

# REMEMBERING HER

". . . what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."  
Matthew 26:13



Article 26

## Retrieving Women's Histories

Harriet Beecher Stowe

Many people know that author Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) wrote her best selling book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852 to help people understand the cruelty of slavery and to promote abolition. Few people are aware, however, that although her religious roots in Congregationalism supported her commitment to abolish slavery; her attitudes about women were more conventional.

Harriet's sister Catherine Beecher took a strong stand against women's suffrage, believing that women could get what they needed without the vote by using their power in home and classroom. Harriet's brother Henry Ward Beecher served as president of the moderate American Women's Suffrage Association. Another sister, Isabella Beecher Hooker, was a radical feminist and suffragette.

As a writer Harriet Beecher Stowe followed a middle way. She worried that politics was so wicked that if women got involved with the political process it might destroy their "delicacy and refinement of feeling." She agreed with her older sister that women were more moral, pure and spiritual than men. Eventually, however, she came to advocate for votes for women. She started thinking about the nation as an extended family, arguing that if women could vote, they would be able to save the nation from corruption—especially with regard to education, temperance, morals and religion.

In her later novels, Harriet Beecher Stowe showed more progressive views of women, promoting the intellectual ability of women by creating young female characters that were bright and capable. Her educated self-sufficient heroines did not need husbands and children; and Stowe seemed to feel that marriage and family responsibilities drained their "sparkle and vivacity." She knew that traditional family patterns often abused women, however when women expanded the idea of mothering beyond the home she felt that women could bring about social change.

The result was a mixed blessing. When Stowe defined women as more pious, less sexual and less selfish than men, she raised their self-image but denied their full humanity. To her, women were too pure and delicate to compete with men for political and economic power. Yet Stowe also realized that when women were preoccupied with domesticity their impact on society would be limited.

One contemporary scholar wrote recently that this way of viewing women as fragile and more holy was disastrous for twentieth century women. Women became disillusioned with images of “the motherly angelic woman as a panacea for societal ills.” Women had to confront the fact that many social problems would never be resolved by family nurture. The “women’s vote” did not seem to make any difference and the failure of prohibition to improve society was a disappointment. Novels written in the 1920s moved from seeing women as angels to casting them as temptresses and sources of trouble. . . . [Gayle Kimball, *The Religious Ideas of Harriet Beecher Stowe: Her Gospel of Womanhood* (New York: Edwin Mellon, 1982), p. 177].

Protestant church women were deeply influenced by the so-called “cult of true womanhood” that celebrated unique female virtues. Gradually, however, women learned to use scripture texts less and less to justify separate, distinct and unequal gender roles favoring the special gifts of women. Women’s mission outreach, Bible study and educational engagement encouraged Christian women to work for social justice alongside men. And by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century thousands of church women were actively involved in egalitarian movements for political and civic change. Like Harriet Beecher Stowe they cultivated a balanced feminism.

Harriet Beecher Stowe would have understood. She started by insisting that women were different and glorified their strengths, but over time she saw that generalizations about women and men were not helpful. She was practical. “The past, the present and the future are really one: they are today,” she said.

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