Introduction: Converted, Called, Commissioned

A Phalanx of Institution Builders

We learned right there that any work of the Lord should be organized, in order to be a success, because they get scattered and the fowls of the air with the wolves get in and destroy them.

Emma Ray, *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed*

In the spring of 1909, Iva Durham Vennard returned from maternity leave—after having given birth in her late thirties to her only child, William—and stepped into the aftermath of a bloodless coup that had engulfed Epworth Evangelistic Institute, the training school for Methodist deaconesses she had founded in St. Louis. While she tended her newborn, a group of Methodist clergymen and laymen, with the district superintendent as ringleader, seized control of the school, rewrote its charter, overhauled its curriculum, and replaced women faculty with clergymen for Bible and theology courses. Despite this preemptive strike, Vennard magnanimously welcomed the district superintendent, Dr. Wright, onto the faculty to teach the Christian ethics course that fall. In the school’s monthly publication, *Inasmuch*, she wrote this notice of greeting: “Especially have we been glad to secure Dr. Wright on our staff, and to welcome him to our city and to the position of President ex-Officio of the Board of Directors of Epworth Evangelistic
Institute.” While this declaration appears quite generous, and may well have been, Vennard had no choice. By vote of the 1904 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, district superintendents held official oversight of deaconess institutions within their constituency. To comply with this ecclesial protocol, Vennard had to report regularly to the St. Louis Conference Deaconess Board, a committee chaired by the district superintendent.

Owing to the enforced changes at Epworth Evangelistic Institute (EEI) and challenge to her leadership, Vennard submitted her letter of resignation shortly after she returned from maternity leave. In the St. Louis Annual Conference minutes, the redirection of EEI, including a new name, appeared in this solitary sentence: “Epworth Deaconess Institute is getting a firmer grip on the situation in St. Louis.” Vennard, however, remained undeterred and indefatigable. She moved her family to Chicago, and the next year, in 1910, she opened a new religious training school, Chicago Evangelistic Institute. This school, which would be renamed Vennard College after its founder, lasted as a Christian college for nearly a century until it closed in 2008.

Vennard did not initially plan to pursue the path of institution building. After graduating from Illinois State Normal University, she became a grade school teacher and eventually a high school principal. In 1892, she attended Wellesley College, where she became acquainted with Dr. Charles DeGarmo, professor of modern languages and newly appointed president of Swarthmore College. DeGarmo, recognizing her promise, offered Vennard a scholarship to Swarthmore to complete her senior year as well as an extended stay in Europe with his family. Before embarking in this direction, she attended a camp meeting near her home in Normal, Illinois, as she did every summer. She already possessed strong religious convictions stemming from her conversion at age twelve, membership in the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), and experience of sanctification at age eighteen. At this summer camp meeting, she ran into the Reverend Joseph Smith, a well-known Methodist holiness evangelist who had been the preacher when she was sanctified. Her biography records that Smith expressed disappointment over her current spiritual state: “When I knew you a few years ago, I thought you were one young woman who was going to be spiritual; and more than that—a spiritual leader. But I see you seem to have gone mostly
These remarks “awoke once more the old gnawing restlessness and dissatisfaction of soul,” and she worried that she had neglected God’s counsel concerning her future plans and educational ambitions. As she wrestled in prayer through the night, she resolved to decline the scholarship.

Doors immediately opened for Vennard to lead evangelistic meetings, first as a singer, then as preacher. One request came from a couple in Lodge, Illinois, thirty-five miles away in the next county, where “there was no pastor and no regular church service. This one Christian man rented an abandoned saloon building, and someone loaned an organ. Miss Durham [Vennard] had to be the entire evangelistic party. She led the singing, played the organ, preached, and conducted the altar service. But the room was filled night after night.” Despite the invitations, according to her biographer, she hesitated, since evangelism involved preaching, and “she just did not approve of women preachers. It was all right to speak, to lecture, to give messages, but to come out in the open as a woman preacher—that did not appeal to her at all.” Vennard prayed for guidance with the hope that God “would excuse me from preaching, and let me be perhaps a singer or a social worker.” That word never came. Eventually she accepted the call to evangelism, and in retrospect, she reflected, “Evangelism has been the chief accent of my ministry.”

Vennard then enrolled in a Methodist deaconess training school in Buffalo, New York.

After graduation, her first assignment as a full-fledged deaconess evangelist took her to Methodist churches throughout New York State, where she held evangelistic meetings. Notably successful in her first three years, she was reassigned by her supervisor to travel as an ambassador representing the Methodist Deaconess Bureau. Vennard protested that this promotional work sidelined her evangelistic labors and proposed a compromise: she would create a department of evangelism, under the auspices of the Deaconess Bureau, with a course of study to train deaconesses in evangelism. Her plan involved a division in her time and effort—for two months she would teach evangelism in the new department, for eight months she would continue in her ambassadorial role. When she received a negative response, she quit the Deaconess Bureau and pursued her dream of training deaconesses in evangelism by founding EEI.
A Paradigm Shift in American Christianity

Vennard emblemizes women evangelists who founded evangelistic organizations, churches, denominations, schools, rescue homes, and rescue missions across the country during the Progressive Era. Ill at ease simply to proclaim the gospel message of salvation in Jesus Christ and then move on to the next preaching venue, as had women evangelists in previous generations, women like Vennard undertook the formidable work of building institutions to gather in converts, train them for further work in evangelism and outreach, and ensure the legacy of the “old time religion” for future generations. With this key strategic change, these women transformed the quintessential expression of American Christianity—evangelism—from an itinerant practice into the grand task of institution building.10

They were not the first women to evangelize in America. Quaker women preached in public and faced severe persecution, even martyrdom, like Mary Dyer, hanged on Boston Commons in 1660. Three decades earlier, “the most celebrated female evangelist in the seventeenth century,” Puritan Anne Hutchinson, incurred the wrath of Massachusetts ministers, including her former mentor, John Cotton, who excommunicated and then banished her to the wilds of Rhode Island.11 At the turn of the nineteenth century, women evangelists ventured forth in greater numbers as itinerants who “followed their own instincts, or leadings of the Spirit, in plotting their travels.”12 From venue to venue, by foot, horseback, stagecoach, or canal boat, they traveled alone because they viewed themselves as strangers without a community, pilgrims on the move. “As if they knew they would one day be forgotten,” writes historian Catherine Brekus, “these women often described themselves as ‘strangers in a strange land’ or ‘strangers and pilgrims on the earth.’ Comparing themselves to the biblical heroes and heroines who had lived by faith, they wondered if they would always be exiles who ‘sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country.’”13

This book focuses on the next generation of women evangelists who shifted their tack from itinerancy to institution building. The salient change was this: the first generation of lone itinerant women evangelists who had once wandered the continent became, in the next generation, a phalanx of entrepreneurial institution builders. Each of their institutions exhibited a measure of permanency, complete with official incorporation, administrative structure, worker training, membership cultivation,
scheduled activities, fund-raising protocols, and an established location for meetings and services. These institutions permeated large American cities, as well as isolated reaches and settlements. In Boston, a Roman Catholic laywoman, Martha Moore Avery, cofounded the Catholic Truth Guild, the first evangelistic organization launched by Catholic laity on American soil. Three thousand miles to the west, Florence Louise Crawford brought the Pentecostal message from Azusa Street to downtown Portland and opened the Apostolic Faith Mission. In Hicks Hollow, an impoverished enclave in Kansas City, a former slave, Emma Ray, turned a ramshackle, two-story wooden building into a rescue mission for African American children, while at a nondescript crossroad along the foothills of the Appalachians, Mattie Perry founded Elhanan Training Institute, even before the first public school opened in Marion, North Carolina. When institution building reached the craggy creek beds of western North Carolina through an ordinary woman like Perry, with no financial reserves, no church standing, and no higher education, the movement can be said to have thoroughly pervaded the entire nation.

Yet, despite their geographical pervasiveness and continued persistence throughout the twentieth century, most of these institutions—the builders as well—have escaped the notice of historians. Despite the marked increase in the last two decades of monographs on American women evangelists, none sheds light upon the capability and proficiency they exercised as fund-raisers, entrepreneurs, publicists, denominational executives, and school principals. None captures women evangelists’ penchant for institution building that transformed American religion during the Progressive Era. This book accomplishes this significant feat based largely upon primary sources unearthed in archives stretching across the continent, from Seattle and Portland in the Pacific Northwest to Cape Breton in Nova Scotia. These sources emerge from the women themselves, their sermons, books, articles, diaries, letters, speeches, and autobiographies, as well as their institutions’ records, such as letters to supporters, yearbooks, financial reports, and monthly newsletters.

Women, Evangelism, and American Christianity

Just who were these women and what did they believe? Let’s take a second look at the conflict at EEI and set it against the sizeable backdrop of
American Christianity. From this vantage point, three significant issues emerge that help us understand these women and the beliefs that motivated them and propelled their detractors. These three issues are conversion, sanctification, and gender. The exploration of each issue will help us to apprehend the commitments of these women. At the same time, each issue also opens a window to view American Christianity in the Progressive Era. In other words, by looking at these women, we garner indispensable insights into the development of American Christianity. In turn, by looking at larger conflicts in American Christianity, we garner indispensable insight into the motivations of these women.

The conflict over conversion in American Christianity. The male leaders of St. Louis Methodism transformed EEI’s curriculum by replacing evangelism courses with religious education courses. This seemingly unremarkable curricular change reflected an intense, ongoing struggle within Protestantism over the nature of Christian conversion. Vennard, as an evangelical Protestant, believed that the ultimate goal of religious work should be a demonstrable and prompt conversion of sinners; to that end she established a curriculum at EEI that trained deaconesses to be first and foremost “soul winners.” As historian Leonard Sweet quips about evangelicals, “What sinners were supposed to do, whether they felt like it or not, was get converted. Nothing was dearer to the evangelical heart than conversion.” Not only did evangelicals embrace a dramatic conversion, but they also galvanized around “biblicism (reliance on the Bible as ultimate religious authority); activism (energetic, individualistic engagement in personal and social duties); and crucicentrism (focus on Christ’s redeeming work as the heart of true religion.”

In contrast, progressives, like Dr. Wright, the Methodist district superintendent, gravitated toward a conversion nurtured gradually in the womb of a Christian family and church; for Wright and others like him, a dramatic conversion seemed an antiquated relic of “old time religion.” Even workers in the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), an organization initially founded to evangelize young men moving to the cities, put less stock in a definitive conversion experience. “In a 1913 survey, 99 of 127 YMCA boys’ workers claimed to have grown ‘gradually into the Christian conception of life’; only 47 even experienced a
recognizable turning point." The teachings of Horace Bushnell, Congregational pastor and theologian, exercised a significant influence in this direction during the mid-nineteenth century, when he began to criticize “emotional revivalists” for their insistence on the “radical breach-making character” of conversion. Bushnell advocated instead for an imperceptible growth into the Christian life, where “the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise.”

His perspective on conversion, recently described as “organic,” relied on a steady, long haul Christian influence at home and church rather than a speedy, spectacular one. To prepare churches and families for this task, the field of religious education emerged at the turn of the century and formalized its own organization, the Religious Education Association, in 1904.

Mainline Protestant seminaries followed suit and advanced a curriculum with religious education as “the new paradigm for ministry” for an educated clergy. “The churches that became ‘liberal’ in the early twentieth century, in other words, did not simply drift away from an emphasis on the conversion experience,” claims historian Ann Taves. “Leading modernists actively promoted a new outlook that replaced evangelism with education within the liberalizing sectors of Protestantism.” By changing EEI’s curriculum, Wright and his cohort replicated this nationwide transition, at least in certain theological circles, from evangelism to religious education.

Despite these theological and pedagogical developments, evangelicals maintained an unrelenting hold on conversion as the decisive moment of salvation, in large measure because it replicated their own experience. Famed African Methodist evangelist Amanda Berry Smith, for instance, related the moment of dramatic change in her conversion narrative: “In my desperation I looked up and said, ‘O, Lord, I have come down here to die, and I must have salvation this afternoon or death. If you send me to hell I will go, but convert my soul.'” A few lines later, she describes the conversion moment: “O, the peace and joy that flooded my soul! The burden rolled away; I felt it when it left me, and a flood of lift and joy swept through my soul such as I had never known before. . . . ‘Why, I am new, I am new all over.'” Smith then went forth, galvanized to preach the gospel and bring others to a similar intense and instantaneous conversion.
The conversion of Martha Moore Avery, a Roman Catholic lay evangelist, remains an exception to the extraordinary experiences of evangelists like Smith. Avery’s conversion adhered more to Bushnell’s paradigm with her lengthy decision process over decades in which she exalted mind over emotion. Even when she reported on her conversion in her diary, emotions did not surface: “April 6, 1904—Wednesday. My birthday—on this day I was pronounced, without reservation, to be competent in the understanding of the doctrine of the Catholic Church. I had been studying with the Prof. of Physics at Boston College, Fr. D.J. O’Sullivan, for two years. And I had found that Catholic theology and philosophy was strictly in harmony with Cosmic Law as far as my knowledge extended.” She also noted in similar fashion the occasions of her baptism, first confession, first communion, and confirmation.\(^{26}\) Reason, Avery’s constant guide and measuring rod, figured as the operative word in her conversion. Through reason, not emotion, she sifted through a number of secular and religious philosophies, such as Spiritualism, Unitarianism, Pantheism, Nationalism, and Socialism, and pronounced them void of Truth, a word she always wrote with a capital “T.” Only the Roman Catholic Church, she reasoned, held the Truth. Once in possession of this Truth, she developed an evangelistic zeal congruent with her Protestant counterparts and cofounded the Catholic Truth Guild for the purpose of making America Catholic.

This brief discussion of different approaches to Christian conversion provides an apt preamble to this book. This volume will allow us to discover, on the one hand, common ground between disparate forms of Christianity that we might be prone to subdivide and polarize, like evangelical versus progressive Protestant and Protestant versus Roman Catholic. Despite their differences, Vennard, Wright, Amanda Berry Smith, and Avery held to the common ground of a commitment to Christian conversion. On the other hand, this book will not paint only with broad strokes; it will also draw out the nuances that arise genetically from diversities within American Christianity. In this case, probing the various approaches to conversion allows us to perceive how a shared perception could yield surprisingly diverse expressions of faith. Beyond both of these observations, too, lies the realization of just how important rank-and-file Christians can be in helping us tease out the rumblings and permutations that crucially shaped American Christianity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
The conflict over sanctification in American Christianity. Another conflict embedded in the crisis at EEI, which shaped these women as well as the larger landscape of American Christianity, revolved around the doctrine of sanctification. Again, the conflict had curricular ramifications. To orient EEI students to sanctification as interpreted by the Wesleyan/Holiness movement, Vennard required students to read J. A. Wood’s *Perfect Love.*\(^27\) The book’s catechetical format provided tidy answers to common questions about sanctification, and its straightforward approach galvanized more than a generation of Wesleyan/Holiness folk, like William Booth, who bought the book’s plates in order to reproduce and circulate it widely among the Salvation Army.\(^28\) To signal their disagreement, the St. Louis Methodist leaders removed *Perfect Love* from the curriculum, and after Vennard’s resignation, they determined that “the doctrine of holiness, as a second definite experience, will be dropped from the teaching of this institution.”\(^29\)

Vennard promoted Wood’s book because, several years after her conversion, she had a second religious experience of “purification and empowerment,” known as “entire sanctification” (also referred to as “sanctification,” “holiness,” “Christian perfection,” or “higher life”).\(^30\) From then on, she identified with the Wesleyan/Holiness movement and its interpretation of entire sanctification as an instantaneous second moment of grace that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, removed the inbred inclination to sin.\(^31\) The result: the sanctified person possessed the power not to sin. Vennard clarified the point further by exploring the theological difference between two nearly identical yet radically different sentences: “I am not able to sin. Notice the position of the negative. That is inability. I am able not to sin. That is ability, power, deliverance, victory. Christ by His Atonement does not hamper my will. He does not take from me the power to sin, but praise His name, He puts His power within me, by the abiding presence of the Holy Ghost, thus enabling me to keep from sin.”\(^32\)

Vennard traveled every summer to camp meetings sponsored by the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness, the conduit of the Wesleyan/Holiness movement in America.\(^33\) Founded in 1867, the National Camp Meeting Association directly and indirectly sponsored an extensive network of national, regional, and local holiness associations, periodicals, missions, schools, camps, conferences,
prayer meetings, and camp meetings. At its camp meetings, Methodist bishops, district superintendents, ministers, and thousands of laypeople flocked to hear sermons and testimonies on sanctification. Along with Vennard, other women evangelists who circulated in this orbit, some briefly and others for decades, include Mattie Perry, Amanda Berry Smith, Jennie Smith, Alma White, and Jennie Fowler Willing.

By the mid-1870s, serious opposition to the Wesleyan/Holiness movement surfaced over what detractors considered a misinterpretation of sanctification. In particular, they objected to Phoebe Palmer’s extremely popular “shorter way” to sanctification. Palmer was the leading Methodist evangelist, author, and editor of the mid-nineteenth century, whom historian Mark Noll refers to as the “majordomo of the holiness movement.”34 Based upon her own experience and following the admonition in Matthew 23:19, “the altar sanctifieth the gift,” she taught that one need only consecrate oneself entirely upon the altar, then believe that God promises to sanctify whatever rests upon the altar. According to Palmer, the believer receives sanctification in that moment of belief.35 She promoted her teaching on sanctification through the national and transatlantic revivals she preached, editorial leadership of the *Guide to Holiness*, several bestselling books, including *The Way of Holiness*, and leadership of the Tuesday Meetings for the Promotion of Holiness.

In defense of this position, Palmer and her associates could appeal to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism in eighteenth-century England, because he insisted that entire sanctification remained, in principle, always instantaneous at least as a work of God. As Wesley wrote, “If sin cease before death, there must, in the nature of the thing, be an instantaneous change, there must be a last moment wherein it does exist, and a first moment it does not.”36 In his writings during the middle years of his ministry, Wesley frequently encouraged followers to seek this experience now, no matter how shortly after their justification. However, in his later writings, in part because of turmoil in the 1760s over some who claimed the speedy attainment of sanctification, Wesley more typically maintained that, while God could bring entire sanctification at any moment, in the majority of cases, it would be after years of growth in grace, when one had matured into a closer resemblance of Christ-likeness exhibited by a robust love of God and
neighbor. Palmer’s opponents gravitated to this latter emphasis in Wesley, downplaying (or ignoring) his earlier emphasis on seeking now.37 So the growing split between mainline Methodist and holiness groups intensified over which Wesley texts and emphases to prioritize.

As the disagreement deepened in the 1880s, Wesleyan/Holiness leaders struggled to keep the unwieldy movement within established denominations, but to no avail. Between 1880 and 1905, some 100,000 “come-outers,” as they were called, broke away to form new denominations specifically focused on this “shorter way” to sanctification.38 Two women evangelists who left the Methodist Church to spearhead new denominations were Mary Lee Cagle (New Testament Church of Christ, which merged later with the Church of the Nazarene), and Alma White (Pillar of Fire). Women evangelists also gravitated to denominations that sprouted several decades earlier from Wesleyan/Holiness roots, like Martha Lee and Emma Ray, who joined the Free Methodist Church, which broke from mainline Methodism in 1860, and Evangeline Booth, youngest daughter of William and Catherine Booth, cofounders of the Salvation Army in 1865, an outgrowth of British Methodism.

Another segment within Protestantism committed to sanctification, the Keswick movement, emerged alongside the Wesleyan/Holiness movement.39 The Keswick movement, also known as the higher life movement, provided a transatlantic umbrella for holiness advocates who approached sanctification as a gradual, rather than instantaneous process, which consists of three steps. The first step requires a full surrender or consecration to Christ, in which one relinquishes one’s will in order to be replaced by the Spirit’s. It happens as a decisive crisis experience after conversion and launches the believer into what Keswick adherents refer to as the “higher life.” The second step—the baptism of the Holy Spirit—occurs when the Spirit falls and fills the believer. In the third step, the believer receives power for service, enabling her to continue to progress into a higher life through service to others. This emphasis on service cemented a close connection between the Keswick movement and the global missionary movement at the turn of the twentieth century.40

An influential group of Keswick adherents made the connection between sanctification and divine healing at a time when healing shrines, homes, and practitioners had become commonplace. Pilgrims
flocked to Catholic healing shrines, such as Lourdes in France and Knock Chapel in Ireland, Mary Baker Eddy's Church of Christ (Scientist) attracted a host of members, and the Emmanuel movement brought divine healing even into the Episcopal Church in America. In this heyday of healing, the atmosphere ripened the link between healing and sanctification. As R. Kelso Carter, mathematics professor, faith-healing advocate, and author of the hymn “Standing on the Promises,” explained, “It is a remarkable fact, that no one has been known to seek the healing power for the body, without receiving a distinct spiritual baptism; and further, that everyone known to the writer (a very large number), who has been entirely healed in body, is or has become a believer in and professor of entire sanctification of soul.” Carter's mentor, A. B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination in 1897, believed in divine healing through faith alone, without the interference of medicine or medical expertise. Simpson summarized his teaching in the four-fold gospel: Jesus Christ as Savior, Sanctifier, Healer, and Coming King. A number of women evangelists, including Carrie Judd Montgomery, Mattie Perry, and Emma Whitemore, followed Simpson's teachings and associated with his denomination, at least for a time, after being healed from debilitating illnesses without medicine, only with prayer. In the mid-1920s, evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson would adopt the four-fold reference for the denomination she founded, the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.

Still another group within Protestantism, Pentecostalism, testified to a baptism of the Holy Spirit that issued forth in speaking in tongues, or glossolalia. Glossolalia broke out prominently in early twentieth-century revivals around the globe, including Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Kansas (1900), Welsh Revival (1904), Mukti Mission in Pune, India (1905), and the Azusa Street Revival, Los Angeles (1906). During these years, significant overlap in terminology, such as “sanctification” and “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” yet with widely divergent meanings, exacerbated tensions between holiness folk in the Wesleyan/Holiness, Keswick, and Pentecostal movements. For instance, the phrase “baptism of the Holy Spirit” became problematic because it referred to sanctification within the Wesleyan/Holiness movement and speaking in tongues among Pentecostals. In her 1926 autobiography, Emma Ray, an
African American Free Methodist evangelist, had to clarify that what she understood the phrase to mean was sanctification, not glossolalia: “A great light flooded our souls, and immediately the Holy Spirit began to lead us out into deeper depths. . . . He [the Holy Spirit] didn’t give us all the light at one time, but later, little by little, as we were able to receive it. Neither did we speak in tongues, but He gave us a new tongue to testify and tell the glad tidings.”

Confusion even confounded the term “sanctification.” Did it mean “cleansing and perfecting,” as maintained by the Keswick and Wesleyan/Holiness movements, or the more Pentecostal motif of power? As historian Donald Dayton writes, “Often the ‘power’ themes merely overwhelmed the ‘holiness’ themes. . . . The mainstream Holiness movement tried valiantly to preserve the classical themes in the midst of the new changes in vocabulary and rhetoric.” During these contentious debates, two Pentecostal women evangelists, Florence Louise Crawford and Mary Magdalena Lewis Tate, held on tightly to both terms—“sanctification” and “baptism of the Holy Spirit”—in the holiness Pentecostal denominations they founded, the Apostolic Faith Mission (Crawford) and the Church of the Living God, the Pillar and Ground of the Truth (Tate).

Despite these different perspectives on the particulars of sanctification—instantaneous or gradual, accompanied with glossolalia or cleansing for service—still the shared advocacy of this doctrine draws women evangelists together in an extended family sort of way. They testify that sanctification imparted “holy boldness,” as historian Susie Stanley demonstrates, and enabled them to overcome the “man-fearing spirit” that had previously impeded their preaching and evangelism. Evangelist Mary Lee Cagle testified, in her customary third-person narrative style, about the boldness that accompanied her sanctification: “Although of a shrinking, backward disposition, she has never seen a crowd since that day large enough to make her knees tremble, and she has preached to thousands.”

It is not surprising, then, that of the two dozen women discussed in this book, only Helen Sunday (Presbyterian), and Martha Moore Avery (Roman Catholic), stood outside the wide umbrella of holiness movements.

As we have seen thus far, various peculiarities of vocabulary and interpretations muddied the waters of conversion and sanctification
during the Progressive Era. Certainly, even with the explanations blurred, however, this much is clear: by understanding the specific ways in which these women attempted to give expression to their experiences, we apprehend a rich penetration into a formative stage in American Christianity. Further, by looking carefully at various conflicts within American Christianity, we gain a diverse yet comprehensive understanding of theological and experiential expressions during the Progressive Era.

The conflict over gender in American Christianity. The St. Louis Methodist men who ousted Vennard from EEI did so in part over the issue of gender. Their specific complaint: Vennard’s supposed duplicity of “training women preachers under the guise of deaconess work.” As the district superintendent, Dr. Wright, explained, “Methodist preachers do not want deaconesses who study theology. We can attend to that ourselves. We want women as helpers who will work with the children, care for the sick, and visit the poor. If our deaconesses are trained in theology they will become critical of the preachers, and that will be the end of the deaconess movement.” In his outrage, according to her biographer, he then referred to Vennard as “a dangerous and powerful woman.”

Many clergymen shared Wright’s sentiments about deaconesses in particular and women in general. Even though they depended heavily on women’s work to keep the church running and bolster membership rolls, since women attended church in greater numbers than men, they became suspicious about any work that approximated women in the pulpit. “Ministers suspected—and rightly—that women had more chance of capturing the church than the Senate; and they reserved their fiercest powers of resistance for such a possibility,” explains historian Ann Douglas.

The conflict over gender at EEI replicated a national discussion within Protestantism. Gender issues surfaced, for example, in votes cast at the quadrennial General Conferences of the MEC from 1872 to the 1920s. In 1880, the General Conference voted to rescind all local preacher licenses previously issued to women, including the popular evangelists Jennie Fowler Willing and Maggie Newton Van Cott. The same vote also banned women from all church leadership positions, with the exception of Sunday-school superintendent, class leader, and steward, and it
slammed the door shut on women's ordination. Subsequent General Conferences dallied around for another four decades before voting in 1924 to restore women's local preacher licenses. Methodist women would then have to wait another three decades for the General Conference vote to approve full clergy rights for women in 1956, the same year the main-line Presbyterian Church cast a similar vote.

While male church leaders equivocated over gender issues in most Protestant denominations, women forged ahead on their own to establish voluntary religious organizations separate from men's. Their creative ingenuity for circumventing official channels confirms sociologist Mark Chaves's remark that “denominational rules regarding women's ordination—whether those rules are inclusive or exclusive—neither reflect nor shape the tasks and roles women actually perform in congregations as closely or directly as might be expected.” Protestant women in a number of denominations, from 1869 into the 1890s, established their own home and foreign missionary organizations, including eight within the Methodist family of churches alone. These organizations enlisted in their ranks a staggering number of members. “More women became involved in women's missionary society work after the Civil War than in all areas of the social reform and woman's rights movements combined. Between 1861 and 1894, foreign missionary societies were organized by and for women in thirty-three denominations and home missionary societies in seventeen.” In turn, these missionary organizations opened up myriad opportunities for women missionaries to preach, teach, and plant churches on the mission field, the very activities that women were not authorized to do in their home congregations. Mary Lee Cagle recognized even as a teenager that she would have more opportunities in leadership and ministry on the mission field. “I felt assured of a Divine call to engage in Christian work. On account of the teachings of that time regarding woman's ministry, I decided there would be no opening for me in my home-land. I came to the conclusion that my call was to the foreign field where I supposed a woman would have freedom in preaching Christ to the heathen. Many dreams I had of crossing the waters and preaching to them.”

Although Cagle never did cross the waters, many women did. Owing to the substantial influx of women missionaries supported by women's organizations, the Protestant missionary force sent from America grew
from two thousand before 1870 to six thousand in 1900. Of the six thousand foreign missionaries at the turn of the century, women constituted roughly two-thirds. Like their counterparts in North America, women missionaries built institutions in foreign lands during the Progressive Era. Take, for example, missionary Eva Swift’s Lucy Perry Noble Institute for Women, a school in Madurai, India, that provided evangelistic training for Indian women.58 The story of this institution and others like it built by women missionaries has been well documented and will not be repeated here, but it is important nevertheless to note the parallel to women’s institution building in the United States.

The same impulse for “female institution building,” a phrase coined by historian Estelle Freedman, gave rise to the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the largest women’s organization in the United States in the Progressive Era, with a membership approaching two hundred thousand by the century’s end.59 From its beginning in the Women’s Temperance Crusade of 1873–74 to its expansion into a “Do Everything” policy under Frances Willard’s presidency, the WCTU provided women with their own, separate institution for societal and ecclesial reform.60 Willard purposefully capitalized on the strategy of female institution building, as historian Margaret Bendroth explains: “Preferring ‘to keep the dimes and distinctions to themselves,’ Frances Willard charged, the denominations had instead classified their women members as mere ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water.’ Only in their own separate organizations, she argued, could women develop their own latent gifts for leadership.”61

Despite the obvious success in stature and numbers of female-only institution building, women evangelists embarked on a different strategy. They broke new ground as women religious leaders and built institutions for both women and men. They did not adopt the strategy of female institution building. Neither did they follow the strategy typified in many evangelical institutions of “participating in a parallel world of women’s ministry groups, where they gain leadership opportunities denied them in their mixed-gender congregations,” which still left men in charge as overseers of the women.62 Instead, women evangelists built the institutions themselves and set the rules from the beginning, and those rules included the presence and participation of both women and men. The evangelistic organizations, churches, denominations, schools,
rescue homes, and rescue missions founded by these women attracted male and female converts, members, and students. Church membership rosters listed male and female names. School photographs captured female and male students sitting alongside each other in classrooms. Letters written from male and female workers back to denominational headquarters described their religious service and travel adventures as they crossed the continent to advance the institutional network. Church leadership positions were filled by both women and men. These women evangelists, therefore, rank among the first American women to build—and lead—mixed-gender religious institutions.

To press this further by looking beyond the stigma often attached to the word “evangelist,” these women stand as pioneering religious leaders in America who held supreme power and authority over their institution, even over men. Women preached, men listened in the pews. Women set doctrine and interpreted scripture, men accepted their teaching. Women pastored, men joined their churches. Women gave orders, men obeyed. Women made real estate purchases, men contributed money. Women held the power within the institution, men submitted to their religious authority. And the power women wielded within these institutions remained fierce and absolute. They dictated what their followers—male and female—should believe and not believe, wear and not wear, eat and not eat, even when to exercise and for how long. What historian George Marsden observed about institutions of American evangelicalism founded by successful male evangelists applies equally to women: “Usually these institutions have been run autocratically or by an oligarchy; in any case they have typically been regarded virtually as private property. They were designed for a special purpose, which could be defined by the people in immediate command, with no need to answer to ecclesiastical authority. These institutions were thus extraordinarily shaped by the personalities of the individuals who founded and controlled them.”

To identify other women religious leaders who accomplished similar achievements of institution building during the same time period, one must look beyond mainstream Christianity to Theosophy, Christian Science, Seventh Day Adventism, and New Thought. Like their evangelical counterparts, Helena Blavatsky (Theosophy), Mary Baker Eddy (Christian Science), Ellen White (Seventh Day Adventism), and Emma
Curtis Hopkins (New Thought) also sought to legitimize their religious movements in brick and mortar, in rules and regulations, in a legacy for the next generation of converts. Mary Baker Eddy, for instance, organized the Christian Science Association in 1876, officially incorporated the Church of Christ (Scientist) in 1879, and opened the Massachusetts Metaphysical College in 1881. Ten years later, she began construction in Boston on the building which became the movement’s Mother Church. Despite many conflicts and several schisms, membership in the Church of Christ (Scientist) grew rapidly in the early decades of the twentieth century, increasing from twenty-six in Eddy’s first congregation to eighty-six thousand by 1906.

Eddy’s prize former student, Emma Curtis Hopkins, built several institutions for her New Thought movement. In 1886, she launched the Emma Hopkins College of Christian Science, and by the following year, the Hopkins Metaphysical Association consisted of seventeen member groups in cities from coast to coast. She restructured the college in 1888 as the Christian Science Theological Seminary and admitted women and men. From the first graduating class, Hopkins herself ordained twenty women and two men. A historian of New Thought claims that “Hopkins’s ordination of women marked the first time in American history (and possibly Western Christian history) that a woman ordained women. . . . With Hopkins’s move, emergent New Thought ceased to be a lay movement of quasi-professional teachers and practitioners. Now it was a religious organization; its leaders were ordained ministers who began to establish churches, hold Sunday services, and preach.”

Like these religious leaders, the women you will meet in this book drank deeply of the same draft of institution building. By and large, they were, like Vennard, theologically conservative, with deeply held views on the necessity of conversion and sanctification and a deep trust in the inspiration of the Bible. Yet—and here lies the utter fascination of these women—despite an entrenched conservatism, which we will note countless times in the pages ahead, these women not only initiated but also stood at the helm of these institutions, which they built to accommodate, to teach, and to equip both men and women. Their evangelistic organizations attracted thousands of women and men to their meetings. Their churches and denominations commenced with a handful of men and women and expanded across the country, some even across continents.
Their training schools and colleges enrolled hundreds of male and female students. Their rescue homes and missions extended humanitarian and evangelistic outreach to men and women in American cities and towns. These women caught the fever rampant in America—and American Christianity—to create institutional legacies during the Progressive Era.

A Remarkable Era for American Christianity

The women in this book occupy a particular niche in American history: the Progressive Era, roughly 1890–1920. These decades of momentous change and foment in America pulsed with the beat of sweeping social change, bold legislation, and audacious innovation, from settlement houses and neighborhood playgrounds to the Nineteenth Amendment for women’s suffrage, from the income tax to the Social Gospel, from the assembly line to the movie theater. No segment of American life, no crevice in American culture, no stratum of American society stalled this explosion of innovation. Larger-than-life figures who even today cast their shadows—John Dewey in education, Frank Lloyd Wright in architecture, Jane Addams in urban reformation, Upton Sinclair in journalistic critique, Walter Rauschenbusch in Christian social responsibility, Henry Ford in mass production—emblemize an era in which America accomplished much and dreamed still more.

An unprecedented measure of institution building solidified these movements. The settlement house movement, for example, launched in Great Britain in the late 1880s, took root in the United States at the cusp of the Progressive Era, beginning with New York’s Neighborhood Guild and College Settlement and Chicago’s Hull House. A handful of settlement houses in 1890 grew to more than four hundred by 1910, each one providing myriad opportunities for urban neighbors to come together across class boundaries through “lectures, classes, plays, pageants, kindergarten, and child care.” Along with community-based activism, settlement houses emerged as institutions dedicated to ameliorating the pressing issues of the day, from immigration and urbanization to poverty and health care.

Evangelists, too, joined the Progressive Era’s institution-building enthusiasm. While this book focuses primarily on the work of women evangelists, it is important nonetheless to note that Dwight L. Moody, the leading American evangelist of the mid-to-late nineteenth century,
had already begun to shift toward institutional evangelism. During the last two decades of his life, along with evangelistic meetings, he devoted resources to institution building. In 1879, he launched a girls school, Northfield Seminary, and allowed his own home to function as the first dormitory and classroom until construction was complete on the seminary’s first building.71 Four years later, the Mount Hermon School for Boys, also in Northfield, opened its doors. These schools, with a core curriculum in Bible and theology, held an evangelistic purpose for Moody, who “hoped that they would become schools for the training of evangelists like himself who would spread the gospel effectively throughout the country.”72 In 1880, he offered the first annual Northfield Conference geared to training laity in evangelism through adult education in Bible study and evangelistic methods. Still another institution, the Chicago Evangelization Society, began in 1887 and developed into the Moody Bible Institute, a training school to equip urban lay evangelists. That same year, he launched a summer-long religious training program, the College Students’ Summer School, which prepared and motivated a generation of young men to be leaders in evangelism, ecumenism, and mission.73 Beginning in the 1880s, institution building for evangelism—evangelistic organizations, churches, denominations, schools, rescue homes, and rescue missions—would intensify throughout the Progressive Era, especially through the efforts of women evangelists.

Along with rampant institution building, the Progressive Era figures as “the most critical time in American religion” according to historian Arthur Schlesinger. He continued, “Perhaps at no time in its American development has the path of Christianity been so sorely beset with pitfalls and perils as in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.”74 Up until this time, evangelicals “had things mostly their own way.”75 Then during the Progressive Era, the evangelical hegemony splintered markedly in reaction to seismic demographic and theological shifts. First, a staggering rate of immigration that reached eight hundred thousand people annually wreaked havoc on every aspect of American life, including religion. Immigrants arrived with their own “dress, language, customs, and religions,” which seemed “threatening to older-stock Americans.”76 In reaction, Congregational minister and one-time general secretary of the Evangelical Alliance Josiah Strong ranked immigration as the
first of seven perils confronting the United States in his best-selling and influential book, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*. “So immense a foreign element must have a profound influence on our national life and character,” wrote Strong. “Immigration brings unquestioned benefits, but these do not concern our argument. It complicates almost every home missionary problem and furnishes the soil which feeds the life of several of the most noxious growths of our civilization.” Immigration further exacerbated another peril that worried evangelicals, the rise of Roman Catholicism. In response, evangelicals turned up the exigency of evangelism in an effort to retain the “old time religion” of a Protestant America. Despite myriad entertainment options, from the cheering of crowds in wooden baseball stadiums to the ubiquitous five-cent storefront nickelodeons, Americans turned out in droves to spend a couple of hours at an evangelistic meeting. Evangelism thrived so readily in the Progressive Era that historian William McLoughlin referred to the period as the Third Great Awakening.

Second, the theological challenges that vexed evangelicals emerged from the theories of evolution and higher criticism. Darwin’s ideas evoked a scientific account of a world that developed as species evolved as opposed to a “providential explanation for the universe” as held by evangelicals. Higher criticism brought scientific methods appropriate for any type of literature, sacred or secular, to the interpretation of the Bible. These more scientific concepts gained traction in mainline Protestant seminaries and influenced future ministers. In a symposium on higher criticism published in the Methodist periodical, *Zion’s Herald*, twenty-five Protestant ministers answered this question, “What should be the attitude of ministers toward the ‘Higher Critics,’ or ‘Criticism,’ of the Bible so called?” Without exception, they responded with appreciation, like the Reverend J. R. Day, D.D., a Methodist Episcopal minister, who declared: “Let the higher critics criticize. They are among the best friends of the cause, for when the objections to the Scriptures are examined by scientific methods by the scholars of the land, the easier will it be for the pastors to go on with their work . . . I hail as a fellow-worker every honest critic in the biblical field today.” Following from such sentiments, many ministers utilized the scientific methods of higher criticism in their sermon preparation, and these same ideas thus trickled down to laity listening in the pews.
Evangelicals protested that both evolution and higher criticism inevitably tampered with the reliability, authenticity, and historicity of the Bible. Of the two theories, they saved their fiercest condemnation for higher criticism, referring to it pejoratively as “destructive criticism.”

In her famous address, “The World’s Great Romance,” presented in auditoriums throughout the world, Evangeline Booth, longtime commander of the Salvation Army in the United States, delivered a dramatic verbal assault against it. “Destructive criticism . . . the pernicious and seductive teaching of dissection and contradistinction of the Bible, in this day of infidel attack upon the fundamental truths of Christianity, snatching the prop of eternal hope from old age as it stands with one foot in the damp sod of the grave, and robbing youth of its one unerring lamp as it starts down the snare-strewn path of life, in this day of unlimited batterings upon the Christ of the Cross . . .”

Evangelicals also denounced higher criticism for being exclusive and elite, for the well educated and seminary trained; as such, it “threatened the basic assumption of commonsense realism and popular piety—that the Bible was open to the average person.” They countered that education, position, class, or wealth did not matter when interpreting the Bible. Evangelist Maria Woodworth-Etter, who could only attend school for a few years because she had to go to work to help ameliorate her family’s desperate economic situation, boasted often that she did not need to study or prepare sermons ahead of time; she simply stood on stage and received the biblical text from God, including its chapter and verse, then opened her mouth to preach.

These fancy ideas and “the profound changes and the shocks that accompanied them,” observed McLoughlin, “registered most heavily upon those country-bred, evangelically oriented . . . individuals who made up the bulk of the nation’s churchgoers.” This same audience, longing for the familiar “old time religion,” gravitated en masse to hear evangelist Dwight L. Moody and songster Ira Sankey. Moody and Sankey “rejuvenated the revival” by attracting “listeners in the millions, converts in the thousands, their hymns on every lip, their names a household word.” Even after Moody retired in 1892, the American populace continued to seek out evangelistic meetings and support them financially. In the year 1911, according to American historian Sydney
Ahlstrom, six hundred fifty full-time and one thousand two hundred part-time evangelists crossed America. Ahlstrom continues with these statistics: “Between 1912 and 1918 they staged at least 35,000 revivals; and according to one careful estimate, the evangelical churches spent $20 million a year on ‘professional tabernacle evangelism’ during the peak years from 1914 to 1917.”

So that they might “confront American life at every level, to permeate, evangelize, and Christianize it,” evangelists launched a massive number of institutions in the Progressive Era. From schools to churches, from denominations to rescue homes, these institutions served not only as a conduit for fervent evangelism but also as a safe house from the storms of evolution and perilous biblical interpretations. And women stood at the helm of many of these institutions as founder, administrator, fundraiser, preacher, teacher, publicist, and entrepreneur.

Institution by Institution

Four types of institutions founded by women evangelists are examined in all their intricacies and evangelistic dimensions in the following chapters. Chapter 1 features the evangelistic organizations that arranged, financed, and implemented evangelistic meetings. Some remained small outfits, like Maria Woodworth-Etter’s or the Catholic Truth Guild, cofounded by Martha Moore Avery and David Goldstein. Others grew to great proportions, like the Billy Sunday evangelistic organization, ranked among an elite group of American corporations, thanks to the business acumen of Helen Sunday, or the WCTU Evangelistic Department, with its hundreds of women evangelists. Along with their decidedly evangelistic purpose, some organizations, like Florence Crawford’s Apostolic Faith Mission, also served as a gathering point for converts who became the nucleus of new churches and denominations.

Chapter 2 investigates these churches and denominations from their initial formation to their development into enduring institutions with established headquarters, printing presses, and full-fledged sets of doctrines and disciplines. Women retained strict control over the institutions as well as their members, often dictating lives down to daily
minutiae, like Alma White’s insistence on a vegetarian diet and thirty
minutes of daily exercise. While the women founders who launched
these churches and denominations—like Mary Lee Cagle, Florence
Crawford, Mary Magdalena Lewis Tate, Maria Woodworth-Etter, and
Alma White—are long deceased, much of their work remains vibrant
into the twenty-first century, and second- and third-generation mem-
ers continue to engage in evangelism across the globe.

Chapter 3 turns the institutional focus to schools. These educational
institutions—founded by Elizabeth Baker, Carrie Judd Montgomery,
Mattie Perry, Iva Durham Vennard, Alma White, and Jennie Fowler
Willing—provided a modicum of training in Bible and practical work
for men and women headed into full-time Christian work as evange-
lists, preachers, Bible teachers, missionaries, and musicians. Despite
their own minimal education, women evangelists pioneered a vision-
ary, path-breaking vocational education for men and women that pre-
saged future enrollment and curricular decisions of public educational
specialists and seminary administrators.

Chapter 4 introduces rescue homes and missions, which provided
humanitarian outreach to the destitute and downtrodden, the prostitu-
tute and unwed mother, along with evangelism. The symbiosis between
evangelism and humanitarianism, in Vennard’s colloquial phrase, was
likened to the “bait on the hook” (humanitarianism), whose purpose
was to “land the fish” (evangelism). With a similar mantra, Martha Lee,
Carrie Judd Montgomery, Emma Ray, Florence Roberts, and Virginia
Moss opened rescue institutions in cities like Omaha, Kansas City, and
Oakland, while Emma Whittemore launched the Door of Hope, doors
really, with an extraordinary national chain—a veritable McDonald’s of
social outreach—of nearly one hundred rescue homes.

The book’s Conclusion teases out these women’s legacy as the Pro-
gressive Era edged into the Roaring Twenties. At this juncture, Aimee
Semple McPherson stood on the giant shoulders of these pioneer-
ing women religious leaders and accomplished even more institution
building. The women who preceded her had already plowed the hard
ground of resistance and opposition to women evangelists. They had
already pioneered transportation technology in evangelism, from gos-
pel wagons to decorated autovans. They had already launched every
institution in McPherson's repertoire—evangelistic organizations, churches, denominations, religious training schools, and rescue institutions. Women evangelists in the Progressive Era paved the way for McPherson to develop a most extensive, wide-ranging collection of institutions from the 1920s to the 1940s.