangelical ethic.

Women like Maria W. Stewart whose understanding of their Christian faith prompted an intertwined submission to God's will and active pursuit of change in one's circumstances personified this change of ethos from an inward to an outward orientation. Stewart's call to the African-American community in the 1830s to change their perspective from one of "I can't" to one of "I will" and to rise up and "Possess the spirit of independence" which would enable America's oppressed to "Sue for [their] rights"[130] stands in stark contrast to the mindset of Stewart's Puritan sisters from earlier generations. Esther Edwards Burr extolled throughout her journal the virtues of maintaining the proper Christian response to difficulties encountered in life: "O how kind is God in all his dealings with his own Children! I cant but have great hopes that I shall get some good out of such trials, that I shall be brought nearer to God by 'em – And

[129] Abbot Bailey, *Memoirs*, 174.
[130] Stewart, *Productions,* 12, 17.

O what reason for thankfullness if it should be so!"[131] Her submission was an outwardly passive acceptance of one's circumstances that was only possible by disciplining her heart to be receptive to God's will and ways. However, Stewart's essays, prayers, and speeches, composed eighty years after Edwards wrestled with God in her heart and in her journal, emphasized God's use of human instruments to effect his holy will. She exhorted her audiences, "Arm yourselves with weapons of prayer. Put your trust in the living God. Persevere strictly in the paths of virtue. Let nothing be lacking on your part; and, in God's own time, and his time is certainly the best, he will surely deliver you with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm."[132] Nineteenth-century Evangelicals who came after Stewart, including Harriet Jacobs, Hannah Crafts, and others whose lifework flowed out of their religious convictions, embodied both Stewart's exhortations to trust the Lord and "let nothing be lacking on your part," as well as Abigail Abbot Bailey's earlier maxim that trusting in the Lord required the "due use of all proper means."[133] Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for example, recalling the pain she suffered as a result of forced separations from loved ones throughout her time in slavery, expressed this change of ethos since Abigail's generation regarding submission to God's will while experiencing hardship. "When separations come by the hand of death, the pious soul can bow in resignation, and say, 'Not my will, but thine be done, O Lord!' But when the ruthless hand of man strikes the blow, regardless of the misery he causes, it is hard to be submissive."[134] And as Jacobs went on to demonstrate in her narrative, she did not merely "bow in resignation" to her fate, she spent herself – her youth, her health, her time, and her love – in fierce resistance to the people and the social forces that conspired to keep her and her loved ones enslaved.

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[131] Burr, "Letter No. 15 {June 28, 1755} Saturday P.M.," *Journal*, 128.
[132] Stewart, *Productions*, 21.
[133] Abbot Bailey, *Memoirs*, 173; Stewart, *Productions*, 21.
[134] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Painter, 41.

Conclusion

In many ways, Abigail Abbot Bailey's life hints at the seachange that was beginning to take place during her lifetime and which gained momentum throughout the nineteenth century. Roughly ten years younger than Esther Edwards Burr and Mary Fish Noyes Silliman, and living most of her adult life in what American historians refer to as the early national period, she exemplified many of the social and religious impulses that were ushering in a new, post-Puritan ethic as colonial America transitioned into the nineteenth century and into mature nationhood. Even as the American Revolution signaled America's new status as its own nation, the nation-building impulse to consolidate Calvinist Anglo-American culture as the defining character of the new nation was undermined not only by the realities of American culture as a whole but also by the revolutionary rhetoric of the age, which struggled to define what constituted Americanness by particularizing universal ideals within a national context.[135] As a result of this grappling with the concept of Americanness, Americans whose race, sex, or class had meant denial of legal citizenship in their own country were able to begin questioning their exclusion from the rights and benefits promised in the inclusive language of the American Revolution. Although Abigail Abbot Bailey and other conservative Evangelical women in her own and successive generations did not necessarily pursue citizenship or legal equality, they did participate in this general move toward democratization by pursuing and seizing opportunities to improve their own and others' circumstances. In their pursuit of self and social betterment, they and many other marginalized Americans, including African Americans and women of all races,

[135] For a more extended discussion of the struggle to particularize universal ideals in the American context see Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 116-126. Also, Nathan O. Hatch, "The Church in an Age of Democratic Revolution," in *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 5-6.

not only challenged cultural mores as they sought to improve their circumstances, they utilized their conservative faith to do so.

Abigail Abbot Bailey's decision in the last decade of the eighteenth century to make "due use of all proper means" to better herself and her circumstances hints at the incipient ethos of reform that would come to characterize the next century and which was personified by women such as Maria W. Stewart and others who engaged in public-minded and reform-minded work. Abigail's life also illustrates the fact that while much of the Evangelical mindset remained the same from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, a change was coming in which the definitions that Evangelicals used to characterize and understand their world were being transformed. As demonstrated in the different kinds of benevolent activities in which Evangelical women engaged, this transformation in how terms such as sin, corruption, repentance, and holy living were perceived would have a profound effect on the practical theology of Evangelical women whose lives and responses to life's difficulties demonstrated the authenticity of their faith.

Chapter Two

Conversion and the Individual: Negotiating Authority Structures and Living the Faith

The woman whom we know only as Old Elizabeth, the name she used in the title of her memoir published in 1863, was born in Maryland in 1766. Because her parents were enslaved, she too was born into that condition. Though she was allowed to stay with her parents until she was eleven, she later was sold to a series of owners, the last of whom was a "Presbyterian" who did not believe in holding slaves for life.[136] Having served this man for a predetermined number of years, Elizabeth finally gained her freedom at around thirty years of age. Besides inheriting her parents' lowly station in life, she had also received from them a devout Methodist upbringing. By her pre-teen and early teen years this religious influence caused her to begin thinking about her spiritual condition. Her memoir, which she dictated "in her 97th year," begins with her recounting a vision she experienced when she was about twelve years old.[137] She saw herself standing on the brink of a fiery pit. In terror believing that she was about to be plunged into the pit, she felt "taught" in her spirit to pray to Christ that he would save her. As she prayed, she was lifted up out of the pit and found herself face to face with Christ. "I sprang forward," she recalled, "and fell at his feet, giving Him all the thanks and highest praises, crying, Thou hast redeemed me – Thou hast redeemed me to thyself."[138] She then was guided upward through "heaven's door" where she saw "millions of glorified spirits in white robes." A voice asked her if she was willing to be saved in the Lord's way. She hesitated, but eventually responded that, yes,

[136] "Memoir of Old Elizabeth, A Coloured Woman," (Philadelphia: Collins, 1863); repr. in *Six Women's Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8. Hereafter referred to as *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, with the appropriate page number.

[137] *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, 2.

[138] *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, 6.

she was willing to be saved in the Lord's way. "Immediately a light fell upon my head, and I was filled with light, and I was shown the world lying in wickedness, and was told I must go there, and call the people to repentance, for the day of the Lord was at hand..."[139]

For Elizabeth, as for all whose faith can be considered Evangelical, conversion "the Lord's way" entailed a call to action. However, for Elizabeth and others whose Evangelicalism was situated in the nineteenth century, the action to which they believed they were called was subtly, yet profoundly changed from the kind of action practiced by eighteenth-century Evangelical believers. The Evangelical ethos which saw the imperfection of life as stemming from sin, and understood the solution for such brokenness to be repentance and faith leading to holy living remained much the same from the eighteenth-century to the nineteenth. However, as indicated in the last chapter, although the terms by which Evangelicals described and understood their world stayed relatively constant, the meanings attached to them took on a newly outward focus in the nineteenth century. Whereas both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Evangelicals understood the perceived brokenness and imperfection of life as the result of the corrupting influence of sin, earlier Evangelical believers emphasized the inward effects of both sinfulness and the requisite repentance. For them, the action to which they were called was a highly personal, internal change wrought by a process of continual submission to the will of God, whatever His will might be. This inwardly oriented version of Evangelicalism's innately experiential, individual character evolved in the social atmosphere of the nineteenth-century into a more outwardly focused form of holy living. Both earlier and later Evangelicals were called to repentance and subsequent action, but for Evangelicals in the nineteenth-century this spiritually

[139] *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, 6-7.

motivated action went beyond the reformation of one's character to the potential reformation of society.[140]

While the nature of the change that occurred in the Evangelical ethos from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century was the topic at issue in the previous chapter, this chapter takes up the question of the kinds of social factors that were at work and that may have contributed to the changing application of Evangelical theology as believers embodied their faith within the context of nineteenth-century America. Although this thesis in its entirety considers both white and black women in America, this chapter particularly focuses on black women in the nineteenth century since, out of the sources used in this research, they most fully and clearly demonstrate the changed understanding and application of Evangelical theology that came about during that era. Central to this change in Evangelical practical theology were two interrelated phenomena that worked in tandem to usher in a new, outwardly-focused iteration of Evangelicalism that would have a profound effect on American society.

These two factors were first, an individualism latent in the Evangelicalism of the eighteenth century but that came to the forefront in the next, and second, a general crisis of authority in the early years of the nineteenth century that allowed this latent individualistic tendency room for expansion and fuller expression.[141] By examining the ways in which Evangelical faith influenced nineteenth-century black American women as they thought about

[140] See James E. Block, *A Nation of Agents: The American Path to a Modern Self and Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002) for a description of the progression of Protestant understandings of believers' role in the world. Block makes a distinction between "modernizing" Protestantism that led to "reformist ferment" of the nineteenth century and earlier forms of Protestantism that contained the seeds, but not the realization of such agency in the life of believers. See particularly chapter 10, "National Revival as the Crucible of Agency Character," 369-423. Also, for an overview of the religious impulses at the heart of nineteenth-century reform, and how social activism transitioned from predominantly moral suasion to a more political focus see Lori D. Ginzberg, "'Moral Suasion is Balderdash': Women, Politics, and Social Activism in the 1850s," *The Journal of American History* 73, no. 3 (1986): 601-622, accessed July 16, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1902979.

[141] Nathan O. Hatch, "The Crisis of Authority in Popular Culture," in *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 17-46.

and engaged in social action, this chapter seeks to reveal how characteristics of an Evangelical practical theology contributed to and drew on a more generalized change in the understandings and practices of authority in nineteenth-century American society.

Women, and perhaps especially black women, faced considerable obstacles to social engagement. Some of those obstacles were internal, for example a feeling of unworthiness or inability stemming from notions of female propriety, lack of education, being black in a predominantly white society, or all of the above. Related to these internal obstacles were external ones, including social conventions that informed notions of female propriety and appropriate gender roles, lack of access to educational or leadership opportunities, and entrenched racial prejudice that strengthened each of these. Additionally, and for the majority of the women in this chapter, institutionalized slavery was a formidable physical, as well as an ideological obstacle. This chapter will take each of these obstacles in turn, looking at the ways in which women's social action was circumscribed in nineteenth-century American society, while showing how the individualism inherent to Evangelicalism, and the resulting tendency toward egalitarianism, not only equipped women believers to surmount obstacles and engage confidently in social action, but also reflected and perhaps strengthened the era's tendency toward a model of social and religious authority that was more diffused rather than concentrated in traditional hierarchies.

Although political action and a demand for equal political rights was not essential to living an Evangelical life, the theology of Evangelical believers in nineteenth-century America prompted them to morally upright, outwardly-focused action as a means of living out their faith, a kind of action which during the nineteenth century often took a political form.[142] At the same

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[142] See Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, particularly Chapter 1 "Protestant Evangelicals in an Age of Mass Political Parties,"1-49 for an analysis of the ways in which Evangelicalism and Politics interpenetrated and shaped each other during the nineteenth century. He also discusses the difference between

time that Evangelical theology called believers to action, its emphatically individualistic ethos elevated individual experience to an authoritative position vis-à-vis established authority figures and institutions. In so doing, Evangelicalism contributed in large part to a general rearrangement of existing religious and social hierarchies of authority in the nineteenth-century American milieu. By granting otherwise marginalized Americans a measure and means of authority, Evangelical theology as understood and practiced in the nineteenth century became a uniquely effective agent by which such people could and eventually did access the political and social equality that was expressed in American political theory but not enacted in fact.[143]

The Egalitarian Impetus of Evangelical Social Action

As the nineteenth century matured and took on its own character distinct from that of the preceding century, the religious zeal of the Second Great Awakening blended with and contributed in large part to social reform projects that drew on the same populist energy that had reconfigured the religious world.[144] Though this reform-mindedness was characteristic of the culture as a whole during that time, women unquestionably were central actors.[145] Their focus on reform, and outward as well as inward change indicates not only that women had reason to

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"pietist" Evangelicals whose action was more intensely private and focused on cultivating personal piety and winning other souls for Christ without engaging in political wrangling and other "Calvinist" inspired Evangelicals who tended to emphasize the social responsibilities of Christians. See pp. 14-30 especially.

[143] James E. Block makes a similar argument in *Nation of Agents*, although he focuses more on the structural characteristics of early, mid, and late nineteenth-century American society, as well as the structural features of Protestant Christianity that made Protestantism uniquely effective as a catalyst for social change during the first third of the century. See in particular, "The Logic of American Institutional Developments" and "The Challenge for American Religion," 370-381.

[144] See, for example, Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class* and Keith E. Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood: The American Woman's Rights Movement, 1800-1850* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977).

[145] For a discussion of the connection between the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening and the benevolent associations that germinated the reform movements of the nineteenth century, as well as women's central role in each of these see Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, particularly chapters 2 and 3, "Family in Transition: the Revival Cycle, 1813-1838," 60-104 and "The Era of Association: Between Family and Society, 1825-1845," 105-144. See also Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 30-36.

believe they themselves could do something to change the brokenness they perceived in their lives and in their world, but it also indicates that social structures were being reconfigured in such a way that women could not only imagine this change but pursue it, and on an increasingly larger scale. While it may not have been clear to these women that their activism, either on their own or other's behalf, was helping to usher in a new understanding of human rights in their society, their lives were part of a larger trajectory of an expanded vision of who was included in the scope of the 'equal rights' supposedly enshrined in America's founding documents.

During the 1790s as Abigail Abbot Bailey's personal drama was taking place, her Congregational faith placed her in the center of the religiously and culturally hegemonic mainline denominations. Yet even the circumstances of her life – a devout wife and mother whose faith put her at odds with an (at best) religiously apathetic husband – were in some measure representative of the fact that this hegemony was being challenged.[146] The Second Great Awakening, which eventually would overpower the establishment stalwarts and usher in a new era of religious diversity and unprecedented Evangelical religious influence, was gaining momentum.[147] The "religious populism" engendered by this broad-scale religious revival not only tapped into the democratic impulses of the new nation, it became "a residual agent of change in America."[148] As Americans of all classes, races, and genders embraced Christianity, not as the religion of the political, economic, and cultural elite, but as a religion that had the power to resonate with even the poorest and most pitiful of souls – for all were poor apart from

[146] For a discussion of women's disproportionate role in the religious milieu of the Second Great Awakening see Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, especially Ch. 2, "Family in Transition: the Revival Cycle, 1813-1838," 60-104.

[147] See Daniel Walker Howe, "Chapter 5: Awakenings of Religion," in *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 164-202 for an excellent overview of the Second Great Awakening and its effect on American society, particularly on the lower and middle classes.

[148] Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 5.

Christ, and all had the power to become rich in Him – they were empowered by its egalitarian message of hope for all who believed.[149]

This egalitarianism fueled the belief that ordinary people had significance – religiously as well as politically – and prompted a change in how Evangelical believers experienced their faith. The intense, inward orientation of eighteenth-century practical theology gave way to an equally intense, but increasingly outward theology of social action. This metamorphosis encompassed both the lower and upper portions of Evangelical church hierarchy and was nothing short of a leveling, or democratization of the church institution. The leadership as well as the laity were encouraged by the tenets of Evangelical theology to value an active, vigorous faith that sought not only inward change but also outward evidence of their commitment to working toward the establishment and the furthering of Christ's eternal – as well as temporal – purposes. This expectation of outward as well as inward action applied equally to all believers, and prompted a turn away from elite religious leadership toward a model of leadership that eschewed formal education and disregarded family connections and instead valued charisma and evidence of genuine, heart-felt religion. The "unschooled" and "unsophisticated" audiences of such leaders were fired by "a marvelous sense of individual potential and of collective aspiration."[150]

As religious belief and even Biblical interpretation became a democratic enterprise in which common people had a compelling interest, the prospect of not just religious but also political and social change became a real possibility. Populist religious movements, "shared an

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[149] Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 187-188. Also, Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) makes the case that low church Christian denominations such as Baptists and Methodists held a particular attraction for poor folk, both black and white, and that the participation of the two races in a common Christian tradition had a transformative and invigorating effect on Protestant Christianity in the eighteenth-century Virginian, and by extension American context. This mutually beneficial mixing of races and cultures would fade following the Great Awakenings, but the changes that occurred in the religious fabric of American culture would prove to be extensive and long-lasting.

[150] Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 5.

ethic of unrelenting toil, a passion for expansion, a hostility to orthodox belief and style, a zeal for religious reconstruction, and a systematic plan to realize their ideals."[151] They also opened up possibilities for new understandings and practices of leadership within the Church and in parachurch organizations such as mission works, benevolence societies, and other social organizations that were not officially church sanctioned but nonetheless were Christian, if not Evangelical in their outlook. While earlier versions of American Evangelicalism were not devoid of examples of female leadership and initiative in a church context, such examples were rare, and in the social and political climate of the late eighteenth century grew even more so.[152] However, the populist sentiment of the nineteenth century, stoked by individualism, made female leadership, especially in parachurch organizations, not an unthinkable notion but a real possibility. While many women who took the initiative to be involved in and to lead such organizations had little interest in taking more prominent leadership positions within the church institution itself, even that possibility was open for discussion in some quarters. And some women, like Jarena Lee and Old Elizabeth not only felt called to take up the more public roles of preachers and exhorters, they seized the opportunities presented to them and pressed for further admittance and acceptance in the active roles to which they believed God had called them.[153]

Overcoming Internal Obstacles to Evangelical Women's Social Action

For some Evangelical believers like Elizabeth and Jarena Lee the action to which they were called was primarily spiritual in its intent: preaching, exhorting, and praying.[154] For others,

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[151] Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 4.

[152] See Catherine A. Brekus' work in *Sarah Osborn's World* and *Strangers and Pilgrims* for examples of these. Also, see Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1994).

[153] For examples see Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims*.

[154] Sparks, *Jordan's Stormy Banks*, 45-6, discusses the power and influence that were inherent to such

like Maria W. Stewart in her younger years, the spiritual action took a more social and sometimes even political cast. However, whatever the action might be, devotion to Christ called for courage to pursue faithful living no matter the cost. The cost could be quite high, but the motivation to action was strong enough that such women persisted in both their belief and in the action which that belief called for, even though they might encounter a great deal of opposition. At the time of her conversion, Elizabeth was reluctant to take on the role of "the Lord's mouthpiece."[155] And as she met with opposition both within and without the institution of the Church, she wavered between pugnacious defense of her calling in Christ and "backwardness" in which she felt very "unworthy and small."[156] This feeling of being "unworthy and small" that Elizabeth describes was shared by many Evangelical women no matter what their particular calling was, whether they were preachers, novelists, abolitionists, or merely women trying to live faithfully in an imperfect world.

Jarena Lee, an itinerant preacher like her fellow evangelist Elizabeth was, expressed a similar feeling about her calling. A recurring theme in her narrative was seeking after the "sanction" of God for her preaching. She always took careful note of the evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in the hearts of her audience members and when "the tears of the penitent flowed sweetly" she was encouraged "to persevere in proclaiming the glad tidings of a risen Saviour to my fellow beings."[157] She explains why this result was so encouraging: "When the heart is thus melted in to tenderness, I feel assured the Lord sanctions the feeble effort of His poor servant…."[158]As Elizabeth and Jarena expressed, Evangelical women who were compelled by

activities and that women were able to tap into as they performed these roles within Evangelical religious meetings.

[155] *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, 17.

[156] *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, 14, 16.

[157] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal*, 35.

[158] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal*, 35.

their theology to live out their faith felt keenly the struggle that many nineteenth-century women experienced in trying to live by their convictions – which may have called them to action in the larger public sphere – while being constrained both by a sense of their own unworthiness as well as by social notions of what constituted proper behavior for women.[159]

As was true for Elizabeth and Jarena Lee, some of these women faced the additional challenge of belonging to a minority community discriminated against by the dominant race, a situation that exacerbated other social conditions that may have contributed to a sense of unworthiness or inability. Hannah Crafts, whose unpublished manuscript was composed in the late 1850s but was discovered only recently and published in 2002, wrote in her Preface that, "In presenting this record of plain unvarnished facts to a generous public I feel a certain degree of diffidence and self-distrust. How will such a literary venture, coming from a sphere so humble be received?"[160] Harriet Jacobs, writing perhaps a few years after Crafts, expressed a similar concern with her autobiographical account *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. In her "Preface by the Author" Jacobs recounts the story of how friends had urged her to record her experience shortly after she escaped to freedom. But she refused because, she wrote, "I was altogether incompetent to such an undertaking." She goes on to say that, "Though I have improved my mind somewhat since that time, I still remain of the same opinion; but I trust my motives will excuse what might otherwise seem presumptuous."[161] The young Charlotte Forten,

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[159] This feeling of unworthiness that women felt may have been rooted in a number of characteristics of eighteenth-century Protestant Christianity, which tended to assign greater blame to women for the presence of original sin in the human race, and who often associated women with not just physical, mental, and spiritual inferiority but also fundamental impurity associated with their supposed greater propensity for sexual misconduct. In conversion narratives, men often focused on their sorrow over particular sins whereas women tended to focus on their overall, innate corruption. For a gendered analysis of Evangelical conversion narratives see Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981).

[160] Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 4.

[161] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl*, ed. Painter, 3.

also writing mid-century, was gratified when an essay of hers was published, but felt that it was unworthy of such honor. Before it was published she wrote of it in her journal, "Had to finish the 'Glimpses' this morn, for Mr. [Joseph] P.[utnam] insisted on taking them with him to be published. His kind intentions will be defeated, for he'll find no one willing to publish such stuff."[162] Her expectations notwithstanding, less than a month later she recorded in her journal that, "To my great astonishment see that my poor 'Glimpes'["Glimpses of New England"] are published in the '[National Anti-Slavery] Standard.' They are not worth it."[163] In spite of Charlotte's disparaging remarks about her work, and although she and the other women believed that their words and work were humble, possibly even presumptuous, they did not believe their efforts were worthless.

In fact, as Jacobs noted, the purity of their motive redeemed any defects of workmanship or stigma that might be attached to their work because of its author's gender, race, or social status. The work which these women were compelled to perform was quite purposeful, and grew out of the strength of the moral and religious convictions with which they interpreted the world around them. Hannah Crafts indicates in her "Preface" what her motivation was for writing the novel: "Have I succeeded in portraying any of the peculiar features of that institution whose curse rests over the fairest land the sun shines upon? Have I succeeded in showing how it blights the happiness of the white as well as the black race?" She goes on to explain what she hopes the reader will take away from her book. It was not a romance, she states, but rather a true relation of what actually occurred. For this reason, she claims that there was no particular moral woven into

[162] Charlotte Forten Grimké, "Journal Three: January 28, 1858-February 14, 1863," Byberry. Thursday, May 20. In *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, ed. by Brenda Stevenson, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 311. Hereafter referred to as Grimké, *Journals*.

[163] Grimké, *Journals,*"Friday , June 18, 1858," 318.

the story apart from the truth that readers with "pious and discerning minds can scarcely fail to recognise" both in the book and in their own observations of life: "…the hand of Providence in giving to the righteous the reward of their works, and to the wicked the fruit of their doings."[164]

This same compulsion that Crafts felt to share what she saw as an innate moral lesson in life was a motivating factor for many Evangelical women of all races and classes to pursue the Evangelical call to action, wherever that call might take them. As Elizabeth remarked about her call to preach and the resistance she felt from authorities within the Church, "I persevered, notwithstanding the opposition of those who were looked upon as higher and wiser."[165] Her perseverance in the cause of exhorting her "fellow-creatures" to repentance and salvation was a necessary concomitant of her own salvation. Just as Elizabeth did, Evangelical women who persisted in their faith persisted in action, in spite of opposition and in spite of the possibility of appearing presumptuous as Jacobs and Crafts feared.

Facing External Obstacles to Evangelical Women's Social Action

Elizabeth's remark about "the opposition of those who were looked upon as higher and wiser" is indicative that not only did women in the nineteenth century internalize socially-sanctioned opposition to many extra-domestic activities that they engaged in, they also faced very real external obstacles, including pressure from husbands or other family members to conform to conventional notions of appropriate female behavior, a lack of access to sources of social power such as education or leadership roles in public forums, and for some, entrenched racial prejudice that deepened the disadvantages they already faced as women in a society that privileged maleness. For most black women in nineteenth century America, these external

[164] Crafts, *Bondwoman's Narrative*, 4.
[165] *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, 14.

obstacles were given further strength by institutionalized slavery that left them "… entirely unprotected by law or custom," and, in fact, at the mercy of a law that reduced them "…to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another."[166] As powerful as these external obstacles were, however, Evangelical faith equipped believers with both the motivation as well as practical tools to confront, and even overcome such obstacles, with a confidence born of a divine injunction to live out their faith in obedience to God rather than to man.

Old Elizabeth's account is replete with examples of her encounters with social and religious authority figures who opposed her faithful obedience to her call. She describes meeting with opposition from legal authorities, once having a city "watchman" come to a prayer meeting with the intention of breaking it up. However, Elizabeth "grew warm and courageous in the Spirit" and proceeded to castigate the man for interrupting and hindering "the cause of God" even as "the ungodly are dancing and fiddling till midnight" and others, blind to their own spiritual condition, slumbered in their sin, "…crying 'let me rest, let me rest,' while sporting on the very brink of hell."[167] Appropriately shamed by this rebuke, the man begged pardon and left Elizabeth and her companions to finish their prayer meeting unmolested. Throughout her journal, Elizabeth recorded similar interactions in which she confronted authority figures and used superior Bible knowledge or reasoning to defeat their opposition to her ministry.

While the watchman was a socially authoritative figure, religious authority figures were also opposed to Elizabeth's unconventional behavior. "Even the elders of our meeting joined with the wicked people, and said such meetings must be stopped, and that woman quieted. But I was not afraid of any of them, and continued to go, and burnt with a zeal not my own."[168]

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[166] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life a Slave Girl*, ed. Painter, 62.
[167] *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, 11.
[168] *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, 12.

Notably, Elizabeth's confidence in pursuing obedience to her divine call served to galvanize other women to live out their faith in a similar way. One woman, with whom Elizabeth shared her story and how burdened she felt, not only because of her duty to the Lord, but also because of the continual opposition she encountered, immediately offered her own home as a meeting place for prayer and exhortation and thus, "run the risk of all the church would do to her for it."[169] While Elizabeth often was discouraged because of opposition, especially that from within her own denomination, she persevered in her faithfulness to her calling. Her decades-long work included an itinerant ministry throughout the United States in which she appointed and led meetings for prayer and exhortation, as well as a period of four years in Michigan, where, she wrote, "I found a wide field of labor amongst my own colour" and was able to establish and run a successful school for "coloured orphans."[170]

Mirroring Elizabeth's zeal in overcoming external obstacles to her ministry, many other Evangelical women also relied on God as they lived out their faith in the face of considerable hindrances. For those who were enslaved, they not only faced the same barriers to achieving higher education that their free sisters of any race faced, they in many cases were barred from acquiring even a rudimentary education. Hannah Crafts and Harriet Jacobs both allude to this legally-enforced deprivation in their narratives: Crafts' literacy came about because of an antislavery benefactress who, in transgression of the law, taught her to read, so she could read and understand the Bible; Crafts herself, knowing how to read, was forbidden to teach it to other slaves; Harriet Jacobs was taught by her mistress, but though she did share the gift of literacy with her fellow slaves, she was forced to do so in secret, lest she and they be punished harshly.

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[169] *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, 14.
[170] *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, 19.

After Jacobs escaped, she not only took every opportunity to improve her command of literacy, she in her narrative reprimanded a culture that would enact laws forbidding an entire class of people access to the word of God. Exhorting missionaries to look homeward rather than abroad to foreign lands, and to focus their efforts on slaveholders, she wrote specifically of this culture of withholding literacy from the slaves: "Tell them that they are answerable to God for sealing up the Fountain of Life from souls that are thirsting for it."[171] Crafts spoke to similar purpose in her own narrative, though in a less direct style than Jacobs. Remarking on the peculiarities of a nation in which wealth and position are valued over the lives of individuals, she made clear that American society's denial of literacy to the lower classes, and especially slaves was a grave moral failure: "The Constitution that asserts the right of freedom and equality to all mankind is a sealed book to them, and so is the Bible, that tells how Christ died for all; the bond as well as the free."[172]

The moral fortitude required for Jacobs and Crafts to rebuke an entire society in the public forum of their narratives was not new to them once they gained their freedom. Jacobs, for example, even while she was still a slave, used the moral values of the Christian religion to combat her exploitative master's repulsive, tyrannical behavior. He had just joined the Episcopal Church, and yet made obvious that he would continue his usual habits of trying to coerce Jacobs into illicit behavior with and for him. When she reminded him of his public profession made just the day before, he told her he had done so because his position in society required it, and recommended that she do the same. "'There are sinners enough in it already,' rejoined I, 'If I could be allowed to live like a Christian, I should be glad.'"[173] As Jacobs' self-assured answer to

[171] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Painter, 82.
[172] Crafts, *Bondwoman's Narrative*, 201.
[173] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Painter, 83.

her master demonstrates, enslaved women's Christian faith, shared even on a nominal level with their oppressors, gave these women grounds to call their individual tormentors as well as the larger society to account for injustices perpetrated upon those with the least ability to resist.

As indicated by the moral tone of Jacobs' and Crafts' narratives, throughout the nineteenth-century the action that Evangelical believers like these women engaged in increasingly took on the character of moral reform efforts that sought first to influence the hearts of individuals and then spread outward into homes and communities, effecting positive social change.[174] Even Old Elizabeth, whose primary mode of faithful action was preaching, exhorting, and praying, touched on social issues that she believed could and should be changed through correct thinking and living prompted by the gospel of Christ. When she visited the state of Virginia as a preacher, she was censured by some not only for preaching, but also because she made clear that the slavery practiced in that state was immoral. She recorded in her memoir, "[T]he people there would not believe that a coloured woman could preach. And moreover, as she had no learning, they strove to imprison me because I spoke against slavery…."[175]

Jarena Lee had a similar interest in the issue of the condition of black Americans, attending the meetings of several antislavery societies and speaking against slavery and prejudice in the same way that Elizabeth did.[176] She also emphasized the importance of education, especially for those of her own race. She often visited and spoke at schools, encouraging parents

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[174] Examples of scholarship that discuss religious women's engagement with social issues include Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Nancy A. Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999); and Mark Perry, *Lift Up Thy Voice: The Grimké Family's Journey from Slaveholders to Civil Rights Leaders* (New York: Viking, 2001).

[175] *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, 17.

[176] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal*, 90.

to pursue as thorough an education for their children as possible. One school by which she was particularly impressed belonged to the well-known and outspoken abolitionist, Lewis Tappan. At Tappan's school, "…the principles in different branches [of learning] which had been, and in some instances, are yet hid from the people of color, to deprive them of their enjoyments, were here taught them…." The import of the varied curriculum that the school used was that such an education "…greatly helped to elevate them to a position that would command respect through the short voyage of life."[177] Though Jarena Lee saw education as a path to social betterment, she also saw it as a path to moral betterment, and encouraged several of her audiences to invest in the education of the next generation because "…without the advantages of education they never would be a moral people."[178]

Though Elizabeth's mention of her vocal opposition to slavery was almost incidental in her memoir, and Jarena Lee's interest in antislavery and education were only a small portion of her work, the pattern of their life and their work are indicative of a larger pattern of behavior among women who lived their lives as Evangelical Christians in the nineteenth century and who operated from that perspective. From a careful look at the experiences of such women, it appears that Evangelical discourse, which shaped "the principal subculture" of that century and could in fact prompt women toward social conservatism, contributed in large part to a radical reworking of patterns of thought and behavior in the larger society.[179] Jarena Lee relates the story of an unnamed woman whom she encountered in Baltimore. This particular woman "seemed very

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[177] Lee*, Religious Experience and Journal*, 80.

[178] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal*, 69.

[179] Lisa Shaver, "'Serpents,' 'Fiends,' and 'Libertines': Inscribing an Evangelical Rhetoric of Rage in the *Advocate of Moral Reform*," *Rhetoric Review* 30, No. 1 (2011):1-18, accessed August 8, 2014. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2011.530099. Shaver makes a similar with regard to Evangelical women reformers' use of rhetoric in the early nineteenth century, and its effect on later female reformers who would go on to employ similar language and methods though with secular rather than religious motivations.

zealous" and "spoke much in the spirit of God." Lee says that, "She was a Teacher in the Sabbath school, at which place she often took occasion to extend her usefulness in speaking for the cause of God, for which she suffered much opposition, even from her husband; although he was a preacher of the gospel…"[180]

Although the actions of such women were not always intended to bring about large scale political change, taken as a whole, their courageous, faithful living performed on an individual level helped make commonplace socially-minded action justified by appeals to an authority that did not necessarily reside in recognized social institutions. This impetus to work change in one's surroundings, though it stemmed from the Evangelical emphasis on an active, living faith, was in stark contrast to the Evangelical ethic of the eighteenth century in which the primary goal of faithful action was internal change. Though eighteenth-century Evangelical believers did engage in benevolent activities like visiting "the Widow, the fatherless, and the sick"[181] as Esther Edwards Burr did, these activities were not intended to fundamentally change the order of things in communities or in society. And such activities were certainly not done in an organized way or on a public stage. Yet, in the following century, Evangelical believers' practical theology took on an entirely different cast. These later women's actions, often done independently of or in opposition to representatives of recognized social authorities such as churches, husbands, or traditional mores, and often conducted in an extra-domestic mode or setting, made appeals to authority a legitimate path to social change. Such women as these, by merely living their lives and living out their faith, challenged existing authority structures and perhaps without intending to, played a powerful role in the eventual re-creation of their society.[182] Their faithful obedience

[180] Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal*, 61.

[181] Burr, "Letter No. 9 {October 21, 1754} Monday," *Journal*, 57.

[182] See Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 48-9 for a summary of his argument that antebellum Evangelicalism profoundly influenced the political discourse of American life in subsequent years. See also Sparks,

to the principles of their commonplace, Evangelical faith, contributed momentum to the development of a pattern of discourse within which marginalized Americans of later generations operated as they pressed for legal and political equality as American citizens.[183]

Evangelical Individualism and the Changing Nature of Social Authority

At the heart of this socially powerful effect was Evangelicalism's evolving ethic of individualism, which reconfigured the ways in which authority was understood and practiced within, and increasingly outside of, the Evangelical subculture. A central feature of Evangelical theology in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was its emphasis on individual experience.[184] Even though nineteenth-century Evangelicals retained the four identifying marks of earlier incarnations of evangelicalism – *crucicentrism, bibliocentrism, conversionism,* and *activism* – and thus could be considered theologically conservative relative to many other Christian denominations, they were products of their time in that they largely eschewed received tradition and rejected traditional authority structures in favor of an individualized authority that came from an unmediated relationship with God. Individualism as such does not figure in to Bebbington's definition of evangelicalism, but the notion of conversion, in which a person is changed by a spiritual encounter with the God of the Christian Bible, carries with it the idea of an individualized, individualistic faith. This tendency to elevate the individual, nascent in

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Jordan's Stormy Banks, 49-50, for a discussion of husbands' opposition to their wives' conversion and Evangelical religiosity because of its egalitarianism and the resulting revolutionary potential.

[183] See James E. Block, *Nation of Agents*, for a discussion of Evangelicalism's contribution to the reworking of American social discourse as well as its eventual political consequences.

[184] Catherine A. Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) argues that Evangelicalism was "a vector of modernity" that adopted and adapted strains of Enlightenment thinking, particularly the empiricist notion of the authority of individual experience. See "Introduction," 1-12. Also, Nancy A. Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* 2nd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), particularly Chapter 5 "Religion is Something to Do," 44-52.

eighteenth-century Evangelicalism, intensified in the social conditions of nineteenth-century America and is the common denominator between a definite change in Evangelical practical theology from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth and Evangelicalism's contribution to the expansion of political possibilities for marginalized Americans.

Nathan O. Hatch argues that as the religious establishment of the eighteenth century faded into fragmentation during the nineteenth, "common people [were challenged] to take religious destiny into their own hands, to think for themselves, to oppose centralized authority and the elevation of the clergy as a separate order of men."[185] Elizabeth's experience in Virginia, in which she drew criticism for speaking against slavery, demonstrates the powerful incentive that Evangelical theology gave to seemingly insignificant individuals to persist in their beliefs and their calling in spite of opposition from authority figures. One of the objections she met with was the issue of her ordination and her authority to speak as she did. "[T]hey asked by what authority I spake? and if I had been ordained? I answered, not by the commission of men's hands: if the Lord had ordained me, I needed nothing better."[186]

Hatch describes this movement toward individual rather than institutional authority, which Elizabeth exemplified in her career as an itinerant preacher, as the "individualization of conscience."[187] Some professing the name of Christ also professed to follow only one authoritative, directive source, the Bible alone. While apparently deferring to the authority of the Bible, however, such individuals in practice elevated to the preeminent position the individual authority required to interpret scripture for themselves.[188] Though some of the individuals Hatch

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[185] Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity,* 58. See "Blurring of Worlds," 34-43 and "Inversion of Authority," 44-46 for Hatch's discussion of the effect of individualism on the American Protestant world's understanding and practice of authority in the nineteenth century.

[186] *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, 17.

[187] Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 42-43.

[188] Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 42-43.

mentions took this authority to its extreme, rejecting even the idea of church denominations, those who remained within the confines of previously established evangelical denominations were similarly affected, and came to believe and practice the notion that the clergy as well as lay people "had to earn the right to be heard" – that no one class or kind of person had a monopoly on authority.[189]

This inversion of authority structures that found expression even among Americans who were relatively religiously conservative contributed to a characteristic of nineteenth-century reform movements and activists: claiming a higher authority than extant institutions and mores as justification for engaging in unseemly or potentially unseemly behavior while pursuing positive social change. In her farewell address to a predominantly black audience, Maria W. Stewart used exactly this justification for her fiery career as an abolitionist public speaker which she was leaving behind for a quieter life of teaching. In her confrontational style she asserted to her listeners, "I believe, that for wise and holy purposes, best known to [God] himself, he hath unloosed my tongue and put his word in my mouth…." Asking rhetorically, "What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days?" she then goes on to recount acts of leadership and learning among women of the past. Summing up her argument she states:

> If such women as are here described have once existed, be no longer astonished then, my brethren and friends, that God at this eventful period should raise up your own females to strive, by their own example both in public and private, to assist those who are endeavoring to stop the strong current of prejudice that flows so profusely against us at

[189] Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 61. Also, Hatch gives the example of the Christian movement as one Protestant denomination that took this individualism to an extreme. Unlike Unitarians, Universalists, and the later Transcendentalists, though these believers who simply called themselves "Christians" sought a reworking of the entire edifice of Christianity – seeking "a radical simplification of the gospel" – they continued to adhere to most of the more traditional Protestant Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the existence of sin, and the need for conversion, repentance, and faith. See "The Christian Movement," 68-81.

present. No longer ridicule their efforts, it will be counted for sin. For God makes use of feeble means sometimes, to bring about his most exalted purposes.[190]

This pattern of claiming a higher authority for an unorthodox mode of action was not new, and had been typical for centuries among marginalized people who sought and achieved validation for themselves and their work through claims of a privileged status as a friend or servant of God. But, such claims to authority were the exception rather than the rule.[191] As the reformist zeitgeist of the nineteenth century matured, however, such behavior became a widely practiced mode of social action in American culture. People of all classes and genders attempted to rectify social problems they identified in their communities, and to do so they often depended on moral suasion which was by its nature an appeal to authority. For some, the authority in question was individuals' conscience or their better nature. For others, including Evangelical women, the authority to which they appealed was God himself, whether the change they sought was other individuals' religious conversion, the abolition of slavery, temperance, or changes in their own material or spiritual life.

Consequences of the Evangelical Ethic of Individualism in American Society

Though the changing nature of authority structures prompted by the egalitarian nature of nineteenth-century Evangelicalism was particularly present in the religious context of the era, the empowerment that resulted from believing in one's own significance had important ramifications in the larger society as well. Ordinary people – women, slaves, and other marginalized folk –

[190] Maria W. Stewart, "Farewell Address," in *Productions*, 75-77.

[191] Sue E. Houchins, "Introduction" to *Spiritual Narratives*, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxx-xxxvii discusses the similarities and differences between medieval mystics and black women revivalists of the nineteenth century, arguing that the two groups shared a "confidence in the privileged nature of their relationship with God" which "freed both groups to reject gender roles of their respective societies," xxxiii.

took seriously the idea that they were as valuable in God's sight as anyone else. Hannah Crafts, for example, recounted caring for young enslaved children as part of her duties before she escaped to freedom, and in her recounting indicates how congenial her own Christian beliefs were to the notion of human equality. Pitying these little children whose fate was "hard and cruel," Crafts hoped that they in years to come would remember her care and love for them as "the sunshiny period of their lives." However, though she was prohibited by law from "open[ing] the door of knowledge to their minds by instructing them to read," she did what she could to teach them virtue through love and by her own example. "What a blessing it is," she wrote, "that faith, and hope, and love are universal in their nature and operation – that poor as well as rich, bond as well as free are susceptible to their pleasing influences, and contain within themselves a treasure of consolation for all the ills of life." Crafts goes on to make clear that not only were faith, hope, and love universal in their operation and application, these qualities were what proved the universality of human worth and dignity. "These little children, slaves though they were, and doomed to a life of toil and drudgery, ignorant, and untutored, assimilated thus to the highest and proudest in the land – thus evinced their equal origin, and immortal destiny."[192] In other words, one's social status and race were ephemeral qualities, but the internal ones – the qualities that made one human – were not. And it was these qualities that made "ignorant, and untutored" children, "slaves though they were" the equals of "the highest and proudest in the land."

Though Crafts' book remained unpublished for a century and a half after she penned it, the principles of human equality that she articulated in her work were common in the speeches and writings of those who sought the betterment of their society, whether that betterment was

[192] Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, 11-12.

intended to come about through preaching and individual conversions, through teaching leading to the acquisition of knowledge and of moral improvement, or through speaking out for the abolition of slavery. And like Crafts, for many of those activists who were Evangelical, principles of human equality were inseparably intertwined with the principles of Evangelical Christianity. Maria W. Stewart whose career took her from being an outspoken abolitionist in her younger years to being a poverty-stricken yet dedicated teacher in later life makes clear in one of her speeches the connection between her Evangelical faith and her understanding of equal rights, She thunders to her audience of mainly black Americans, "Certainly, God has not deprived [black people] of the divine influences of his Holy Spirit, which is the greatest of all blessings, if they ask him. Then why should man any longer deprive his fellow-man of equal rights and privileges?"[193]

Though this intertwining of specifically Evangelical theology with notions of human equality was more prominent in the political milieu of antebellum America than it was in the years following the Civil War, and later Evangelicals began to pull back somewhat from their intense engagement with politics, the early Evangelical impetus to effect positive change in their communities helped set the course for the rest of the century.[194] In fact, even though Evangelicalism and secular politics had significant points of difference that meant their interpenetration was fraught with conflict, the flourishing of Evangelicalism coincided with that of mass political participation in the young nation. And, thus, "The way was open for the dominant religious culture to leave an indelible mark on American political life."[195]

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[193] Stewart, *Productions,* 18.

[194] See Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 17. Also, Lisa Shaver, "'Serpents,' 'Fiends,' and 'Libertines': Inscribing and Evangelical Rhetoric of Rage in the *Advocate of Moral Reform*," *Rhetoric Review* 30, no. 1 (2011): 1-18. Accessed August 8, 2014, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2011.530099.

[195] Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 17, 48-9.

For women like the young Maria W. Stewart, whose faithful action was geared inherently toward large-scale political change, they may have seen clearly what their political goal was, but they may not have realized that merely living their ordinary lives also was pushing their society toward it. Stewart is a particularly interesting case, however, since, as she made clear in her "Farewell Address," she became convinced that agitating for political change was not the path she had thought it would be to equal rights for those of her race. Managing to strike a simultaneously victorious yet defeated tone in this last address to "Her Friends in the City of Boston," Stewart chides her listeners for their previous urgings "to not talk so much about religion."[196] Instead of conceding to their apparent wishes, however, she proceeds to make her case that not only should religion be the topic of greatest concern among her fellow Americans, it should be pure religion, free from political entanglement. "Again, those ideas of greatness which are held forth to us, are vain delusions, are airy visions which we shall never realize. All that man can say or do can never elevate us, it is a work that must be effected between God and ourselves. And how?" She asks, "by dropping all political discussions in our behalf, for these, in my opinion, sow the seed of discord, and strengthen the cord of prejudice."[197]

Stewart even goes so far as to say that, "It is the sovereign will of God that our condition should be thus and so. 'For he hath formed one vessel for honor, and another for dishonor.' And shall the clay say to him that formed it, why hast thou formed me thus?"[198] She then renews her plea for a shift in focus from political goals to spiritual development: "It is high time for us to drop political discussions, and when our day of deliverance comes, God will provide a way for

[196] Stewart, "Farewell Address," in *Productions*, 79.
[197] Stewart, "Farewell Address," in *Productions*, 80.
[198] Stewart, "Farewell Address," in *Productions*, 80.

us to escape, and fight his own battles…[L]et us follow after godliness, and the things which make for peace."[199]

Living up to this plea to refrain from political wrangling and to focus exclusively on godliness, Stewart left behind the lecture halls and went on to kinds of work that were still conducted in the public sphere, but in which she was less visible as a public figure. She established a private school, which succeeded through her considerable effort in raising funds as well as convincing people of the importance of educating their children. Not content to provide only traditional academic learning, she used her building as a Sabbath school as well. In the 1870s she served as the Matron of the Freedmen's Hospital in Washington, D.C.[200] In addition to this quieter form of public activism, Stewart at some point turned from the Baptist denomination in which she was baptized as a young woman to the Episcopal Church, of which she stayed a member for the remainder of her life. As she left behind her previous occupation as an abolitionist and began her turn toward these more conservative practices, she expressed disillusionment with what she saw as the poor success of her previous efforts. The concluding remarks of her farewell address in Boston summarize her feeling of having accomplished but little in her endeavors: "Thus far has my life been almost a life of complete disappointment. God has tried me as by fire. Well was I aware that if I contended boldly for his cause, I must suffer. Yet, I chose rather to suffer affliction with his people, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season." [201]

While Stewart's impassioned rejection of the methods of abolitionism she formerly had embraced, as well as her turn toward private benevolence could be construed as a retreat into an

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[199] Stewart, "Farewell Address," in *Productions*, 80.

[200] Marilyn Richardson, ed. *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches.* (Bloomington: Indiana State University Press, 1987), 85.

[201] Stewart, "Farewell Address," in *Productions,* 82.

Evangelical framework more closely resembling that of the eighteenth rather than the nineteenth century, the two modes of social action in which she engaged over her lifetime illuminate the unique potential of Evangelicalism to empower women in ways that were important to them. Considering the fact that the Episcopal Church that she joined in later life was a denomination that, while it espoused the four core Evangelical emphases, was also much more hierarchical in its polity than other denominations like the Baptists and Methodists were, Stewart's later years arguably were much more conservative than her earlier ones. In fact, the way in which her turn toward religious conservatism paralleled the less radical forms of social action that she adopted could be held up as a proof text that conservative religiosity led women to lead more conventional lives. However, it is important to note that her motivation for social action, and even her abolitionist goals, remained the same although in later life she adopted a different, less secular and less political method of achieving those goals. She was not disempowered by her more conservative outlook. Rather, her Evangelical faith – at both ends of her life and career – gave her the freedom first, to determine how she ought best to live out her faith in the world around her and second, to see that determination through by engaging in the kind of social action that she understood to be most effective. Though the historiography of the female experience in America tends to privilege the idea of secularization and a more political path toward social equality for all, Maria W. Stewart's life and experiences call this privileging into question. Her life, informed by her increasingly conservative faith, indicates that secularization and political means were but one route that could lead to female empowerment and social change. In fact, her faith and constant social action throughout her life make clear that a religious, non-political path to social change could be just as empowering to women as a secular, political one was. We see by Stewart's example that rather than serving to constrict women into a single mold, Evangelicalism motivated, equipped, and liberated nineteenth-century women to act in multiple

ways that were meaningful to them personally, as well as influential in their communities and in their nation.

Though Maria W. Stewart may have believed her earlier social activism to have been less than successful, the whole of her life indicates that both her fiery orations as well as her persistence in living faithfully as an aging believer in Christ were a vital part of the much larger social trend toward the equality of all Americans, regardless of race or gender. Her near contemporaries acknowledged as much. William C. Nell referred to Stewart's role in the progress of abolitionism and the woman's rights movement in an 1852 letter to their mutual acquaintance, William Lloyd Garrison. His remarks are worth quoting in full:

> …my mind reverted to your early and constant advocacy of women's equality. The seeds sown by you at a time when the public was indifferent have germinated, and now promise an abundant harvest. The fact of woman's equal participation in the lecture room, in the halls of science, and other departments hitherto monopolized by man, has become an everyday occurrence. In the perilous years of '33-'35, a colored woman – Mrs. Maria W. Stewart – fired with a holy zeal to speak her sentiments on the improvement of colored Americans, encountered an opposition even from her Boston circle of friends, that would have dampened the ardor of most women. But your words of encouragement cheered her onwards, and her public lectures awakened an interest acknowledged and felt to this day.[202]

In addition to this credit for the value of her work as a lecturer, she was eulogized in *The People's Advocate* of Washington, D.C. the February following her death in December 1879. This eulogy focused on her personal piety as well as her benevolent work in the black community in that area. The story they chose to remember her by was her role in bringing back a young woman who had fallen into trouble and found herself working in a brothel, believing herself unworthy or unable to return home. Maria Stewart went to the mistress of the establishment, and though rebuffed at first, eventually retrieved the young woman and restored

[202] Quoted in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington: Indiana State University Press, 1987), 90.

her to her family. As the eulogist stated, “So long as there is remembrance of such an act, and St. Luke’s P.[rotestant] E.[piscopal] Church still stands, the culmination of humble efforts begun years ago in which Mrs. Stewart was a pioneer, no funeral oration is needed to state the place she will take as a missionary.”[203] This private benevolence, no less than her public passion, was a testament both to her Evangelical faith as well as to the power of individuals “fired with a holy zeal” to live active, faithful lives and thereby effect change in the world around them. As the lives of Stewart and other Evangelical women demonstrate, even the less visible – and perhaps more socially conservative – forms of Evangelical “activism” were effectual in stimulating large scale social change, even when the women who participated in them, like Stewart, were unable to see that their efforts were not in vain.

Conclusion

The pattern of Protestant Evangelical women’s lives, characterized by zealous action and yet lived within the parameters of a theologically conservative faith, was both commonplace for the time and yet also a potent catalyst in the move toward moral and social reform intended to make America a better, more equitable place to live. As indicated by the lives of these women, and perhaps especially the life of Maria W. Stewart, the individualistic, action-oriented Evangelical faith gave nineteenth-century believers a great deal of confidence to assert their rightful participation in the public sphere. For many such women, their newfound confidence prompted them to engage in social action in spite of opposition from authority figures in their lives: husbands, church and government officials, and even tradition and custom. Negotiating their way through such opposition, they relied on the egalitarian ethic that was inherent to their

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[203] Quoted in *Maria W. Stewart, America’s First Black Woman Political Writer,* ed. Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington: Indiana State University Press, 1987), 86.

Evangelical religion and that justified their unconventional behavior. At the same time, the disintegration of religious structures that had been socially as well as religiously authoritative in the previous century allowed room for new interpretations and applications of Evangelical theology in the lives of believers in the larger society as a whole.

By appropriating to themselves a measure of religious authority via the individualistic nature of American Protestant Evangelical Christianity, those who were part of the Evangelical subculture of the nineteenth century simultaneously appropriated a measure of social authority, and in so doing enacted a much more tangible form of equality than what the U.S. Constitution supposedly guaranteed to all Americans. In this way Evangelicalism was a powerful equalizer of all people, yet within the context of a racially divided nation, people who inhabited either side of that divide experienced and utilized their faith in ways that reflected the differences in their social realities. As indicated by the value that many of the women in this chapter placed on literacy as they sought to influence their communities even as they improved their personal circumstances, the use of literacy played a particularly vital role in nineteenth-century women's engagement in social action. However, the various ways that Evangelical women utilized literacy reflected racial and other social realities that affected the nature of their practical theology. The next chapter takes up the question of how race and literacy influenced the ways in which Evangelical believers in the nineteenth century understood and applied their faith as they made sense of themselves as women, as Christians, and as Americans.

Chapter Three

Activism and Identity: Considerations of Faith, Race, and Literacy in the Consolidation of the Self

Sarah Emma Edmonds was born in New Brunswick, Canada in 1841. By 1864 she had immigrated to the United States. Part of her migration had included adopting a male persona and taking on not only male clothing, but also a male occupation along with the more expansive social freedoms allowed to white men in the nineteenth century. Perhaps even more surprisingly, when the American Civil War broke out, Emma, or Franklin Thompson as she was known to her acquaintances at the time, enlisted in the Union Army as a private, in which capacity she served her adopted country for more than two years. Though historians have yet to establish beyond doubt that she did in fact serve as a spy for part of that time, she later claimed that among her other more commonplace, soldierly duties she also was commissioned to infiltrate Confederate lines, and did so on multiple occasions, often darkening her skin and disguising herself as a slave boy, in which unassuming role she was able to evade detection.[204]

Her military occupation apparently suited her well, but at some point in early 1863 circumstances were such that she felt she had no choice but to leave behind her military career or risk discovery of her complicated identity. At that time she was listed officially as a deserter, and though she later claimed that her desertion was prompted by a case of malaria that would have required medical treatment and thus threatened to undo her carefully maintained male identity, there are questions about whether her motivation might have had more to do with emotional distress either over the hardships of war or as a result of a lover's squabble with an officer in her

[204] Elizabeth D. Leonard, "Introduction" in *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse and Spy: A Woman's Adventures in the Union Army* (Hartford: Williams, 1865; repr. Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999), *xiii-xxvi*.

regiment.[205] In either case, she did not stay away from military life for long, and by May of that year she was working as a volunteer (female) nurse at a U.S. Sanitary Commission hospital at Harpers Ferry.[206] In 1864 she published an account of her experience in the army, entitled *Unsexed, or the Female Soldier.* In this memoir, which appears to be part fact and part fiction, she recounts how deep devotion to God and to her adopted country led her to seek out a way to "express a tithe of gratitude" during the war.[207]

A rousing success when it was published, especially in the second edition of 1865, which sported a title considerably toned down from the original, Emma's *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse and Spy: A Woman's Adventures in the Union Army* later served as a help both in her bid to establish the fact of her honorable service in the army and as a bridge between her cross-dressing adolescent self and her (somewhat) more conventional matronly self of her mature years.[208] In spite of its rather racy sounding original title, the memoir was eminently acceptable to its nineteenth-century audience. Emma's Christian faith informed the text – as well as her character's actions – from the first page of the memoir to the last. In it she recounted that in spite of the fact that the United States was her adopted country, she was grieved when the Civil War became a reality. Determined not "to seek my own personal ease and comfort while so much sorrow and distress filled the land," Emma pondered in the opening pages of her memoir what her role should be during the war. Considering the enormity of the war, and perhaps her own moral convictions on the pertinent issues at stake in it, she asked herself, "What part am *I* to act

[205] Laura Leedy Gansler, *The Mysterious Private Thompson: The Double Life of Sarah Emma Edmonds, Civil War Soldier* (New York: Free Press, 2005).

[206] Gansler, *Private Thompson*, 181.

[207] Sarah Emma Edmonds, *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse and Spy: A Woman's Adventures in the Union Army*. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999), 4. Hereafter referred to as Edmonds, *Memoirs*, with the appropriate page numbers.

[208] Gansler, *Private Thompson*, 185, 200, 222.

in this great drama? I was not able to decide for myself – so I carried this question to the Throne of Grace, and found a satisfactory answer there."[209] Characteristically, Emma left the details of that divine answer discreetly vague. Going on to provide biographical background information, she described her church membership and religious participation in her native land as well as her youthful desire to enter the mission field. Deftly, she connected this missionary impulse to her undertaking in the Union Army, and thus conveniently foregrounding her patriotic, Christian motivations while leaving important specifics of her service in the background, Emma masterfully went on to recreate her experience in such a way that her audience's nineteenth-century sensibilities were not only not offended but reinforced and even edified.

Emma's memoir makes clear that her command of literacy, as well as her deeply held religious beliefs, were powerful tools she used to shape her experience and then present it and herself to the world in a way that both upheld and subverted conventional notions of women's proper role in society. What her life and her memoir also indicate, in a much more subtle way, is that while a fluid gender identity allowed her a great deal of freedom and agency as she acted in and upon her world, equally potent was the unstated power that her European descent gave her in a society that privileged whiteness. Had Emma been born to a family whose European descent was mixed with African ancestry, her options – indeed her agency – for self-determination would have remained limited even while taking on a male persona.

Like many other nineteenth-century Evangelical women whose lives were less colorful than Emma's if no less guided by their Christian faith, her life stands as proof that women whose lives and identities were constructed upon beliefs that were commonplace, conventional, and religiously orthodox could and often did occupy a paradoxical space in which they

[209] Edmonds, *Memoirs*, 3.

simultaneously abided by, upheld, exploited, transgressed and ultimately contributed to the expansion of what was considered socially respectable female behavior.[210] And yet, though these women as Evangelical believers may have shared an essentially similar religious perspective of the world they inhabited, many social factors, including considerations of race, played a role in how they incorporated their religious beliefs into their daily lives and in how they engaged with the pressing social issues of their day.

Embodying racial difference even as they ordered their lives according to a shared and relatively conservative religious faith, nineteenth-century Evangelical women inhabiting opposite sides of the American racial divide offer an ideal opportunity to explore the question of how religious faith may have affected women whose lived experiences differed at many points even as they shared a similar theological perspective. As scholar David Wills has asserted, racial difference in the American context entailed power, meaning, and the relationship between the two. Living within such a context, Evangelical women of differing races – as well as differing economic status and class – had not only differing motivations for their social action but also different opportunities and levels of access to power and meaning in their society. Inhabiting social spaces on opposing sides of the racial and cultural gap that Wills noted, Evangelical women both white and black applied their broadly similar theological framework to a vastly different experience of being an American, a Christian, and a woman in the nineteenth century.[211] Thus, the forms of activism that they engaged in, and their specific interpretation of the human condition, as well as what they believed to be the solution to the difficulties of life all reflected this difference in lived experience, in spite of their shared Evangelicalism.

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[210] For a more complete discussion of this topic see Beth Ridenoure Austin, "Hannah More and the Paradox of Feminine Authority," term paper, Colorado State University, 2012.

[211] David Wills, "The Central Themes of America Religious History: Pluralism, Puritanism, and the Encounter of Black and White," in *Anthology*, 214-15.

Although the women in this thesis engaged with social issues of their day through multiple avenues that reflected their social and racial circumstances, of particular interest is the literary path to social engagement and the appropriation and use of social authority. All of the women under consideration, no matter what other kinds of activism they may have engaged in, also participated in the public sphere by harnessing the power of language, the written word in particular. However, considering the social realities that the question of race imposed on American women of that era, race was a vital factor in the various ways Evangelical women thought about and employed language as they embodied their faith in a social context that privileged some even as it disadvantaged others merely because of the color of their skin. While for white women, their command of literacy represented a means to legitimate participation in a public sphere disinclined to allow them that right, for black women, the import of literacy and having a literary presence in society was doubly significant.[212] The literary path to social engagement not only encompassed the bypassing of cultural notions regarding women's proper place in the civic sphere, it also served as an instrument by which they and others of their race both asserted and proved their right to full inclusion and participation in American society.[213]

In spite of having differing goals and uses for literacy based on differing social circumstances, nineteenth-century Evangelical women on either side of the American racial gap made use of the written word as they sought to influence the world around them. By engaging in

[212] See the scholarship of Mary Kelley for an overview of women and literacy in American history. In particular, see *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literacy Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1984; repr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), as well as *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). See also Beth Ridenoure Austin, "Hannah More and the Paradox of Feminine Authority," (term paper, Colorado State University, 2012) for a discussion of Evangelical women's use of literacy as a means of moral authority in both the European and American contexts during the nineteenth century.

[213] Jacqueline Bacon and Glen McClish, "Reinventing the Master's Tools: Nineteenth-Century African-American Literary Societies of Philadelphia and Rhetorical Education," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2000): 19-47. Accessed August 14, 2014. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3886116.

the practice of writing, and in some cases even publishing, these women were products of their era in two related ways. First, they were participating in the complex social phenomenon of a combined market revolution and groundswell of literary and publishing activity that came to characterize nineteenth-century America.[214] The advent of the nineteenth century was, in fact, the advent of modern mass media, and Evangelical production and consumption of print were prominent actors in this quintessentially modern phenomenon.[215] Secondly, as the prominent Evangelical presence in the burgeoning publishing and literary market indicates, the context of nineteenth-century America infused a new vitality to a traditional Evangelical emphasis on literacy. Drawing on the Reformation's affirmation of the individual's ability to read and understand the word of God for him or herself, believers in the Evangelical tradition historically have privileged the use of the written word, whether that word was found in the Bible, in the form of Church catechisms, or by reading or writing faithful and edifying guides for cultivating faith.[216]

Thus, as Evangelical believers in the nineteenth century living out their faith in the literacy-rich intersection of the Protestant religious tradition and the dynamic print culture of their era, nineteenth-century Evangelical women who engaged with social issues via a literary path not only represented their place in time, they also embodied a religious culture in which engagement with the written word constituted a vital component of faithful living. What this chapter seeks to understand, then, is how Evangelical women's literacy interacted with – i.e.

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[214] David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[215] Nord, *Faith in Reading*.

[216] Examples of scholarship on this topic include Nord's *Faith in Reading*; Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Brumberg, *Mission for Life*. See also Mary Kelley, "'Pen and Ink Communion': Evangelical Reading and Writing in Antebellum America," *New England Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2011): 555-587, accessed August 8, 2014, http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/TNEQ_a_00130.

prompted, reinforced, led to, or flowed from – their involvement in other forms of social activism and how these various paths of access to social authority reflected both the social realities of women's lives as well as the social structures through which these women had to navigate as they sought to live out a faith that called them to act in and upon the world around them.

The first chapter of this thesis addressed the question of simultaneous continuity and profound change within the Evangelical subculture of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, especially in the ways in which Evangelical women perceived, defined, and acted upon the imperfections and brokenness they encountered in their societies and in their own lives. The second chapter took up the question of why and how this change came about in the practical theology of Evangelical believers. This last chapter explores the commonalities and differences between the experiences of white, Evangelical women and those of black, Evangelical women, with particular focus on two women whose social realities differed in every way except that of their (eventual) shared Evangelical faith. Sara Emma Edmonds was a white woman raised in a rural, working class, Evangelical family. Charlotte Forten Grimké, her near contemporary, was born in Philadelphia to one of the prominent families of the elite black middle class. Unlike Edmonds, Grimké's religious background was not one of near undiluted Evangelicalism, but rather an amalgam consisting of Christian religiosity that was inherited from her family and from the culture around her, secularly-based ideas of social justice drawn from the abolitionist thought in which she was well-versed, and theologically liberal sensibilities that were common among the literary élite with whom she associated during her youth. The considerable social distance between these two women underscores the way in which the realities of life inflected women's experience of faith, social action, and identity construction within the context of a racially divided American society. Not only is this chapter a case study of individual women's

experiences in the nineteenth century, it is also an exploration of the connections between individual experience and the reconfiguration of social and political discourse that came to characterize modernity in the American context. At the heart of this chapter's analysis is first, the question of how these women's various racial, religious, and social realities as well as their level of education affected the way they understood and engaged with social and political issues of the day. Additionally, as these women pondered, recorded, and engaged in social action through the medium of the written word, in what ways did racial differences and religious beliefs intersect in the experience of living their faith in the American context? Lastly, considered as a whole, how do these women's lives illuminate the process by which ordinary people contributed to the reconfiguring of American culture over the course of the modern era?

Social Influences on Identity Construction, Faith, and Activism

Regardless of racial, social, or economic status, all of the women in this chapter participated in and were products of the literacy-rich culture in which they lived. All of them, in some form rendered their life experience into writing. Some, like Sarah Emma Edmonds did so with the intention of publishing, others, like Charlotte Forten Grimké, aspired to publish but also kept private writings in which they recorded their ideas, feelings, and opinions. Along the way they left traces of how they perceived themselves and how that sense of identity came about as they interacted with the world around them and reflected on those experiences through writing. Though many of the women featured in this thesis were exceptional in some way, they each embodied an Evangelical faith that in their historical context was entirely unexceptional, insofar

as it was representative of what several scholars have agreed was a "principal subculture" of nineteenth-century American society.[217]

With successive generations of Americans having adapted it to their social, economic, and political contexts, Evangelicalism has been a formidable presence in American culture from before the founding of the United States government. Though Evangelicalism has proven somewhat difficult to define, the four distinctives identified by scholar David Bebbington – *bibliocentrism, crucicentrism, conversion,* and *activism* – are a helpful tool in defining and understanding Evangelicalism in its different historical iterations.[218] In the context of nineteenth-century America, the Evangelical trait of activism in particular took on new significance as it blended with and contributed momentum to modernity's penchant for progress and social improvement. At the same time, a traditional Evangelical emphasis on the importance and use of the written word took on an almost symbiotic relationship with the nineteenth century's emergent culture of mass media.[219] Considering these two coincident circumstances, it is little wonder that Evangelical women of all races and classes took to the pen as they encountered and engaged with pressing issues of their day. By doing so, they proved themselves to be products of their time, and whether they lived extraordinary lives or not, their lives and writings exemplify two of the major impulses that characterized the century in which they lived. At the same time,

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[217] Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, xv.

[218] For the purposes of this study, Bebbington's definition is refined even more to include only women who affiliated with evangelical denominations that were established prior to the nineteenth century. The reason for this narrowing of scope is that the focus of this thesis has been on women who can be considered conservative, both religiously and socially, relative to their time. Though Evangelicalism as defined by Bebbington has existed for centuries, Evangelicalism as manifested in the nineteenth century was not immune to the radicalizing impulse that led to the fragmentation of the religious establishment of the previous century. Christians who were largely Evangelical in their history and in their religious sympathies could and often did establish new denominations and sects that in many ways were as radical and as fringe as Baptists and Methodists had been in the eighteenth century. Such groups could not truly be said to represent the larger, unexceptional and ordinary masses of Americans. For this reason, they are excluded from consideration. See Hatch, *Democratization,* 34ff.

[219] David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

their use of literacy evidences the reality of social distinctions based on race that flavored their thinking and their writing, as well as their motivations and opportunities for taking action in the world around them.

Evangelical Women's Agency: Literacy and the Pursuit of Freedom

Though in many ways Sarah Emma Edmonds lived an extraordinary life, her origins were quite the opposite, and she appears to have had an upbringing that was both distinctively Evangelical and religiously unexceptional for the time.[220] Born to Betsy and Isaac Edmondson, who eked out a living as farmers, Emma lived a humble, commonplace life in her early years. Being the fifth daughter and the last child of the family, Emma was a bitter disappointment to her father who for all of his married life had hoped for sons to help with the grueling task of farming in the harsh northern climate of New Brunswick. Her father's bitterness over life's circumstances seems to have compounded a natural predisposition toward harshness. Thus, frequent rages and constant simmering anger shaped the household in which Emma and her siblings grew up. And with Emma's disappointing female sex being representative of all that was frustrating in Isaac's life, she often bore the brunt of his intemperance. Though Emma herself, as well as her biographers, point to this poisoned home atmosphere as a catalyst for her later extraordinary actions, there were other influences in her early life that also prompted her to take the path she ultimately took. Though Emma was a farm girl accustomed to backbreaking labor in the outdoors, these other important influences in her life were literary in nature.

[220] See Mary Kelley, "'Pen and Ink Communion': Evangelical reading and Writing in Antebellum America," *New England Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2011): 555-87, particularly pp. 578-79, for a brief discussion of the Evangelical influence in Maine, the American state neighboring the Province of New Brunswick, Canada. While Kelley's focus is on Evangelical reading and writing practices in Antebellum America, it stands to reason that the same influences that were felt in Maine may have carried over to its Canadian neighbor.

First, Emma's family – and perhaps especially her mother Betsy – was deeply religious, and Isaac's foul personality notwithstanding, the Bible and religious instruction were a mainstay of the household. One biographer describes Emma as "an avid reader" eager to devour whatever literature was available, which in her family's case was the family Bible. The family often would read it aloud together in the evenings, and Emma delighted in committing long passages of it to memory.[221] This early immersion in the sacred text of the Christian religion would leave a lasting impress of not only Christian morality and sensibilities but also patterns of speech and thought that would give her later writing a distinctly Biblical flavor. It also instilled in Emma an abiding faith in God which allowed her to carry her every concern "to the Throne of Grace" and which sustained her throughout her life.[222] Though Emma claimed no specific denomination in the memoir she wrote and published in the later years of the American Civil War, a number of textual clues indicate that she not only was broadly Evangelical in her beliefs, but also that she was associated with one or more of the most common Evangelical denominations. These internal textual clues are corroborated by her biographer who indicates that when she moved to Michigan following her first initial success as a book salesman in Nova Scotia she not only boarded with the family of a Methodist Episcopal pastor, she also joined the church and became an active member of it.[223]

In addition to the deeply religious nature of her upbringing, another lifelong literary influence on Emma's character was her mother's commitment to ensuring that each of her children received a good education. Emma and her siblings regularly attended school, which in conjunction with the regular reading of the Bible cultivated a habit of reading that would stay

[221] Gansler, *Private Thompson,* 1-3.
[222] Edmonds, *Memoirs*, 3.
[223] Gansler, *Private Thompson*, 20.

with Emma throughout her life.[224] This thirst for reading that was fostered by education and developed through the family's devotion to religious instruction prepared the way for yet another powerful literary influence in Emma's life: her encounter with a novel during her formative years. Though novels in general likely were not allowed in a family as religiously inclined as Emma's was, she was given a copy of Maturin Ballou's *Fanny Campbell, the Female Pirate Captain* as a gift from a grateful peddler whom the family had offered room and board for a night. Emma and her sisters pored over its pages whenever they found the time and the privacy to do so, and Emma claims that it was this novel that inspired her to embark on her infamous adventure as Frank Thompson, traveling book salesman and eventual soldier in the Union Army during the American Civil War.[225]

In its simplicity, indicative not only of the socioeconomic circumstances associated with a rural farming family but also of a characteristic Evangelical *bibliocentrism*, Emma's upbringing was perhaps the most distinctively Evangelical of the women considered here. She, like the majority of nineteenth-century American women, was immersed in a social context that was highly literate in spite of the undeniable inflections of class, race, and gender. As Emma sought – and found – in a masculine identity a greater measure of independence than her female gender and socioeconomic background had allowed her previously, her command of literacy was an invaluable tool. Not only did the freewheeling character of Fanny Campbell inspire her to take action to improve her circumstances, her literary aptitude and proclivities allowed her to take on a form of employment that she undoubtedly was qualified to perform, so long as her female sex did not cloud the issue with her employers or customers. However, though this option of taking on a male identity was available to her, and she had the determination and skill to make the

[224] Gansler, *Private Thompson*, 3.
[225] Gansler, *Private Thompson*, 4-6.

endeavor a success, had she not been of European descent, she still would have met with severe restrictions on what her male identity allowed her to accomplish. Clearly, she benefited both from the freedom of movement and expression allowed to European Americans but which was denied to Americans of African descent, as well as from the literacy she acquired while she grew to adulthood.

While not all of the women in this chapter were Evangelical from their youth as Emma appears to have been, they all, like she did, benefited from emphatically literary influences in their formative years, though the racial prejudice they had to contend with meant they used their literacy in slightly different ways than Emma did. Even nineteenth-century women who were born into slavery found, and often made for themselves, opportunities to acquire literacy and to cultivate what Harriet Jacobs, who was born a slave but later published a memoir, referred to as "deportment."[226] Jacobs, born in North Carolina in 1813, was considerably older than Emma, and considering that she only achieved her freedom in adulthood, she faced much greater challenges throughout her life socially, economically, and even religiously than her younger contemporary faced. Her mother died when Harriet was only six years old, so the most significant mother figure in her life was that of her maternal grandmother who raised her.

Harriet's first mistress was also a mother figure of sorts, having promised Harriet's mother that the girl would be well-provided for. The mistress was kind, as far as mistresses go, teaching Harriet to read and write and generally ensuring that she was not treated harshly. However, this kindness lasted only as long as the mistress's earthly life, and when she died, she bequeathed Harriet to a niece rather than setting her free. Of this injustice Harriet writes, "My

[226] Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. by Jean Fagan Yellin (Boston, 1861; repr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 189. Hereafter referred to as Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Yellin, with the appropriate page number.

mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' 'Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so unto them.' But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor."[227] This first experience of hypocrisy would flavor the rest of Harriet's life, and is a recurring theme in the memoir she published following her escape to freedom. In spite of the bitterness of this memory, Harriet wrote of her gratefulness that this mistress was kind enough to grant her the gift of literacy, even if she failed to grant her freedom.

Harriet's father and her maternal grandmother were perhaps the most influential positive figures in her life, and both were models of hard work as well as of relentless pursuit of freedom and the accompanying recognition of their innate worth as human beings. Her father made himself indispensable to his masters as a master carpenter whose skill was highly valuable even around the community. With such a skill in his possession, along with the high demand for his services, he was able to negotiate for himself a relatively autonomous role in spite of his enslaved status. Harriet's grandmother took a similar path, making herself invaluable to her captors and operating her own bakery business on the side. These parental figures in Harriet's life cultivated within her and her brother William, as well as in her young aunts and uncles, certainty of their worth as human beings as well as the injustice of their circumstances. As a result, Harriet not only thirsted after freedom for herself and her children, she was resolved to achieve it.

Her literacy not only proved to be an invaluable tool in her pursuit of freedom, it also was rightly perceived as just such a threat by the slaveholding community in which she lived. She records in her memoir an incident that occurred around the time of the Nat Turner insurrection in

[227] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Yellin, 7-8.

1831. The white community in the slaveholding South panicked and embarked on a bloody, riotous campaign to root out any other potential threats. The uncouth men who searched Harriet's grandmother's house could barely read themselves, and yet they were directed by the wealthy planter leading the campaign to bring to him any bit of writing that they might find as they terrorized the neighborhood.[228] The slaveholders' associating writing with slave insurrection closely mirrored Southern laws that prohibited slaves from learning to read or write. For Harriet, literacy was an undeniable link between her own humanity and the recognition of that humanity that was the concomitant of freedom, a linkage that her oppressors' attempts to eradicate literacy among the slave population confirmed.

The vital importance of literacy to those who lived in the shadow of slavery and politically-sanctioned oppression is reiterated in the writings of other women. Hannah Crafts is an enigmatic figure who only recently appeared on the historiographical scene. Although it is clear from internal textual evidence that she penned her work entitled *The Bondwoman's Narrative* between the years 1857 and 1860, it was only discovered in 2001 and published for the first time in 2002.[229] In this apparently autobiographical account, she like Harriet Jacobs records how she learned to read and write because of the kindness of a white woman. Unlike Jacobs, however, Crafts' benefactor was not her owner and in fact befriended the little girl and taught her to read because she herself was opposed to slavery and to the laws that made it crime for them to acquire literacy. Also like Jacobs, Crafts sought out opportunities to improve on the rudimentary knowledge that this woman and her husband had gifted her with: "I tried to remember the good things they had taught me, and to improve myself by gathering up such crumbs of knowledge as

[228] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Yellin, 63-5.

[229] See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Introduction" to *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), *xi-lxxiv* for an overview of what scholars know about Hannah Crafts and how her narrative was discovered and authenticated.

I could, and adding little by little to my stock of information."[230] Unlike Jacobs' mistress who showed only limited kindness, tempered with a hypocritical faith, Crafts' mentors were thoroughly Christian in both word and deed, and inspired her with a desire to emulate their living faith. The education and exposure to literacy that she received from them seems to have closely resembled the simple, Bible-infused education that Sarah Emma Edmonds received. When possible, this couple who in Crafts words were "Simple and retiring in their habits modest unostentatious and poor" included the young girl in their earnest "morning and evening sacrifice of worship" and in "their devout songs of praise."[231] According to Crafts, those "sacrifices of worship" included not only prayer in which the plight of the slaves was remembered, but also "reading from the book of God."[232] This early foundation in both reading and in a simple yet deep faith remained strong throughout her life, as indicated not only by her writing a compelling narrative of her experiences, but also in her description of life after her escape from slavery. She found that "a life of freedom" was all that her "fancy had pictured it to be."[233] She lived in her own "neat little Cottage," she was reunited with the mother she never knew, she was able to operate a school for black children, and she was married to "a fond and affectionate husband" who was "a regularly ordained preacher of the Methodist persuasion."[234]

For all of these women, regardless of their race, education, or social status, their lives and their writings demonstrate the link – both perceived and real – between literacy and personal agency. With the tool of literacy at their disposal, they were able to construct a powerful apologetic for their actions and their beliefs, whether those actions and beliefs entailed personal

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[230] Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, 10.
[231] Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, 10.
[232] Crafts, *Bondwoman's Narrative*, 10 and 12.
[233] Crafts, *Bondwoman's Narrative*, 237.
[234] Crafts, *Bondwoman's Narrative*, 237-39.

freedom from the oppression of slavery, liberty to act in the world in the best way they saw fit, or the authority to opine on social, political, or religious issues. At the same time, literacy and its use were commingled with these women's experience of faith. Harriet Jacobs, for example underscored in her narrative that "There is a great difference between Christianity and religion at the south."[235] True Christianity, exemplified by virtuous women such as her mother and grandmother, as well as several of her antislavery benefactors, recognized the human worth of individuals and prompted behavior that was consistent with what the Bible taught: that "God judges men by their hearts, not by the color of their skins."[236] When her master who had recently joined the Episcopal Church tried to persuade her that, "You can do what I require; and if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife," she rejected his logic by simply saying that "…the Bible didn't say so."[237] Throughout her narrative, this hypocritical faith of her captors was contrasted with the simple faith of those whose words and actions matched what Jacobs knew the Bible taught.

This same rebuke of hypocritical faith features in Hannah Crafts' equally compelling account of her own experience of resisting and escaping from slavery. Her mistress – also a professing Christian – attempted to punish her by forcing her into "a compulsory union with a man I could only hate and despise," but Hannah drew from the precepts of her faith the strength as well as the justification to resist this egregious attempt to violate and humiliate her. In this case,

> "…it seemed that rebellion would be a virtue, that duty to myself and my God actually required it…Yet I feared haste or rashness. I wished to do right and determined to be guided by the Holy book of God. I had a little Bible, one that Aunt Hetty had given me, a plain simple common book with leather binding, and leaves brown with age. It was well

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[235] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Yellin, 74.
[236] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Yellin, 72.
[237] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* ed. Yellin, 75.

> worn and thumbed, too, with neither margin, nor notes, nor quotations, but the precious word itself was their {there} [sic] and that was enough.[238]

Literacy based on the "book of God," which Hannah's benefactor Aunt Hetty had taught her, was in turn the supporting structure that not only allowed her to justify and act on her pursuit of freedom, but also gave her the means by which she later was able to make sense of her past and of her self by creating in writing not only her story but an apologia for her freedom. And this was true of all of the women under consideration. Each of them, in spite of their obvious differences, were markedly similar in that they understood the power inherent to literacy and appropriated that power in varying degrees to shape the world around them. Edmonds and Crafts, having had the most distinctively Evangelical influence on their early lives and on their education, evidence the most obviously Evangelical ethos in their writings, but each woman in writing a discrete narrative of her life, framed her experience with a triad of faith, use of literacy, and the pursuit of freedom.

The Evangelical ethos exemplified in these women's writing is present not only in this triad of faith, literacy, and freedom, but also in other characteristics as well. All of these women purported to write truthfully, taking pains to assure their readers that "…this narrative is no fiction,"[239] and that it was instead a "…record of plain unvarnished fact."[240] Each woman also appealed to the authority of God and the Bible to make moral claims and value judgments, in her text as well as in the lived experiences that she recorded in it. This appeal to the authority of the scriptures was underscored by each woman's assertion of the importance of literacy and the power of the written word, as well as by her own resort to the written word in order to

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238 Crafts, *Bondwoman's Narrative,* 206-7.
239 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Yellin, 1.
240 Crafts, *Bondwoman's Narrative*, 3.

appropriate and exert moral authority as she made those claims and judgments. Lastly, the Evangelical ethos is also evident in the fact that each woman not only wrote as one means of social action, she also lived a life characterized by activism intended to make the world a better, more equitable place to live: Hannah Crafts taught at a school for black children, Harriet Jacobs involved herself in abolitionist circles and relief work among freed slaves, and Sarah Emma Edmonds lived a life of service to all varieties of people from war orphans to destitute veterans of the Civil War.

Although none of these women's writings reached the status of "steady seller" among Evangelical publications, these traits indicate that these women were writing with an eye toward honoring not only conventional morals but perhaps even the Evangelical textual community that informed much of the literary marketplace during the nineteenth century. Though these texts did not necessarily conform to some of the most common "universalizing frameworks" found in the Evangelical canon, the function they served both in the constructing of the author's identity as well as in their apologetic significance to their readers, was quite similar to the converting, encouraging role that "steady sellers" occupied in Evangelical circles.[241] Undoubtedly, the kind of education they received as young women contributed to the form that the literary productions of their more mature years took. For most of these women, the simple, *bibliocentric* character of their upbringing and education shaped not only their tastes, but also the kinds of literary tools, including textual patterns, that were at their disposal as they sought to mold their experiences into an identity useful to themselves and into a text useful to their readers.

[241] See Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World*, especially pp. 7-15.

Social Realities that Shaped Experiences and Use of Literacy

As the exception in this group of women, Charlotte Forten Grimké's case is particularly interesting, since the link between literacy and freedom was quite prominent in her thinking and in her upbringing, but the relationship of either of these to her faith was much less noted, at least in the journals written during her younger years. Born in 1837, Charlotte was a near contemporary of Sarah Emma Edmonds. Although both women had the privilege of receiving a good education and grew up in an environment in which literacy was highly valued, Charlotte's more cosmopolitan experience, as well as her experience of being a black woman in a predominantly white America, gave her version of literacy a distinctly different tone than that of Emma's. She was born in Philadelphia, but Charlotte spent much of her youth in Salem, Massachusetts, within driving distance of Boston. Her geographical proximity to this hub of abolitionist and literary activity reflected her relationship to some of the most significant literary and abolitionist figures of her day. She was a member of a prominent abolitionist family, and as a result had many connections and acquaintances who were well-known in abolitionist or literary circles or both. She counted among her friends and acquaintances some of the most visible reformers of her day, including William Lloyd Garrison, John Greenleaf Whittier, Sarah Parker Remond, Wendell Phillips, and Lucretia Mott. She also attended lectures by Lucy Stone, Antoinette Brown, Stephen Foster, and Abigail Kelly. Steeped in the abolitionist cause from her birth, Charlotte's passion was the pursuit of freedom. In her teenage and young adult years she devoted almost all of her free time to furthering the cause. She attended lectures, read pamphlets, and sought to convert her less dedicated friends to the same form of radical abolitionism that she herself espoused. Time not spent in these activities she devoted to her studies and to leisurely reading. Her journals, kept from May 1854 through May 1864, record not only the particulars of much of her life during that time but also the remarkable breadth and depth of her literary

interests. Her innate curiosity and voracious appetite for knowledge, not to mention her familiarity with some of the most successful figures on New England's literary scene, led her to immerse herself in a tour of the most noteworthy literary pieces of the day.[242]

Unlike Emma Edmonds, Charlotte appears not to have received an intensely Evangelical upbringing. And unsurprisingly, given her proximity to the Boston literary elite who tended toward Unitarianism and other more liberal versions of Christianity, her own faith during her youth was characterized by anything but the fervent, Evangelical simplicity of Emma's. In the ten year period from 1854-1864, her record of Sabbath days included taking long walks and drives, reading interesting literary pieces, and attending abolitionist lectures. She seems to have attended church somewhat irregularly, and when she did, she often commented either on how intellectually stimulating the sermons were or were not rather than on their spiritual content or the scripture texts. She also dabbled in Spiritualism, and expressed exasperation with one preacher who spoke strongly against it.[243] It was not until much later in her life that Charlotte's private journals began to indicate a faith that exemplified characteristics of Evangelicalism.

Though in their youth Charlotte and Emma represented opposite ends of the religious, social, and racial spectrum of their age, they both were submerged in a culture in which literacy was highly valued and much more accessible than ever before. As a member of elite black society in the antebellum North, she had many more apparent opportunities than did women like Sarah Emma Edmonds who came from the rural, working class sector of the population. She also had many distinct social advantages over her fellow Americans who were in bondage. Nevertheless, she experienced a social constraint that Sarah Emma Edmonds never experienced,

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[242] Charlotte Forten Grimké, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, ed. Brenda Stevenson. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Hereafter referred to as Grimké, *Journals* with the appropriate page numbers.

[243] Grimké, *Journals*, 244 and 247.

but that was all too familiar to those who labored under slavery: discrimination because of her skin color. Opportunities that may have come about because of her proximity to the epicenter of cultural significance in the antebellum North were circumscribed by what the majority of society at that time deemed acceptable for a black woman to do. They were also circumscribed by the disconnect she felt between the values of the dominant culture and her own values that were derived from her experience as a woman of mixed race living within – and yet outside of – that culture.[244]

Charlotte's social background of deep involvement in some of the most important abolitionist circles, as well as the type of education she received as a result of her family's abolitionist sentiments and connections meant that her life was shaped by the prevailing intellectual ideas about the solution to racial prejudice and to slavery. As scholars Jacqueline Bacon and Glen McClish have argued, early abolitionist rhetoric as formulated and refined in Philadelphia, the city of Charlotte's birth, constituted a reinvention and redeployment of classical rhetorical education. This Scots-derived rhetorical pedagogy formulated in the eighteenth century was meant to cultivate "taste," or an appreciation of the good and the beautiful, as well as "genius," the creative faculty that allowed a rhetor to translate taste into persuasive speech. Whereas this style of education originally was intended to acculturate Scottish young men to British society and thus to reinforce extant class structure, black abolitionists drew from this tradition and subverted its purpose to their own end: upturning and dismantling the existing social structure that systematically disadvantaged people of color. Noting the "…fundamental but paradoxical connection between literacy and liberty for African-Americans" Bacon and

[244] Carla L. Peterson, "Reconstructing the Nation: Frances Harper, Charlotte Forten, and the Racial Politics of Periodical Publication," *Fifteenth Annual James Russell Wiggins Lecture in the History of the Book in American Culture* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1998), accessed September 24, 2014. http://www.americanantiquarian.org/proceedings/44539495.pdf

McClish argue that "Given the legal context of the late 1820s and early 1830s, the goals of literacy in general and proficiency in the rhetorical foundations of nineteenth-century university education in specific both constituted acts of resistance."[245] Born to abolitionist parents in Philadelphia in 1837, Charlotte Forten Grimké undoubtedly absorbed this understanding of the value of literacy for the black community. As indicated in the thorough, highly literary education she received, she also undoubtedly was the beneficiary of an earlier generation's iteration of both the underlying problem and the proposed solution to American society's racial divide.

In some ways the classical, rhetorical pedagogy that informed the education that Charlotte received paralleled an Evangelical ethic: literary pursuits converted audiences to the cause and encouraged current devotees to persist in their efforts, and those converted to the cause were called not just to sympathize with the principles at stake but to act on those principles as well. In spite of these basic similarities, however, the two ways of viewing and interacting with the world were quite different. Charlotte's elite education prompted her toward a secular view of both the problem and the solution to society's racial ills, and gave her use of literacy a distinctly different cast than that of her contemporaries who had humbler backgrounds and more basic educations. She did indeed desire to change the world around her to make it a better place, but that desire was birthed from her exposure to and adoption of the tastes and the values of the dominant culture rather than from a faith premised on the equality of all souls before God. The call to action which characterized the abolitionist interpretation of classical rhetoric was based on the Enlightenment concept of sympathy, which understood the essential character of humanity to be an interconnectedness resulting from common feelings, needs, and desires.[246] These early

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[245] Jacqueline Bacon and Glen McClish, "Reinventing the Master's Tools: Nineteenth-Century African-American Literary Societies of Philadelphia and Rhetorical Education," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2000): 19-47, accessed August 14, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3886116.

[246] Bacon and McClish, *Master's Tools*, 29-32.

abolitionists believed that by cultivating within themselves and others of their race the higher faculties of taste, genius, and the resulting rhetoric and sympathy, they would not only provide their oppressors with proof of their human equality, they also would be taking steps to equip the entire race with the tools – namely agency derived from education and morality – necessary to undermine and destroy slavery and prejudice.[247]

Charlotte's education, as well as the sentiments she expressed in her journals, indicate that she and the people she associated with very much understood literacy and the cultivation of the finer senses to be vitally important in the restructuring of American society and in the bettering of her own condition and that of other African-Americans. However, her writing also implies that she felt a certain amount of ambiguity regarding her identity. On the one hand, it is clear that the taste her upbringing inculcated in her was very much inclined toward the cultured. She loved to pursue education and to read, especially the classics and works recommended by her literary friends. She stated at different points and in different ways throughout her journals, "Most earnestly do I wish to possess what is most invaluable – a thorough education."[248] And yet, her appreciation of education and the finer points of culture were tinged with the recognition that even in these, justice and fair-mindedness were not guaranteed. She wrote, "…I can enjoy good and beautiful things so much more when I know that those who wrote them are themselves *good*, and devoted to the Right." [Emphasis in the original][249] With this internal check on her appreciation of the good and the beautiful, a fair amount of Charlotte's interaction with elite literature and the society around her consisted of detecting hypocrisy and decrying it, at least in her journal if she could not confront the perpetrator himself. She wrote scornfully, for example,

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[247] Bacon and McClish, *Master's Tools,* 34-35.
[248] Forten Grimké, *Journals*, 101.
[249] Grimké, *Journals*, 124.

of the “pusillanimity” of an author who did not mention slavery in his compilation of great quotations on freedom.[250] She also endured each Fourth of July celebration with bitterness, “What a mockery it is!”[251]

On one such holiday she recorded in her journal, “The *patriots*, poor fools, were celebrating the anniversary of their vaunted *independence*. Strange that they cannot feel their degradation – the weight of the chains which they have imposed upon themselves…”[Emphasis in the original][252] It was this failure among the dominant majority class to recognize the true character of reality that gave Charlotte a certain amount of ambivalence regarding her identity as a black American woman. She was educated in the tradition of the highest classes of Americans, and yet she knew too well the moral shortcomings which that tradition ignored. She longed to write and speak to a broad, public audience, and yet her thoughts as expressed in her journal demonstrate that there was tension in how she perceived herself and how she wanted to present that self to the public through writing and public speaking. Primarily, this tension resulted from a conflict between the kind of literature that her tastes and education demanded that she produce and what she felt compelled to write and say as a racial outsider subject to prejudice and discrimination. Stuck between these two compulsions, she had difficulty producing pieces that were acceptable to the wide, national audience that she desired to reach.[253] Ultimately, she produced very little for publication and it was not until the end of her life that she seems to have been able to resolve the underlying tension in how she perceived herself as black woman living and writing in nineteenth-century America.

[250] Grimké, *Journals*, 183.
[251] Grimké, *Journals*, 235.
[252] Grimké, *Journals*, 136.
[253] Carla L. Peterson, *Reconstructing the Nation*, 328-32.

Literacy, Freedom, and Agency in the Process of Identity Construction

The other women in this chapter who did achieve publication, Harriet Jacobs and Sarah Emma Edmonds during their lifetimes and Hannah Crafts posthumously, also were highly cognizant of the link between literacy and freedom, and in their use of literacy they experienced a tension similar to what Charlotte experienced. The Evangelical tenor of their faith, however, also inflected the way in which they used literacy and affected how they were able to garner the favor of their audience and then use that sympathy as platform from which they could engage with topics currently at issue in the public sphere. In their writing, they had to grapple with how to present their narratives and experiences truthfully, pricking the conscience of their audience and yet without placing themselves beyond the realm of what society deemed acceptable coming from women of their social stations. Though Hannah Crafts seems not to have pursued publication of her manuscript, she as well as each of those who did have their works published were able to shape their narratives in such a way that in each work a cohesive identity emerged from the experiences recorded. This identity integrated the morals the author professed and her actual experience, which apart from the mediating role of the narrative could appear to be at odds with each other. This integrated identity in turn allowed each woman moral berth from which she could judge the society in which she lived, and by means of that moral evaluation, enlarge the space in which she – as well as other women – could act in society's public sphere.

Harriet Jacobs, who had many fewer social advantages than did Charlotte Forten Grimké, had a difficult task in presenting her story to a public disposed to judge her harshly – because of her race and gender, as well as her status as a former slave and all of the moral dilemmas that slavery entailed upon women especially. Her *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl, Written by Herself* is a prime example of how women disadvantaged by the social system in which they lived could utilize literacy to give shape and meaning to their lives. As a rare example of a slave

narrative "written by herself," *Incidents* allows a deeper look not only at the life of an enslaved woman, but also at what the act of writing meant to her. Expressing regret that she was not "…more competent to the task I have undertaken" she states what her purpose was in presenting her story to the public: "I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself…Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse."[254] By sculpting her story in words and making it into a tool by which she could help effect change in her society, Jacobs not only "mastered her own past," she also challenged the stereotypes that circumscribed her experience and that of other enslaved women.[255] At the same time, she attempted to change the terms of the debate over abolition: the evil of slavery was not just a lack of freedom for the enslaved it was a corruption of the entire social body, much of which had to do with the sexual exploitation of powerless women by men privileged by the system. Implicit in Jacobs' *Incidents* is the idea that any criticism of slavery must include a discussion of the sexual abuse that characterized it. To accomplish all of this, Jacobs had to navigate a perilous course through the prejudices and the conventional morés of her society, as well as through the various genres popular at the time. [256] Combining plain, straightforward language with oblique yet clearly understandable references to those aspects of her experience that were morally repugnant, Jacobs managed both to uphold and to exploit conventional ideas about women, their moral

[254] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* ed. Yellin, 1.

[255] For a discussion of the concept of a mastered or un-mastered past, as understood in the interdisciplinary field of memory studies see Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, "A Looming Crash or a Soft Landing? Forecasting the Future of the Memory 'Industry,'" *Journal of Modern History* 81, no. 1 (2009): 122-58, accessed November 26, 2012, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/593157.

[256] For a detailed analysis of how Jacobs' literacy gave her agency see Jean Fagan Yellin, "Introduction" in *Incidents in the Life a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. and intr. by Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), *xv-xli* as well as Nell Irvin Painter, "Introduction" to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. and intr. by Nell Irvin Painter (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), *ix-xxxiii.*

nature, and their place in society. Before embarking on those portions of her story that dealt directly with the moral corruption inherent to the institution of slavery, Jacobs set the stage for her words' acceptance by carefully framing a confession that indicted the system in which she was held captive, indicated her assent to the prevailing standards of feminine purity, and called upon women whose purity was not compromised by the institution to sympathize with their enslaved sisters and condemn the system that made such corruption commonplace and acceptable. Addressing her female readers directly, she implores them:

> But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery. I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me.[257]

In this passage, as throughout the narrative, Jacobs reframes her experience and shares it with her audience from the perspective of one conversant with both sides of society's moral character. She foregrounds her own humanity, and by inciting her audience's sympathy, she makes a case for the humanity of all who were brutalized by the same system that prevented her from living the moral life that she would have chosen had she been given the opportunity to do so. By recreating – mastering – her story in this way, she retained the moral high ground necessary to cast judgment on the failings of American society at the same time that she was able to reconcile for herself as well as for her audience the free and morally upstanding mature self she had become with the morally compromised young woman that she had been during her years of bondage. In this sense, her literacy and command of the written word proved to be a means by

[257] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* ed. Yellin, 54.

which she constructed an identity for herself that integrated disparate elements of her life and her moral character. After the narrative was published, the moral authority she had appropriated for herself by means of her carefully crafted story also served as a platform for public activism: her fame as an the author of a powerful apologetic for demolishing slavery was a segue into her postbellum vocation as an aid worker providing relief for former slaves.[258]

The use of literacy played much the same role in the life of Sarah Emma Edmonds, even though she did not face the social barriers that either Harriet Jacobs or Charlotte Forten Grimké faced as a result of their race. Considering the nature of her "Adventures," she had a similarly formidable task in presenting her experiences to a public not inclined to look favorably on such escapades. And yet, judging by the popularity of her memoir when it was published, she managed to do so quite creditably. To accomplish this, she, like Jacobs, had to navigate a course that simultaneously upheld, exploited, questioned, and ultimately sought to expand the public role that women were allowed to occupy in the social space. To an even greater extent than Jacobs', her use of literacy was influenced by the Evangelical faith her upbringing and education had instilled in her.

While it seems that the fictional story of Fanny Campbell, the female pirate who set out sea in order to rescue her lover from captivity, may have inspired Emma to escape her less than ideal family situation and to take on a male persona in a quest for independence, it also seems possible that this experience of reading about and identifying with a literary character, as well as her knowledge of the book industry gained during her time as a traveling salesman, may have contributed to her desire to write of her own experiences in a "memoir" that artfully blended fact and fiction in a calculated appeal to the religious, literary, and social sensibilities of the era.[259]

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[258] Yellin, "Introduction," in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, xxvii*.
[259] Gansler, *Private Thompson*, 181,198-99.

Exemplifying poet Emily Dickinson's advice to "tell all the truth but tell it slant," Emma's oblique way of telling the truth was an invaluable tool as she simultaneously proclaimed and yet egregiously transgressed socially acceptable boundaries. For example, she explains the start of her career as a "soldier, nurse, and spy" thus: "Ten days after the President's proclamation was issued, I was ready to start for Washington, having been employed by the government, and furnished with all the necessary equipments." This account is quite truthful, yet in leaving out the fact that her employment actually was enlistment, and "the necessary equipments" the tools of a soldier she allows space in her text for readers to infuse the reading with their own private interpretation of her life, her actions, and her motivations. Combined with her overtly religious rationale for her actions as well as frequent admonishments to her readers and fellow characters to embody greater and more consistent Christian morality, Emma's Dickinsonian technique of "slanted" truth-telling made her narrative more than palatable to an audience predisposed to demand conventional morality in the literature they read as well as in the women who wrote it. Thus, the pattern Emma set in the very beginning of the memoir as she described her enlistment in the army continued throughout the book and allowed her to stay largely within the parameters of respectable society in the eyes of her audience even as her entire life was spent in transgressing and stretching prescribed social boundaries.

Paradoxically, then, even as her unconventional life choices and experiences should have placed her beyond the pale of social acceptability, her skillful foregrounding of her conventional morality rooted in her orthodox Evangelical faith served to redeem her actions to the readers of memoir. At the same time, the undeniable moral character she presented in her book and its success as a publishing phenomenon also gave her a means of furthering her opportunities for the social action that she seemed compelled to perform throughout her life, from her devoted service in the military as a young woman to the last actions that she performed before she died at the

relatively young age of 56. Though she settled down into a much less extraordinary life postwar, her gratitude to her God and to the people of her adopted country was such that she never stopped finding ways to serve. She eventually married a man named Linus Seelye, a widower and fellow immigrant from Canada. Linus had lost his first wife and their infant daughter in 1866, and after he and Emma married in 1867 they started a family of their own. However, the first two children died having lived less than a day. Their third child, a daughter named Alice, and the only one of their biological children to live past infancy, was a few months old when Emma and Linus adopted two orphaned boys whom they raised as their own.

In spite of the painful loss of children, the Seelyes lived extraordinarily compassionate lives. Following the war, they traveled throughout various parts of the United States chasing the available carpentry work for Linus, but eventually settled in Oberlin, Ohio. Emma had briefly attended Oberlin College before their marriage and had some history and possibly some connections in the area. Living in Oberlin gave the Seelyes plenty of opportunity to be involved in church work as well as to be influenced by the socially progressive causes that Oberlin was known for. In early 1875, the Seelyes learned of an opportunity to live at and superintend a Methodist-sponsored orphanage and seminary. Located in Louisiana, this institution served black children, many of whom were orphaned when their fathers were killed serving in the military during the war. Emma and Linus were delighted to take the position, and until Emma's ill health finally forced them to move to a drier climate in 1880, they devoted themselves to caring for the orphans in their charge.[260]

Shortly after their move away from Louisiana the family experienced even more pain. Their children contracted measles, and six year old Alice died. Struggling through this

[260] Gansler, *Private Thompson*, 188-92.

emotionally dark period, Emma also had to contend with physical pain and incapacity resulting from injuries and the malaria she had suffered during the war. Eventually, she decided that she had just as much right to government compensation for her service as any other soldier and embarked on a new and nearly unprecedented adventure: pursuing a government pension for honorable service in the military – as a woman.[261] Fired yet again by compassion for her fellow humans, Emma was determined to use the pension she sought to found and operate a home for veterans of the war. Though she did eventually receive a pension, it was much less than she had hoped and planned for, and her family's precarious financial situation as well as her own poor health prevented this latest scheme from coming to fruition.

Part of her pursuit of a pension involved gathering the support of her former acquaintances and comrades, a task that proved to be most rewarding for Emma. She wrote to the publisher of her book and he kindly returned a letter of recommendation, detailing his acquaintance with her both before and after the war and the nature of her upstanding character, as well as the fact of her having written and published her memoir. He also noted that she gave a substantial portion of the proceeds of the book to the U.S. Sanitary Commission as well as to other charitable organizations.[262] In addition to this rousing letter of support, her former comrades rallied around her as she navigated bureaucratic obfuscation, welcomed her as a member in the veterans association known as the Grand Army of the Republic, and after her death in 1896, they continued to stand by their unusual compatriot by successfully campaigning to provide her a military funeral and interment at the G.A.R burial ground at Washington Cemetery in Houston.[263]

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[261] Gansler, *Private Thompson*, 192.
[262] Gansler, *Private Thompson*, 200.
[263] Gansler, *Private Thompson*, 219.

Arguably, Sarah Emma Edmonds lived an extraordinary life. And yet, her very commonplace Evangelical faith and the conservative moral values it represented was the justification she used for making the life choices that she made. She was an Evangelical, and thus was socially, religiously, and morally conservative and yet it was that very conservative faith that allowed her – and even prompted her toward – an astonishing level of personal freedom, and gave her legitimate authority to act in and upon the world around her in novel, even unconventional ways.

Faith and the Consolidation of a Divided Identity

Though the women discussed in the previous section who wrote discrete narratives of their life experiences seem consciously to have used their literacy not only to shape their stories into cohesive identities but also as means of accessing the larger public sphere, Charlotte Forten Grimké's life took a somewhat different path. Nevertheless, the route she took to finding and constructing an identity in which her impulse to act in the world both validated and was validated by her moral sense demonstrates the potential of the Evangelical faith to empower women. During the Civil War, Charlotte left behind her cultured life in the North to become a teacher of freed slaves living in the Sea Islands near Port Royal, South Carolina. This experience, which removed her from the elite, literary circles to which she was accustomed seems to have introduced to her life and to her thinking an element of Evangelical simplicity that would alter fundamentally the character and the course of her life.

The journals that Charlotte kept provide detailed information for a period of about 10 years in her youth. However, they come to an abrupt halt in 1864 and she does not appear to have journaled again until 1885, when she once more began to write regularly, this time as a mature woman. Though the missing journals would have been invaluable as a window into a

vital period of change in Charlotte's life, the extant journals offer clues about what occurred in the unwritten years between her last entry in 1864 and the next entry in 1885.

The last several entries of the earlier journals hint at a change in her relationship to and view of religion, and the final years of her life indicate that the seeds of change in these earlier entries matured into a thoroughgoing transformation in the later years of her life. Her experience of living in the Sea Islands among the escaped slaves was an especially important stage in the maturation of Charlotte's faith. But it also was crucially important in her path to an integrated identity as a black, American, Christian woman. One of the first experiences she recorded when she arrived at the Sea Islands was hearing the boatmen sing "Roll, Jordan, Roll" as they rowed the passengers from the ship to shore.[264] It was her first exposure to the music that she appreciated from the first and eventually grew to love while she lived in the South. In fact, it was the music that seems to have drawn her in to the religion of the freed people she had come to serve. At the beginning of her time there, she and the other teachers from the North attended both the Baptist Church of the refugees as well as the Episcopal Church where, as Charlotte commented sardonically, "the aristocracy of rebeldom was to worship."[265] However, as the months and journal entries went by, the only church Charlotte recorded attending on a regular basis was the Baptist Church. Although she appears to have been much less intrigued by the sermons than with the singing and shouting, which were "quite in the Ethiopian Methodist style," the tenor of her writing began to change. Perhaps for lack of other amusement, or perhaps for more spiritual reasons, records of her Sabbath days began to include more and more accounts of church attendance and watching baptisms and less of the leisurely pursuits that characterized her Sabbaths in the North. She also recorded proportionally more mentions of God – and addresses

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[264] Grimké, *Journals,* 389.
[265] Grimké, *Journals*, 393.

to Him – in those last few pages of her journal than were in the previous ten years' worth of writing.

Overall, it seems that this new kind of religion that she encountered among freed slaves prompted mixed emotions within her. Her first reaction was one of amusement, mixed with a tinge of revulsion, as she remarked on the flamboyant colors and unusual assortment of the people's clothing. She, however, had nothing but admiration for their genuine faith, their skillful and heartfelt singing, their appreciation of their newfound freedom, and their eagerness to learn the skills necessary to be successful in a life of freedom. As she grew to appreciate and love the people among whom she worked, she appears to have felt even more strongly a sense of division within herself: she could not entirely identify with her Southern students and their families, and yet even though on many levels she was more at ease with her Northern fellow teachers, she was not entirely at home among them either.[266] She at one point referred to the Baptist Church as "our Church,"[267] and yet this inclusive pronoun could just as easily be reversed, as when she made a distinction between their hymns and "…ours, which are poor in comparison."[268]

In spite of this continued division in her identity, however, Charlotte's interaction with the world around her began to change. Previously, while she was in the North she acted the part of an outside observer and critic – of the literature she read, of the holidays she celebrated, and of acquaintances that were to be held at arms' length until their abolitionist status was ascertained. In South Carolina among freed slaves and the volunteers who ministered to them, however, there was much less ambiguity to be discerned in the motivations and values that the community around her maintained. With perhaps the exception of literature she read, Charlotte was freed of

[266] See Carla L. Peterson, *Reconstructing the Nation* for a more complete discussion of this divided aspect of Charlotte's identity while teaching at the Sea Islands.

[267] Grimké, *Journals*, 435.

[268] Grimké, *Journals*, 477.

her former compulsion to ferret out prejudice and animosity: her students, former slaves, certainly held the correct opinions on slavery, as did the Northern volunteers who had come to teach them. And the public celebrations were an endorsement of all of the sentiments she held dear: freedom, humanity, and equality. Attending the Thanksgiving Day service at the Baptist Church, she records having felt a heart bursting with gratitude, an experience that never figured in to any of her previous Thanksgivings. She wrote, "'Forever free!' 'Forever free!' Those magical words were all the time singing themselves in my soul, and never before have I felt so grateful to God."[269] Similarly, her Southern experience of the Fourth of July celebration, though not as unreservedly joyous as the Thanksgiving celebration, nevertheless occurred without the bitterness of previous years and was a happy occasion in which the celebration matched the reality before her eyes.[270]

Celebrated as each of these holidays were under the auspices of the Baptist Church by free people of both races, they reinforced what Charlotte's experience of religion in the South made real to her: that this version of Christianity, which was new to her, was in fact the great equalizer of all people. A few years prior to her sojourn in the South, Charlotte had recorded in her journal a debate that she attended in which the judges "…decided in our favor, – that the Constitution *does* sanction slavery." [Emphasis in the original][271] In Charlotte's experience of being a woman of mixed race in antebellum America, then, it was not the Constitution that guaranteed the recognition of the humanity of all people but rather this humble version of Christianity which insisted not only on a doctrine of the equality of all, but also on action consistent with its teaching.

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[269] Grimké, *Journals*, 404.
[270] Grimké, *Journals*, 491.
[271] Grimké, *Journals,* 353.

Looking forward from this pivotal point in Charlotte's life to what she had become more than twenty years later, we find that following her stint in the Sea Islands she married a Presbyterian minister who performed mission work among freed slaves in the South and who worked quite closely with the African Methodist Episcopal minister Daniel Payne. She and her husband both were passionate about the plight of African Americans, and aimed his ministry toward bringing about change in their condition. One of Charlotte's goals in later life while she and her husband Francis were still in the South was to start and conduct a literary society with the help of the AME minister friend. In addition to this more religiously-oriented character of her social involvement, Charlotte's journals, brief though this later section was, reflect much more Evangelical sensibility than was evident in the earlier journals. Often her journal entries were prayers, and the most common literary pieces to feature in her notes were texts from the Bible or from Christian periodicals. She recorded not the days that she attended Church, but rather the days on which she was prevented from doing so by ill health, bad weather, or both. And she frequently commented on the sermon texts and how excellent the sermons were – though, of course, her endorsement could very well have been the result of wifely enthusiasm for her husband's work.

Following this trajectory in the latter half of Charlotte's life, we see that while in her youth the impetus for her social action was very much intertwined with the current abolitionist thinking of the day and its emphasis on education and rhetoric drawn from the classical rhetorical tradition, in her maturity she retreated somewhat from this formulation for social action and instead found an ideological home in a religion that combined her thirst for activism, her sense of justice and the equality of all people, and hope for achieving a better world. Her younger years were characterized by a deeply divided identity in which she felt both familiarity and ill ease in the elite culture that surrounded her. In her later life, however, conflicting aspects

of her identity were reconciled, not by continued immersion in the dominant culture but by her embrace of a religious identity that allowed her the freedom to act in her community in a way consistent with the moral and social values she held dear.

Evangelicalism as an Agent of Empowerment

Evangelicalism could in fact be used as a tool of repression, as much of the scholarship on women's history indicates. However, as demonstrated in the lives of Charlotte Forten Grimké, Sarah Emma Edmonds, Hannah Crafts, and Harriet Jacobs, its ethos of individualism and the equality of all before God gave it the versatility to empower women in ways important to them. For black women making a life for themselves and their families in the pall of racial prejudice, an Evangelical faith gave them a platform and an ethic from which they could work toward the betterment of life as they knew it. It gave them hope that such betterment was possible, in this life as well as in the next, and it gave them justification for acting boldly in the world around them. Christianity, not a political structure full of empty promises, was the equalizer that made an equitable society possible. Though it could be used repressively, and often was, it unlike the Constitution and other political tools did not sanction slavery and prejudice. It was here, in an Evangelical frame of reference and sphere of influence, that the promise of freedom that America boasted of was much more fully realized for those disadvantaged by the political structures that framed the national polity. Even for white women, though the question of political status and the structures that reinforced it was not as vital or as compelling as it was for women who suffered racial discrimination and the bondage of slavery, Evangelical religion provided them with autonomy, agency, and the option of self-determination, as demonstrated in the lives of Sarah Emma Edmonds, Abigail Abbot Bailey, and others.

The social realities of each of the women featured in this study were diverse. But without doubt, other social considerations notwithstanding, the question of race made all the difference in their experience with an Evangelical faith and the forms that their activism took. Sarah Emma Edmonds, who did not face the obstacle of racial prejudice because of her skin color, was much less socially privileged in many ways than was Charlotte Forten Grimké. And yet her life was characterized by a freedom of movement and expression that Charlotte lacked. She, unlike Charlotte was never barred from entering an ice cream parlor, and she never had the pleasure of watching upstanding citizens remove themselves from the common table at which she sat lest they become contaminated by her presence. Because of the particular life choices that she made in her youth, she had to construct her memoir carefully, using ambiguous language that allowed interpretive space in which she was able to redeem her actions in the opinions of her readers. Yet those choices – freely made in a society that did not discriminate against her complexion even if it did circumscribe her options as a female – still fit within the Evangelical framework that defined her life.

Charlotte Forten Grimké, on the other hand, traveled a path from a more secularly-influenced ideology to the more or less orthodox world of Evangelicalism. Belonging to the elite black middle class of the antebellum North, she had many more educational opportunities than women like Emma Edmonds did, and yet her opportunities were stifled because of her race. Her life was characterized by a process in which she reconciled her divided inner self to a world with whose tastes she was in sympathy, and yet which was hostile toward her because she was a racial outsider to it. Central to this process was the Evangelical religion that she encountered among people of her own race and that demonstrated a coherent ethos of equality even as it legitimated social action.

For both women, their writings were a window into how they viewed themselves, the world, and their place in it. And for both women, as well as for others who also lived within and operated from an Evangelical faith, in spite of a basic similarity of theology, different social circumstances prompted them onto divergent paths as they sorted through what it meant to be a woman, an American, and a Christian. These differing social realities lent a different cast to each woman's individual experience of identity construction, and to her experience and use of authority, as well as to the kinds of social action that fired her passion and impelled her to assert her right to speak and act in the public sphere. Yet in spite of all these differences, the Evangelical ethos that provided social as well as spiritual goals, and individual authorization to act on one's moral conscience remained constant for each woman.

If we consider the reformist nature of nineteenth-century America from the perspective of these women's experiences it can be argued that Evangelicalism was a potent catalyst for change in the way that ordinary Americans perceived their society as well as their own role within it. The Evangelical impetus to engage in publicly-minded faithful living would have been true of most Evangelical believers, but women especially, both white and black, occupied a social position in which the particulars of their private lives, including their faith, their racial status, and their marital and gender practices, intersected with some of the most intense public debates of their age. Thus, women of all different backgrounds were called upon to wrestle with public issues in very personal ways. Some women worked through these issues privately in journals or personal correspondence. Others engaged questions of the day through the disembodied medium of published or unpublished literary projects. And still others confronted these issues directly and visibly, taking on public roles in a clear challenge to the social and religious mores of the day.

Although nineteenth-century women who were radical in either their political views or their religion – or both – have been the most visible historical figures in the struggle to expand

human rights, this thesis has attempted to refocus the scholarly lens on women who, whether they lived lives that might be called extraordinary or not, largely were governed by a personal moral and religious code that was itself ordinary and commonplace in their era. Such women were not markedly radical in their religious beliefs. However, their essentially conservative faith as it was interpreted and applied in the social context of the nineteenth century prompted them to engage with social issues in an active, purposive way that was at decided odds with how their Evangelical forbears lived out their faith in the previous century and which deeply influenced the future path of American discourse on citizenship, social authority, and the means of political change. Though these women's life decisions and practices may have been motivated by a private and fervently-held faith, their individual, personal actions – prompted by a broadly similar Evangelical worldview embraced by these women as well as by a considerable contingent of the American civic body – constituted a significant catalyst in the reimagining of sociopolitical discourse during the nineteenth century. By living according to the principles of a faith that mandated outwardly-focused individual action, nineteenth-century Evangelical women who remained within the confines of conventional morality and orthodox theology and yet worked toward discernible improvement in their own lives and in the lives of others put into practice and made commonplace the idea that individuals working on their own or collectively had the authority to become legitimate actors in the public arena. Though they themselves may well have been uninterested in accessing political power, their form of activism made possible a discourse in which increasing varieties of people called for and had the means to press forward in the urgent, fundamental reworking of social and political structures that characterized American modernity and that led to an expanded scope of human rights within the context of the American democratic republic.

Conclusion: Evangelical Faith as an Agent of Empowerment in Women's Lives

Historians of nineteenth-century America have acknowledged the importance – even the centrality – of women to the social reform movements that proliferated during that era and that were in many ways the precursors to the political rights movements of the later-nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.[272] Significantly, there was notable overlap between women's involvement in and importance to social activism and their prior commitment to religious beliefs. Noting this connection, scholars of the nineteenth century have not neglected religion in their research. However, they have tended to focus on the interplay of religiosity and secular thinking, and primarily have emphasized the radicalizing influence of secular thinking on women's religious sentiments as well as on their social activism.[273] The result of this secularization theory has been the perhaps unintentional and yet systematic leaving out of the equation women whose religious beliefs were on the whole more in keeping with the conventions of the time than not,

[272] Keith Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood*; Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, particularly pp. 30-35. Also, see Lori D. Ginzberg, "'Moral Suasion is Balderdash': Women, Politics, and Social Activism in the 1850s" *Journal of American History* 73, no. 3 (1986): 601-622 for a discussion of the process by which early moral reform movements flowed into and became the more politically-minded movements of the latter half of the century.

[273]See for example, Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Women's Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement, 1830-1870: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2000); Sylvia Hoffert, *When Hens Crow: The Woman's Rights Movement in Antebellum America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995); John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Kathi Kern, "'Free Woman Is a Divine Being, the Savior of Mankind': Stanton's Exploration of Religion and Gender," in *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Feminist as Thinker: A Reader in Documents and Essays*, ed. by Ellen Carole DuBois and Richard Cándida Smith (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Kathi Kern, *Mrs. Stanton's Bible* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Kathleen Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist* (New York: New York University Press, 1988); and Susan Strane, *A Whole-Souled Woman: Prudence Crandall and the Education of Black Women* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1990).

even as they engaged in forms of public action and activism that went beyond what the conservative rhetoric of the era seemed to allow.[274]

Shifting the historiographical focus away from the question of the interplay of religiosity and secularism in women's activism and their eventual path to civil rights, this thesis has attempted to bring into the conversation the lives and the beliefs of these women who largely have been bypassed in the historiography of women in America. Such women were conservative, not just in terms of the relatively conservative doctrine they embraced, but also in terms of moral conduct. Even as they rejected aspects of custom and law that were repugnant to their sense of justice, these women accepted normative marital practices and the sexual ethic those practices were intended to reinforce. As the narratives of Abigail Abbot Bailey, Harriet Jacobs, Sarah Emma Edmonds, Hannah Crafts, and others indicate, these women sought to place themselves firmly within the bounds of what their society deemed morally and socially acceptable. They strived to make themselves respectable even as they challenged slavery, racial prejudice and other deeply entrenched aspects of their society that their faith as well as their lived experiences convinced them were unjust.

Their experiences prompt us to ask what religion, specifically Evangelical religion, might have done for ordinary women – indeed, ordinary people – throughout the history of the United States. As demonstrated throughout this study, the ordinariness that these women illuminate has less to do with class, race, or social status than it does with their beliefs and motivations relative to that of the majority of their contemporaries. Abigail Abbot Bailey, for instance, was ordinary in the sense that her perspective of religion and society tended to situate her within the

[274] One helpful scholarly critique of the secularization theory of American history can be found in Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World*. See especially, "Introduction: The Struggle for Purity and Presence," 18-21.

parameters of broadly accepted ideologies and the mores of her time. In fact, much of her angst came about because of the tension between her acquiescence to religious and social mores and what she felt compelled to do for her own best interest and that of her children.

Considering this tension at the heart of her practical theology, her memoir is not merely a record of what happened in her life, it is a space in which she reconciles both for herself and her audience of mainly other believers in Christ, her essentially conservative faith with actions that seemed to contradict it. What she achieved with her memoir was not only reassurance of her orthodoxy and the integration of her beliefs and her actions into a stronger, more confident identity as a woman and as a Christian, but also a new interpretation of familiar terms that allowed this reconciling of seemingly contradictory elements of her life to occur. Abigail Abbot Bailey was no radical in either religion or in her ideas about social order, and yet she was able to utilize her conservative beliefs in a successful attempt to make improvements in her life and in the lives of those she cared about – even though the changes she sought were contrary to the biases of her era.

While Abigail Abbot Bailey represents a transitional moment in the intertwined history of women and religion in the United States, embodying as she did a changing Evangelical ethos that eventually would contribute a great deal of momentum to a broadened understanding and application of the human rights ideal envisioned in America's founding era, Maria W. Stewart is an equally compelling historical figure. Passionately arguing the abolitionist cause, even as she embodied the right of women to participate in such public debates, her life, including her eventual adoption of the hierarchical and traditional Episcopal faith, demonstrates both the potential of a conservative Evangelical faith as well as its ambiguities. One can hardly argue that she was not empowered by her faith, and yet, at the end of her life she channeled that

empowerment toward forms of social action that were less visible, less contentious, and less overtly political. While this turn to conservatism may seem regressive to modern, secular sensibilities, who is to say, from the vantage point of a generation far removed from that of Stewart, that in fact this later form of social action was somehow less empowered than her earlier action, that it was more limited in scope than that of other women reformers and activists whose motivations were more secular in nature? In both forms of social action that she engaged in, Stewart certainly appropriated and acted upon the right to self-determination. And her faith, far from delimiting her empowerment, supplied her with an astonishing amount of freedom to take action in her world in ways that were important to her, providing her not only with motivation but with a compelling justification for action as well.

Her empowered, yet religiously conservative existence contrasts sharply with what is commonly accepted in the historiographical conversation regarding women in history: that conventional religion, along with its conventional mores, induced women to lead conventional, even repressed lives; that it somehow only partially empowered women; that such women, by reason of their conservative – and often Evangelical – faith, were unable to break entirely free from the patriarchal structures that disadvantaged them. As the lives of Stewart and the other women in this thesis demonstrate, such a reading of history is one-dimensional, failing to recognize fully the explanatory power of religious faith in making sense of the past and of the lives of those who lived in it. For women like Abigail Abbot Bailey, Maria Stewart and Old Elizabeth, as well as Sarah Emma Edmonds and Charlotte Forten Grimké, their Evangelical faith was a vital, liberating force in their lives. Their faith equipped them not only to take confident action in the world but also gave them means by which they were able to integrate and make

sense of disparate aspects of their lives. And as in the case of Charlotte Grimké and Emma Edmonds, their faith was a crucial element of their identity as women and as Americans.

Though the scholarship on women's history has established that conservative religious sentiment and the prevailing nineteenth-century ideology regarding women's proper role in society were complementary impulses, and that the challenging of one entailed challenging the other, it also is clear that many Evangelical women who did not follow the path away from religious orthodoxy and yet still engaged in the reformist tendencies of the nineteenth century inhabited a peculiar social and religious space in which they simultaneously could contest received wisdom and question traditional authority structures, yet retain their religious and even social conservatism throughout their lives. Though such women were conservative enough to acquiesce in many respects to social and religious tradition, the paradox of their faith was such that they also were able to access a measure of authority relative to such institutions and figures, and by challenging aspects of their faith – and of their society – by way of that newly accessible authority they were able to arrive at a form of practical theology that freed them to embody their faith in a new, more public and more expansive way.

Although this newfound access to authority and legitimacy as public actors had serious implications for how individual women lived and experienced their religious faith, the course of American history indicates that socially recognized individual authority, as realized within the practical theology of American Protestant Evangelicalism, was profoundly important politically, both as an ideal and as a tool by which an increasing variety of people leveraged for themselves and others a place within the imagined community of the United States. As Americans of all kinds throughout the history of the United States have grappled with what being an American actually meant to them, the scope of human rights has been continually in flux. In the nineteenth

century in particular, those in the margins of power and who thus had the most to gain from an expanded vision and application of rights found multiple avenues through which they were able to create ever larger and more legitimate positions for themselves within the civic space where the debate over rights was being contested. While many social reformers may have themselves followed a path away from religious orthodoxy and taken a more secularized view of social issues, this was not always the case. And if Evangelicalism indeed constituted a principle subculture of American society, it stands to reason that for vast numbers of Americans, and perhaps women in particular, secularization was not what prompted them to press for social reform and ultimately contribute to a change in the discourse of rights and citizenship. Rather, their conservative, commonplace, Evangelical faith authorized them to engage in outwardly-focused action on behalf of their God, their communities, and their families, and along the way redefined what it meant to be a woman and a citizen of the United States.

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