



William Jennings Bryan 1860-1925

Though William Jennings Bryan lost more elections than he ever won, his influence in American life and politics continues strong today. With a methodical and exacting mind, Bryan was a leader of the people, not simply a follower of their polls or opinions. Often he took a stand on an unpopular issue because he was convinced it was right; the public usually came gradually to agree with him. Bryan was among the first to stand for the popular election of Senators; he worked for amendments establishing prohibition and women's suffrage. He authored a law requiring publicity in campaign contributions, encouraged the establishment of the Department of Labor, and worked for currency reform that later resulted in the Federal Reserve Act. Bryan was called "The Great Commoner" because he worked tirelessly to protect the common laborer and farmer.

But these political achievements were not the strongest motive in Bryan's life. William Jennings Bryan was born in Salem, Illinois, on March 19, 1860, on the eve of the Civil War. His parents were both devout Christians, and the church played an important part in molding young Bryan. When he was fourteen, Bryan was converted to Christ during a revival at the Presbyterian Church. He was always thankful for the foundation the church provided for his life before he left home for college. Bryan's father was a judge and member of the Illinois legislature. He took every opportunity to impress upon young William the value of the Bible. As William later wrote, "To him it was not only the Word of God but the foundation of wisdom. He was especially fond of Proverbs and was in the habit of calling men in from work a little before noon to read a chapter and comment upon it. "When his father died, Bryan stated, "the Biblical truths that he [my father] sought to impress upon me grew in value and I took up the book of Proverbs and read it through once a month for a year. I have frequently mentioned this experience and advised young men to read Proverbs because of the accumulated wisdom found there – wisdom on all moral questions and expressed with wonderful force and clearness."

Bryan followed in his father's example, becoming a lawyer, known for his oratorical skills. He married Mary Baird and they had three children. The couple

was devoted to study, not knowing the direction the future held for them. Bryan stated in a letter to Mary during their courtship, “. . . I turned with some trembling to contemplate the unknown future, its responsibilities, its possible successes, and its probable misfortune. I would dread to be compelled to set forth on this sea with nothing but the light of my reason to aid me. What a blessing it is that we have that guide, the Bible. The future looks bright. . .”

In 1887, the Bryans moved from Illinois to Lincoln, Nebraska, where William thought he could have a more successful law practice. His oratorical skills were becoming well known, and he was often asked to speak at political or church functions. One evening in 1888 he came home after giving a speech, awakened Mary and said, “I found I have power over the audience. God grant that I may use it wisely.” At that moment he sank to his knees in prayer.

In 1891 and 1893, Bryan was elected to the U.S. Congress from Nebraska. He used his eloquence in politics to protect the interests of the farmer and the common laborer. He ran for president unsuccessfully, and was the only man in history to run as a major party candidate for president three times without winning. In spite of his losses, Bryan remained active in public affairs, seeing many of his policies implemented. He once wrote that “. . .the experience of public life has tended to confirm in me the convictions of my early education – that the more we conform our lives and actions, both in private and public relations, to the demands of honor, truth, sincerity, justice, and Christianity, the greater will be our happiness and prosperity.”

Bryan devoted his later life more than ever to Christian work. He and Mary moved to Miami, Florida, where William’s Sunday School class in the Presbyterian Church became so large it spread to the park. From the bandstand Bryan spoke to thousands, many not normally church-goers. He also worked actively with the YMCA, helping young men battle with the religious skepticism.

Bryan came to believe that the teaching of evolution as a fact rather than a theory caused many students to lose their faith in the Bible, and he became a key spokesman against evolution. Bryan is perhaps most remembered as the prosecuting attorney in the famous 1925 Scopes Trial. John Scopes taught evolution in a Tennessee school. Such was against the law in that state. Bryan won. Scopes was convicted and fined. But Evangelical Christianity lost much ground in the larger culture. Now 75 years later, the Creationist – Evolutionist controversy continues.

Bryan died of a heart attack on July 26, 1925, a few days after the conclusion of the Scopes Trial. Throughout his life, Bryan had used his political

and oratorical gifts to establish popular government, safeguard society, and spread the Christian faith.