

12 Trail-Blazing Christian Women You Should Celebrate

March is Women's History Month, so for the next few weeks we will be hearing a lot about women inventors, humanitarians, entertainers and entrepreneurs who are changing today's world. We will probably also hear a lot about Hillary Clinton and her chances of shattering the glass ceiling in American politics—but I'm not convinced that all the great women heroes of the past would be cheering for her political views.

When I think about the empowered women of my generation I'm reminded that they stand on the shoulders of brave women pioneers who didn't have today's advantages. We should especially be grateful for the Christian women who defied religious and cultural traditions—and sometimes paid with their lives—to free African slaves, protect children from abuse, denounce injustice, preach the gospel in foreign nations, heal the sick and win women the right to vote.

This is certainly not an exhaustive list, but here are 12 women I'm celebrating this month:

1. Mary Magdalene – She was the pioneer of pioneers and the forerunner of all forerunners. As a passionate follower of Jesus, and the first person—male or female—to be commissioned to preach the gospel, she proved to a male-dominated, first century-world that God can and does use women to do His work.

2. Jarena Lee (1783-1855) – Authorized to preach in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, she traveled hundreds of miles on foot to share the gospel. When people questioned a woman's right to preach, she told them: "If the man may preach, because the Savior died for him, why not the woman, seeing he died for her also?" She was the first black woman in the United States to publish an autobiography.

3. Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) – Born a slave in New York—and later sold to a second owner for \$100—she eventually became an abolitionist. In her most famous speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” delivered in Ohio in 1851, she demanded equal rights for both women and blacks. She became a Methodist in 1843 and felt God calling her to ministry. “The Spirit calls me, and I must go,” she wrote. During one speech in Boston she admitted that she once hated white people, but that after she met Jesus she was filled with love for everyone.

4. Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874) – A Methodist revivalist, Palmer and her husband, Walter, helped fuel the holiness movement in the mid-1880s, which led to the Pentecostal revival. Although she and Walter were well-known preachers, she was the more popular speaker at a time when women preachers were an oddity. In one of her books, *The Promise of the Father*, she called for the acceptance of women in ministry. In 1850 she also founded a mission for alcoholics in a New York City slum.

5. Fanny Crosby (1820-1915) – Even though she was blind from birth, this “queen of gospel song writers” composed more than 8,000 hymns. Raised as a Baptist, her most famous songs include “Blessed Assurance,” “Rescue the Perishing” and “Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior.” She always prayed that her hymns would bring people to Christ, and she believed her songs were divinely inspired. Some theologians criticized her for “feminizing” church music.

6. Catherine Booth (1829-1890) – At a time when people threw eggs at women for speaking in public, this brave firebrand preached on the streets of London and ignited a gospel revival movement to help the poor. Not only did she establish the Salvation Army with her husband, William, she also carved out a path for women ministers by writing *Female Ministry: Women’s Right to Preach* in 1859 and by mentoring hundreds of “Hallelujah Lassies,” women who served as evangelists in the Salvationist movement.

7. Mary Slessor (1848-1915) – This short, red-headed girl from Scotland was inspired by a Presbyterian pastor to go to the mission field at a time when women were discouraged from such work. She ended up in a dangerous region of Calabar (modern Nigeria), and she established a mission station among tribal people by traveling to them in a canoe. Her work laid the foundations for the widespread growth of Christianity in Nigeria today. With her characteristic spunk, she opposed African traditions and successfully stopped the ritualistic killing of twins in Calabar.

8. Amy Carmichael (1867-1951) – This brave Irish Presbyterian sailed to India and founded the Dohnavur Mission—which pulled hundreds, if not thousands, of children out of ritual prostitution. Known to the children as “Amma,” which means “Mother,” she dressed as an Indian and even dyed her skin with coffee to fit into the local culture. When a British woman asked Carmichael what missionary life was like, she simply wrote: “Missionary life is simply a chance to die.”

9. Ida Robinson (1891-1946) – She was an early Pentecostal pioneer ordained in the United Holy Church of America and appointed to pastor a small church in Philadelphia in 1919. A few years later she felt God gave her an assignment to “loose the women” so more females could be ordained in ministry. Thus she founded the Mount Sinai Holy Church of America, which became a network of 84 churches by the time of her death in Florida.

10. Aimee Semple McPherson (1890-1944) – Born in Canada, she preached the gospel to her dolls as a child. But after she began preaching throughout the United States in the 1920s and 1930s—often under a large tent—she was more popular than evangelist Billy Sunday. People loved “Sister Aimee” because she used drama and theatrics to make the Bible come alive. When she built her church, Angelus Temple, in Los Angeles in 1923, people came from all over the nation to hear her—including Hollywood stars. She eventually founded the

International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, which today has more than 8 million members worldwide.

11. Corrie ten Boom (1892-1983) – The daughter of a Dutch clockmaker, she led a rather boring life until Nazi forces invaded Holland. At that point, Corrie and her Christian family began hiding Jews in their home to protect them from German death camps. But their work was exposed, and she was sent to Ravensbruck, a women's labor camp in Germany. Her horrific experiences there prepared her for a worldwide ministry that took her to 60 countries. She preached about forgiveness and Christ's love well into her 80s.

12. Gladys Aylward (1902-1970) – This simple British woman wanted to go to China as a missionary, but she was told that women could only serve as teachers or nurses—and she was neither. So without official backing she used her life savings to buy a one-way ticket to Shanxi Province. Once she got to China, she became an official “foot inspector,” helping Chinese officials enforce a new law against the cruel “foot-binding” of Chinese girls. This led to her work among orphans. Her brave attempt to protect children from the Japanese invasion of China was memorialized in the 1958 film *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*—a film that Aylward hated because it glamorized her very simple life.

It was Catherine Booth who said: “If we are to better the future we must disturb the present.” We need more women today who will disturb the status quo. I pray that this year's celebration of Women's History Month will inspire a new generation of women to rise up with holy courage. {eo}