



# Women as Missionaries

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THE REFLECTIONS IN THIS ARTICLE ON WOMEN IN MISSION ARE BASED ON MY own experience and observations over a period of thirty-two years as a missionary in Syria/Lebanon. I ventured over to Lebanon with my husband, Ben, on a small Greek ship in 1953. We were before the jet age. I sailed from New York with a rather idealized vision of what missionary life would be like. I left Lebanon by way of Syria in 1985 under a stressful and ambiguous situation, but gratified for God's presence throughout.

The intervening years were a period of immense social and spiritual growth and change for me and my colleagues. We lived and worked in a newly established country, roughly divided evenly between Christians and Muslims. The major question being asked of Lebanon was, "Can people of different faiths and ideologies live together?" What missionary women say or do, or do not do, or how they live out the gospel and relate to others is a tremendously complex subject. Nevertheless I hope to provide some clues to women in action in mission by sharing my own experience.

Mission like the incarnation is a human/divine enterprise. The word became flesh. As Christians, we live in this paradox wherever we are. We know life and death and resurrection. It is God who has called us to be followers of Christ. We know we are fragile people and are dependent on the grace and unmerited mercy of God. At rock bottom it is the Holy Spirit who inspires us to join the cloud of witnesses down through the ages. In his Holy Spirit, Jesus lives again, and through imperfect lives Christ is spoken and seen and heard. In these convictions we live and pray and work.

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Women are called just as men are called to be missionaries. We celebrate this reality. For women are also created in the image of God and are able to be transformed by God's love. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, single women, professional women, and homemakers commit themselves to participate in the mission of the church. Women have worked individually, together, or as a group with men for the welfare of the whole community. The gospel is such that it must be shared. We proclaim Christ on the cross. Yet experience teaches that there have been and continue to be wide gaps in information and stumbling blocks to acknowledgement of the full participation of women as missionaries and supporters of mission. Fortunately the social climate in the United States in recent decades has made research about women more respectable. Genuine efforts are being made particularly by women authors to recover and treasure the history of the participation of women in church and society.

#### I. THE EARLY YEARS

*Fifty Three Years in Syria* is the autobiography of Henry H. Jessup, one of the early missionaries to Syria. Jessup's two-volume work provides a fairly detailed account of the development of mission in Syria/Lebanon from 1823 to 1910. Although he includes descriptions, anecdotes, and explanations of the work of missionary men, he makes little mention of the part played by women. Part of the reason may be that many wives died young in the early years. Henry Jessup himself married three times. There is no mention of his wives' activities beyond a sentence or two. Photographs of the pioneer missionaries in the book show pictures of couples but descriptive comments concerning the wives are lacking. Brief notes were made at the death of a wife. "Mrs. Smith commenced in 1834, soon after her arrival, a school for girls in Beirut, which was the first regular girls' school in Syria and under her auspices was erected the first edifice ever built in the Turkish Empire for the education of girls."<sup>1</sup> Her missionary career ended in her death two years later. Mrs. Smith's husband, Eli Smith, famous linguist and translator of the Bible, also married three times, but none of his other wives' activities are mentioned either.

Even those wives who lived longer got scant mention. In 1873 Dr. Thomson's "devoted" wife, Mrs. Maria Thomson, "after more than forty years of a lovely and consistent Christian life in this community, passed to her heavenly reward, universally beloved and respected by people of all nationalities."<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the wife's activities were indistinguishable from her husband's contribution. "Dr. de Forest and his accomplished wife were admirably fitted to train young women in piety, intellectual knowledge, and a beautiful domestic life. The lovely Christian families in Syria, whose mothers were trained by them, will be their monuments for generations to come."<sup>3</sup> Dr. de Forest's wife remains nameless and we hear only a

<sup>1</sup>Henry H. Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, 2 vols. (New York: Revell, 1910) 1:54.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 618.

sentence or two about her again. Women's contributions in early mission work in Syria/Lebanon are played down and marginalized. No mention is made of the wives having a missionary goal in their own right. This silence concerning a vocational role is consistent with attitudes toward women prevalent in the United States at that time. The women of the mission were wives who made homes for their husbands and raised children.

Catherine Beecher, writing in 1841, refers to women as having no interest or concern for civil or political activities, but they are properly concerned, and even have superior influence, in the education of children, support of clergymen, benevolence, and in the area of morals and manners.<sup>4</sup> Rufus Andersen, a member of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church and influential in missionary circles in the United States, declared that the "women's sphere" was as helpmeet, companion, and mother of children. These concepts he defended as being scriptural. However, he added that women might also exert influence on education, particularly women's and children's education. He encouraged men to marry and felt wives were "useful."<sup>5</sup> He discouraged appointment of single women. They would be a problem. Where would they live? In foreign cultures they could not live alone.<sup>6</sup> It was not until 1927 that single women became regular members of the mission, nearly one hundred years after the first missionaries were sent out. Wives were finally designated as associate members.

## II. WOMEN'S MISSIONARY SOCIETIES

The situation for single women in the second half of the nineteenth century improved with the organization of women's missionary societies. This missionary movement was probably the largest of the nineteenth-century religious movements in America. "Their role in generating enthusiasm for foreign service has been largely overlooked in structures that focus on activities of denominational mission boards and a handful of prominent mission statesmen."<sup>7</sup> These societies encouraged education for women. They actively recruited single women, financed women for mission, and developed a different rationale for mission. They served to broaden the definition of evangelism from conversion only to include social services. Denied ordination, women sought to have other activities besides teaching.

Dr. Mary Eddy in 1893 was the first woman physician to be granted permission to practice medicine in the Turkish empire. She attained a wide reputation for her work in an ophthalmic hospital and dispensary and for her care of tubercular patients in Syria/Lebanon. She was financed by the Women's Foreign Missionary Society, and oral history of her work continues to the present. Eliza Everett, the first American

<sup>4</sup>Patricia Hill, *The World Their Household* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1985) 31.

<sup>5</sup>R. Pierce Beaver, *American Protestant Women in World Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 52.

<sup>6</sup>Lois A. Boyd and R. Douglas Brackenridge, *Presbyterian Women in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1983) 166-167.

<sup>7</sup>Hill, *The World Their Household*, 33.

teacher appointed by the Board of Foreign Missions, was also financed by the women. She became the principal of the first girls' school in the Turkish empire, situated in Beirut. This was the school founded earlier by Mrs. Smith; now it was a boarding school and taught the English language. The Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions only financed schools which taught in the vernacular with a goal of conversion. Thus this important school, which later initiated the development of higher education for women in Syria/Lebanon, was largely financed by the Women's Foreign Missionary Society. The size of the mission contingent continued to grow. Soon the number of women, including wives and single women, outnumbered the men. By 1890, "eighteen missionaries and their wives [had] been commissioned. Also six unmarried men and twenty-two unmarried women."<sup>8</sup> Women's contributions were finally recognized. Men could no longer deny women a place in world mission. All they asked was that women keep their place!

It is difficult to assess motives for mission in the past or present. Many missionaries feel a "burning fire" to speak the word of the Lord (Jer 20:9). I believe it is the Holy Spirit nudging both women and men to speak of the great things that God has done. Motives are complex. Many women were raised on the mission field and had parents or family members who served as missionaries. Some may have had a strong sense of vocation that could be fulfilled abroad. Others wanted to do something meaningful in their lives. International mission may provide authority in the work of women not possible in home territory. Only recently have women been ordained. Even today an overseas assignment may allow women to speak more freely in the mission environment. A sense of self-worth and personal satisfaction may result. Church historians have speculated that women are naturally "spiritual." They are ready for self-sacrifice. I seriously question that there is any one natural characteristic common to all women in mission. My own heritage included a number of clergymen. My aunt was a missionary to China. I wanted to serve God in some significant way. Overseas mission work became my goal. I believe God's Holy Spirit was leading me in a variety of ways.

### III. TWENTIETH-CENTURY WOMEN

In the 1920s a spurt in mission interest in the United States led to increased numbers of mission personnel. Women continued to outnumber men. In 1924 Beirut College for Women was established as an outgrowth of the girls' school in Beirut. Mrs. Smith of pioneer days had started more than she ever knew. A school for girls was established in the Shi'ite Muslim town of Nabatiyeh, the first school for girls in that area. This town was where Ben and I were assigned for language study. Ben was to be involved also in evangelism outreach and work with seven protestant churches in the surrounding area. I, as a missionary wife, had no assignment. Because of the particular conservative Muslim setting in which we were planted, I was not able to join Ben in his tasks. My stateside vision of joint endeavors vanished. Frustrated, I had to do what I could. Friendships with my

<sup>8</sup>Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, *General Assembly Minutes* (1890) 224-227.

Muslim neighbors proceeded slowly. A Bible study with women aborted when a Muslim woman was beaten by her angered husband for attending. Using my public health nursing skills was confined to preparing health lessons for the school's village outreach to young women and mothers in several surrounding villages. I taught science and nursing care at the Nabatiyeh girls' school. I studied Arabic, managed the household, and had two more children, bringing the total to three. I offered hospitality to villagers, teachers, and traveling church leaders. I suffered culture shock and loneliness and had difficulty coming up to my own hopes and expectations of what a successful missionary should do and be.

When we sailed into Lebanon in 1953 there were about sixty missionaries altogether. The mission organization was responsible for two hospitals, one in Lebanon and one in Syria. Missionaries were administrators and staff in a rural project, evangelistic efforts, seven secondary schools, the Beirut College for Women, and the Aleppo College in Syria. Several American professors taught at the Near East School of Theology, an interdenominational seminary for the preparation of pastors and teachers of religion throughout the middle east. Women missionaries were allowed to develop their own tasks, to vote, and be engaged in the decision-making process of the mission. While we went about mission, the sixty protestant churches went about their churchly duties.

Change, however, was in the wind. Our church in the United States was a conciliar church and thus a member of the World Council of Churches. Ideas about mission arise out of historical processes. Shifts in thinking naturally take place in the light of current challenges. In theological discussions, a change in focus from mission-centered churches (as in the United States and Europe) to church-centered mission was taking place. Mission no longer belonged to foreign missions planted around the world; every church needed to be in mission.

In discussions in the World Council of Churches the concept of some churches being "sending" churches and some "receiving" churches was challenged. Designation of "older" and "younger" churches was declared outdated. The goal was being, working, and living together in obedience to Christ. Did these changes mean that mission would lose its distinctive character, its cutting edge? What is the specific missionary task? We lived these questions.

The Spirit of God wills fresh awareness. The Holy Spirit, creator of community and fellowship, presses us as Christians to come together that we may reach out and embrace any and all people of the world with its hungers and hope. We know these truths, but transitions are often painful. We met, we prayed, we worshiped together. We complained, we stumbled, we picked ourselves up, and carried on.

In 1950 the Syria/Lebanon mission turned over full responsibility for mission work to the Synod of Syria and Lebanon, including property, administration, staffing, decision-making, and goal-setting. American personnel were to function under the direction of the local indigenous church. Intellectually and theologically missionaries agreed, but the sudden transfer of power, change of direction, and the beginning of downsizing was not so easy. How did these changes affect women?

Wives and single women and men were moved farther away from decision-

making. The mission leaders had been both men and women, and we felt free to speak and challenge. The national church leaders were male and were members of a society which had very different perspectives on female participation in the church. It was a time of radical change and fresh ambiguities. What did the national church expect from women? How could we live beyond partnership slogans to serve and work in new relationships? We had been schooled in indigenization. We learned Arabic, worshiped together, and lived to the best of our abilities in cross-cultural mission.

The human spirit keeps looking for ways to break out of the structures and images that imprison us. The Holy Spirit works invisibly and anonymously to create community. Women began to shape their lives through their own initiative. The movement of women's liberation in the 1960s did not appeal to most of the missionary women. Reading and discussing with other women, particularly on furlough, helped me, however, to shore up my sense of power to shape my own life. Some of the women missionaries forged new identities. I realized that, with the closing of several mission hospitals, my original preparation in nursing was going nowhere. On furlough I completed the seminary studies I had begun before going to Lebanon. It took me altogether a stretch of about twenty years, but I graduated with a master's degree in Christian education. I offered myself to teach at the Near East School of Theology and was accepted. I became an assistant professor in Christian Education. Another woman colleague left her administrative post at the American School for Girls in Beirut (yes, it's that same school) because able Lebanese now filled such positions. She was ordained in our church in the United States and became an associate pastor in the Lebanese congregation in Beirut. She was the first ordained woman in the land. She also taught in music and worship at the Near East School of Theology. The Synod of Syria and Lebanon was functioning in a period of fluidity. Women were able to seek out new roles. Some wives continued to function in the "helpmeet" role. Others continued teaching or found service tasks. New occasions teach new duties. Women through the years shaped roles permitted to them by society, most often by the men of the society. Certain people have been expected to play powerful roles, and some are expected to have powerless roles—in social institutions, education, marriage, and church. Women shape new opportunities as they live out their commitment when they are free to honor the validity of their own experience, including their religious experience.

Mission does not take place in a vacuum. Lebanon was a confessional democracy, a mosaic of a variety of confessional groups. The delicate balance of Christian or Muslim populations began to change. Stability in the country was eroding. After the invasion of Israel in 1982 there followed an alarming record of abuses which continued in all sectors of the country. Evictions, harassment, arrests, detention, demolition of houses and destruction of property, arming of militias, murder, drugs, extortion, kidnapping, displacement of people, and interference in the economy and political administration of Lebanon all occurred. Conflicts escalated. A greatly reduced core of American missionaries wanted to stay on in Lebanon in solidarity with the people of the country. We had tasks to do. In reversal of the

usual “women and children first,” it was the women who felt they could stay and be at least as safe as our Lebanese colleagues by maintaining a low profile. A few men with essential duties opted to continue. Ben, my husband, was administering relief supplies to a variety of war stricken people. In the ensuing chaos, Hezbollah (the Party of God), a Shi’ite group from Iran, started kidnapping Americans through its unit called Islamic Jihad (Islamic Holy War). They were protesting American policy of support for Israel and hoped for a prisoner exchange with some of their imprisoned relatives in Kuwait.

#### IV. KIDNAPPING AND GROWTH

One morning as Ben and I walked from our front gate on our way to the seminary, Ben was kidnapped. It was a political issue, both his being kidnapped and the possibility of his release. I had learned by living with suffering people that spiritual discipline and joining others for justice is one commitment. Ben’s suffering was a sharing in the suffering of the people of Lebanon, and that suffering needed to be exposed. After ten months of trying to get information on Ben’s condition and his whereabouts, I left the middle east for Washington, D.C. In Washington I lived the parable of the widow who knocked on the door of the unjust judge—the one who cared neither for God nor man but ultimately opened the door because of her persistence. Scripture comes alive as we can say, “Yes, that is true. I have lived that experience.”

I tried to relate to George Shultz, the Secretary of State, some details of the plight of suffering people in the middle east. I mentioned that, because of our American interference and U.S. policies in that area, we as Americans had some complicity in what was happening. Pounding on the table, he rejected that idea with some vehemence. He said, furthermore, that the U.S. policy was definitely not to negotiate with terrorists and not to negotiate with Kuwait. Disappointed, I decided other action must be taken. We went public with the plight of the kidnapped men, and ultimately all were released. Sometimes we must take a particular position in relation to our own government. We may find ourselves required to take on the sins of our community or nation. The biblical prophets found their prophetic role to be lonely. I was grateful for a church and for a nation of people who acted for the release of the men.

For women who live in a period of uncertainty and sharp criticism of mission, for women who are searching for a new identity, it is instructive to return to scripture, reading with new eyes. Feminist hermeneutics challenge traditional interpretations of texts in order to expose the hidden histories of women, to prevent the trivialization of their participation in salvation history, and to rescue texts from the distortion of biased male interpretations.

Sandra Schneiders provides a feminist interpretation of John 4:1-42, which is a case in point.<sup>9</sup> She suggests that the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is

<sup>9</sup>Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991) 180-199.

the first recorded woman evangelist/missionary to bring a group of people to Jesus. The story may not actually be an historical event. It is a case of reading back into the ministry of Jesus the post-resurrection experience of the Johannine community's understanding of the Samaritan mission of the church. The true purpose of the story is to establish in the community the full equality of Samaritan Christians with Jewish Christians. In the story, Jesus tells the disciples that Samaria is ripe for harvest, which is a great missionary venture. The Samaritan townspeople come to Jesus and believe in him because of the woman's testimony. The Samaritan woman's conversation with Jesus is theological. She questions and challenges Jesus on the significant tenets of Samaritan theology and recognizes that Jesus must be the Messiah, which Jesus himself confirms. The role of the Samaritan woman is apostolic and missionary; it suggests the contribution of women as apostles, theologians, and missionaries in the early church.

As women missionaries search to find their way, scripture may be reclaimed by noting the heritage of women in hints and clues about their activity in the early church. Women's actual contribution in mission is largely lost in scripture because of the scarcity of sources. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza uses "historical imagination" to fill out and contextualize the fragments of information available to us.<sup>10</sup>

Paul's letters use missionary titles for a number of women, such as co-worker (Prisca), sister (Apphia), "diakanas" (Phoebe), and apostle (Junia). A word study of Phoebe's title indicates she was probably the minister of a church and received the letter of recommendation as an official teacher and missionary in the church of Cenchreae. Junia is a partner in mission with Andronicas and is given recognition as an apostle (Rom 16:7). Since they were in Rome they were probably engaged in the gentile mission even before Paul, and were imprisoned with Paul because of their mission activity. Prisca and Aquila founded, sustained, and promoted churches wherever they moved. The house church provided women equal opportunity to participate and provide actual leadership for the community (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:5; Acts 18:18). Their houses in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome were missionary centers. Women were surely among the most prominent missionaries. The new community created by the Spirit of God was one of equality for all, encouraging women to respond.

The challenge for women in mission is to make our lives believable whatever the role. Women, because they have suffered discrimination, help to create the kind of environment that will encourage the sharing of faith in mutual trust and equality. All women bear a story, a fragment of the world's wisdom and sorrow and joy. In sharing faith and life's learnings, energy, creativity, and hope are generated. Whatever new ways have developed for being in mission, women have accepted Christ's call. For they wish to have a voice and won't be dismissed as telling "idle tales." ⊕

<sup>10</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 169-172.