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Education and Women in the Stone – Campbell Tradition

DEBRA HULL

She was born in 1850, the daughter of a Civil War general, died in 1927, and was remembered by her friends as one who “gave herself unreservedly to the cause of humanity . . . in her reading, in her thinking, in her planning, in her waiting, and in her living.¹

Ida Withers Harrison is best known for chronicling the work of the Christian Woman’s Board of Missions (CWBM), serving as its national vice-president from 1908-1920. Among many activities in her rich and full life, she was a college and convention speaker on mission concerns and a visitor to mission sites, the centennial secretary for the 1909 Pittsburgh celebration (the only woman on the Centennial Committee), the first woman to receive an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Transylvania University (for her work in education), and the first woman to serve on the Lexington School Board. Six times she was elected president of the Woman’s Club of Central Kentucky and twice chosen president of the Kentucky Federation of Woman’s Clubs, as well as chair of the Woman’s Democratic Party, and a volunteer for the Red Cross and Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA).² A profound commitment to opening educational opportunities more fully to women unified her life’s work. Ida Withers Harrison embodies, in composite form, the story of restoration churchwomen at the turn of the twentieth century.

Certainly church-related educational opportunities have changed the lives of many women. The education of women has changed the church as well, sometimes in unexpected ways. In the early part of the nineteenth century, according to Ida Withers Harrison, “the most rudimentary education was considered all that was necessary for a woman. Anything beyond that was considered indelicate and unwomanly, and was supposed to unfit her for the sphere to which God had assigned her.”³ All that changed by the end of the nineteenth century when elementary and secondary education became generally available to girls and 80 percent of colleges admitted women. Indeed, by 1890, because boys tended to drop out of school to go to work, more girls than boys were graduating from high school.⁴ The increasing availability of classical education opened the professions (especially of law, medicine, and the ministry) to women and gave them the confidence and knowledge to accomplish needed political, social, legal, and ecclesiastical reform.⁵

With access to education and the professions, women had more choices—choices that led them into new arenas and gave them new means for shaping church and community.⁶ In the Restoration Movement, education is woven in and out, as a precursor and result of women’s active involvement in establishing

1. A.W. Fortune, “Appreciation of Mrs. Ida Withers Harrison,” *The Christian-Evangelist* 64 (December 15, 1927): 1670.

2. Lorraine Lollis, *The Shape of Adam’s Rib: A Lively History of Women’s Work in the Christian Church* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1970), 46-49.

3. Ida Withers Harrison, *Forty Years of Service: A History of the CWBM, 1874-1914* (no city: no publishing company, no date), p. 19.

4. Lois W. Banner, *Women in Modern America: A Brief History* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1948), 5.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Linda W. Rosenzweig, “The Anchor of My Life: Middle-Class American Mothers and College-Educated Daughters, 1880-1920,” *Journal of Social History* 25 (1) (1994): 1-20.

colleges, church missionary societies, and reform organizations, and in their service as educators, philanthropists, pastors, missionaries, and evangelists.

STONE-CAMPBELL EDUCATIONAL FOREMOTHERS

The list of educationally minded women in the Restoration Movement who tenaciously raised money, recruited students, taught in colleges, and founded and administered colleges is long indeed. These are just a few illustrative examples.

1. Charlotte Fall Fanning and Tolbert Fanning established Franklin College and its associated girls' school (which students considered to be the same school) in 1845, and Hope Institute for girls and women in 1866, both in Tennessee.⁷
2. After twenty-eight years of serving in a variety of educational settings in the United States and Australia, Mattie Forbes Myers Carr fulfilled her dream of establishing a college for women with the founding of Carr-Burdette College in 1893, in Sherman, Texas.⁸
3. Luella Wilson St. Clair Moss and Emma Frederick Moore combined to serve forty years as presidents and co-presidents of Restoration Movement colleges for women—Christian (now Columbia) College in Columbia, Missouri, and Hamilton College (later absorbed by Transylvania) in Lexington, Kentucky. (Luella Moss was also at the forefront of suffrage and other women's rights efforts.)⁹
4. In 1992, Kristine Culp, Dean of the Disciples Divinity House at the University of Chicago, Professor Rita Nakashima Brock, and other Restoration Movement academicians founded the Forrest-Moss Institute for scholarship on women and religion. In its name, the institute honors Luella Moss and Albertina Allen Forrest, one of the first scholars of religion in the Restoration Movement. While completing her graduate work in the fields of philosophy, psychology, and English literature at the University of Chicago (from 1894-1897), Albertina Forrest served as the first administrator (in 1894) of what would later become the Disciples Division of Higher Education, became a charter member (in 1896) of the Campbell Institute, and published scholarly articles. Other early Disciples women scholars in religion who were trained at the University of Chicago include Lucy Markey, perhaps the first Disciples woman to earn a Ph.D. in religion (class of 1925); Kathleen McArthur, a YWCA executive in New York City (class of 1936); and Kathryn Rogers (class of 1937).¹⁰

Women were not readily accepted as full degree-seeking students in divinity schools until the mid-1900s. One pioneer, Gustine Courson Weaver, reported her experiences while attending J. W. McGarvey's class at the College of the Bible (now Lexington Theological Seminary) in 1895. Weaver remembered that she had to sit on the back row next to the door, arrive after all the men were seated, leave before the men were dismissed, excuse herself if McGarvey indicated that the day's text was inappropriate for mixed company, and, above all, keep quiet.¹¹

EDUCATION AMONG RESTORATION MOVEMENT AFRICAN AMERICANS

Although African Americans were early participants in Restoration Movement churches, many while they were still slaves, their educational opportunities were even more limited. Church women were

7. James E. Scobey (ed.), *Franklin College and Its Influences* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1954), 147-148.

8. Mrs. O. A. Carr, "Carr-Burdette College," *Christian Standard*, 30 (July 21, 1894): 731.

9. Allean Lemmon Hale, *Petticoat Pioneer* (St. Paul, MN: North Central Publishing Co., 1968), 148.

10. Kristine A. Culp, "Disciples Women Scholars," *The Disciple*, 131 (5) (May, 1993): 16-17.

11. Reprinted from *The Apostolic Guide* (May 14, 1886): Elizabeth Hartsfield, *Women in the Church: A Symposium on the Service and Status of Women among the Disciples of Christ* (Lexington, KY: College of the Bible, 1953), 12.

instrumental in righting that situation by establishing high-quality educational opportunities for African Americans, primarily through the efforts of the CWBM. In 1900, the American Christian Missionary Society asked the CWBM to assume the management of the Southern Christian Institute in Edwards, Mississippi, a school founded in order to educate African-American Disciples. Sarah Lue Bostick, an ordained African-American woman from Pea Ridge, Arkansas, was particularly effective in raising money for the institute from African-American auxiliaries of CWBM and for encouraging young people to attend. She also helped to garner support for the Bible Chair at the University of Michigan and to raise money for Jacob Kenoly's mission school in Liberia—established by CWBM for repatriated freed slaves.¹²

African-American Disciples in Texas established a college for black students modeled after the Southern Christian Institute. In 1904 the Christian Woman's Board of Missions joined the effort, raising \$11,000. Bertha Mason Fuller, active in the Texas CWBM and one of the earliest ordained women in the Christian Church, helped secure land for the school from the Jarvis family, and Sarah Lue Bostick raised funds from non-Texans. Jarvis Christian Institute opened in 1912 with twelve elementary students, and evolved into the college we know today. Since 1988, Jarvis Christian College has been the only historically black college, of the twelve colleges originally established by the Christian Church, to survive.¹³

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL REFORM

The changes in American culture around the turn of the twentieth century that made it possible for Ida Withers Harrison to live her life the way she did had a profound impact on the church as well. Harrison is prototypical of the women of her time who were active in a multitude of church and social reform organizations. In addition to her work for CWBM, Harrison was also a charter member of the National Benevolent Association, founded originally to serve orphans in the United States. Reform efforts outside the church also occupied her attention. In her writing and speaking, Harrison was pro-peace and pro-women, especially in her later years. She recognized that reform-minded women's efforts were often integrated across church and civic lines when she said, "The women in the church heard the call of the poor and needy, and felt that same impulse to organize that found expression in the Women's Rights Movement."¹⁴

Women's organizations played a vital role in enabling women to gain access to education, to enter public life, and to influence the course of church history. Stone-Campbell women established the CWBM in 1874 to improve the lives of women and children in the United States and abroad through practical assistance within a religious context. Supporting CWBM became the "grand passion" in the lives of countless Christian women who devoted their spiritual, intellectual, and financial resources to its work. It operated as a grassroots organization in parallel to official church hierarchy, made up of a large number of local church societies supported with many small contributions.

Because formal educational opportunities for women were so severely restricted, early CWBM leaders provided home and church study materials for their members. *Missionary Tidings*, published by CWBM beginning in 1883, included letters full of information about little-known countries from the missionaries they sponsored. CWBM members established children's mission societies in many churches and published mission magazines for children—*Little Builders at Work*, *Junior Builders*, and *King's Builders*.¹⁵ During its forty-five years of existence, CWBM established 284 schools, including, on the domestic front, mountain schools in Appalachia, and Bible chairs in five different universities.¹⁶

Women in the Restoration Movement were not alone; church members in other denominations established a total of thirty-three foreign missionary societies and seventeen domestic missionary societies in a thirty-year period beginning in 1860. CWBM, however, was the first to serve both foreign and domestic

12. Bertha Mason Fuller, *The Life Story of Sarah Lue Bostick* (Little Rock: 1949).

13. *The Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Jarvis Christian College" (by Rachel Jenkins) <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/JJ/kbj6.html> (accessed February 8, 2007).

14. Harrison, *Forty Years*, 21.

15. Debra Hull, *Christian Church Women: Shapers of a Movement* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1994), 123.

16. Harrison, *Forty Years*, 120-132.

missions, to employ both men and women, and to be managed entirely by women.¹⁷ At about the same time, a number of different denominations established sixty training schools, offering theological and practical education to their mostly women students, many of whom went on to become missionaries.¹⁸ The College of Missions, established by CWBM in 1910 in Indianapolis, trained many church leaders, both men and women, for the Stone-Campbell Movement. For instance, Canadian Jessie Trout, one of the founders of the Christian Women's Fellowship, is an alumna.

The initial reason for admitting both African-American and European-American women to the professions of law and medicine and to missionary service was so that they could serve other women—legally, to represent women in cases of rape, adultery, and prostitution; medically, for gynecological care; and in ministry, to serve in countries where male missionaries were not allowed to interact with women.¹⁹ A byproduct was that missionary work gave professional women opportunities that were not readily available to them in the United States. Women-led missionary societies such as the CWBM sent single and married women into the mission field to establish churches, schools, and hospitals. For example, CWBM sent Drs. Olivia Baldwin, Arabella Merrill, Lillian Miller, Rosa Lee Oxer, Ada McNeil, and Mary M. Longdon to serve as physicians in India prior to 1900.²⁰

Ironically, the common presumption of women's moral superiority—thought to be evidenced in stereotypical feminine characteristics of tenderness, sympathy, meekness, mercy and other-centeredness—helped women move into various social reform arenas. “For when feminists argued that morally superior women should be allowed to reshape society, it was difficult for conservatives, despite their desire to restrain women's morality to the home, to disagree.”²¹ As we have seen, leaders of church women's organizations were often active in social and political reform, and leaders of social and political reform efforts were often church women. For instance, Glenn Zuber believes that after hearing women speak from church pulpits about the religious justification for temperance, church members were more receptive to the ordination of women.²²

THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG REFORM ORGANIZATIONS

Voluntarism and social reform were the hallmarks of nineteenth century organizations devoted to such diverse concerns as cleaning up tenements, beautifying cities, promoting labor rights, establishing kindergartens, guaranteeing food and drug purity, and humanizing the penal system. Most organizations, including religious ones, had women's rights goals and many coalesced behind suffrage work, despite strong anti-suffrage sentiment—emanating mainly from the Catholic Church, the liquor industry, and political bosses fearful of losing power.²³

Through these organizations, women had a profound impact on the lives of many people. To the extent that their efforts involved imparting middle class values and behavior patterns to the “worthy poor,” however, they may have inadvertently reinforced class distinctions. The tension between benevolence (rooted in the power of class) and justice (rooted in self-determination) manifested itself in several reform groups (notably abolition, suffrage, and labor rights). Perhaps through their own experiences with benevolent fathers, brothers, and husbands, women came to realize that benevolence could lead to a loss of self-respect and to dependency.²⁴ This realization helped reformers make sense of occasional anger, resentment, or

17. Ibid.

18. Barbara Hargrove, Jean Miller Schmidt, and Sheila Greeve Davaney, “Religion and the Changing Role of Women,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 480 (1) (1985): 117-131.

19. Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 11, and Hull, *Christian Church Women*, 132.

20. Harrison, *Forty Years*, 124-125.

21. Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 43.

22. Glenn Zuber, “The Gospel of Temperance: Early Disciples Women Preachers and the WCTU 1887-1912,” *Discipliana*, 53 (2) (Summer, 1993): 47-60.

23. Banaer, *Women in Modern America*, 43.

24. Louise W. Knight, “Biography's Window on Social Change: Benevolence and Justice in Jane Addam's ‘A Modern Lear,’” *Journal of Women's History* 9 (1) (1997): 111-138.

ingratitude on the part of some of their “projects” and shaped later reform efforts, especially those related to civil rights.

African-American women also founded women’s clubs, which united in 1895 to form the National Association of Colored Women—primarily to provide social services.²⁵ Traditionally, African-American women have played prominent roles in their church—as evangelists, preachers, singers, and deaconesses—although they have had to insist on leadership roles, too. For African-American men, the church provided a much better opportunity than the public world for them to feel valued and important, making them perhaps less eager to share church leadership with women. Generally, the mission of African-American churches has been more holistic—serving physical and educational needs as well as spiritual ones—and this ministry has been likely to involve black men as well as black women.²⁶

RECLAIMING THE CHURCH FOR MEN

As women moved into the public world, they began to dominate the church. Various studies show that around the turn of the twentieth century there were twice as many female as male members of missionary societies, that about 60 percent of worshippers were women, that 90 percent of Sunday School teachers were women,²⁷ and that (by 1893) 60 percent of missionaries were women.²⁸ “A careful reading of the popular press indicates that at least one part of the conservative agenda of the time was to regain the church for men.”²⁹ In the Stone-Campbell tradition, the dissolution of the CWBM in 1920, and the consequent reduction in women’s leadership, may have been a part of the effort to reassert male dominance in the church.

At the same time the church was becoming more feminine, United States culture was becoming more secular. Many historians believe urbanization, industrialization, changing gender roles, professionalism, specialization of knowledge, militarism generated by World War I, a consumer economy, secular public education, immigration, the labor movement, a decline in traditional values, and socialism all served to reduce the influence of the church in the culture.³⁰ Note, however, that some of these changes are the very factors that gave women more influence in culture.

By and large, throughout the twentieth century, those churches that opened doors to women—by allowing them to be ordained or become elders and sit on church boards, that established leadership quotas for women (and minorities), and that developed inclusive-language liturgies—declined in membership and financial contributions (although not in per capita giving). On the other hand, more conservative Protestant churches gained members. Biblical literalists and strong opponents of social change turned out to be the most regular church attendees and the largest financial contributors.³¹

DeBerg believes that in nineteenth century popular culture, feminism and secularism were seen as symptoms of dispensational premillennialism (the ungodly period prior to the second coming), evidenced by an increase in dancing, drinking, card-playing, divorce, contraception, and revealing clothing styles (that reflected changes in gender roles and behavior). “[Women’s] education, free-thinking, and prominence within the religious realm were considered evidence of social decay and the approaching apocalypse”³² and a rejection of the word of God.

25. Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 102.

26. Hargrove et al., “Religion and the Changing Role of Women.”

27. Betty A. DeBerg, *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism* (Minneapolis: MN, 1990), 80.

28. Elizabeth A. Clark and Herbert Warren Richardson (eds.), *Women and Religion*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 315.

29. DeBerg, *Ungodly Women*, 76.

30. *Ibid.*, 5.

31. Charles Y. Glock, “The Churches and Social Change in Twentieth-Century America,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 527, (1993): 67-83.

32. DeBerg, *Ungodly Women*, 124.

As women gained access to education and the professions, they had other outlets for their talents; mission work was no longer their only option. As Lorraine Lollis states:

By the end of the Second World War, with a few exceptions, the woman's missionary movement had left the mainline Protestant churches, although her perfume continued to linger in the corridors. Ultimately it is unclear if she left because she was told to do so, or because she politely excused herself and went about her other business. Built on a fading legacy, multi-issue general women's groups (Christian Women's Fellowship, for instance) replaced the woman's missionary societies in the local churches, although they failed to capture the imaginations of mainline Protestant women to the extent that missionary societies had attracted their grandmothers.³³

CONCLUSIONS

During much of the nineteenth century, women had limited access to higher education, making it difficult for them to respond to a call—to teach, to heal, or to preach. Restoration Movement women, who were sometimes not well educated themselves, recognized how vital the education of women was to the church, to the family, to the local community, and to the world. When their daughters were directly or subtly discouraged from enrolling in existing colleges, committed women established female seminaries and coeducational mission schools. When existing colleges excluded African Americans, CWBM helped establish institutes devoted to the education of African Americans. When they heard of the need for education in far-off lands, Restoration Movement women organized themselves, raised money, and sent out missionaries. The young women, here and abroad, who were educated through the efforts of Restoration Movement women in the nineteenth century, changed the face of the church and of the world.

Access to higher education was so effective in opening the professions to women that today women make up the majority (or close to the majority) of students in medical and law schools and in schools of theology associated with mainline Protestant churches. Although professional women initially found greater acceptance when they were working with women and children in traditionally feminine fields, especially abroad, gradually they moved into more nontraditional areas, and, by virtue of their participation in the public world, were able to have a greater impact in shaping culture.

Efforts to reclaim the church for men resulted in the temporary dissolution of women's influence in the church. Gradually women reclaimed their prominence in the church until today the roles of Restoration Movement women in higher education and philanthropy are varied and mostly valued. While women are still underrepresented in upper level faculty ranks in colleges associated with Restoration Movement churches, and women presidents and higher-level administrators are uncommon, most of us rejoice in women's increasing participation in shaping education. The debt we owe our education- and philanthropic-minded foremothers is incalculable; whole generations of women and men were educated through their efforts. It remains for us, in turn, to learn from them, to reapply their timeless lessons to the world in which we live.

The challenges we face today call us to assess and assert what we believe to be God's will in the new century. Creatively and together we, too, can bring good from cultural changes that threaten the status quo and seem largely out of our control. In order for the church to regain its prominence in the community, it will need both to remain true to its roots, and to adapt to the changing circumstances of our time. We are blessed to have the women of the nineteenth century Restoration Movement as our models. In their stories we find challenges—to question our own assumptions and to look for ways that we too might open opportunities for others.

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33. Lollis, *The Shape of Adam's Rib*, 315.