

Mary Hill Davis: Texas Baptist champion of women and missions

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Carol Holcomb, professor of church history and Baptist studies in the College of Christian Studies at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, wrote this profile of Mary Hill Davis using her annual addresses to the Woman's Missionary Union of Texas during her presidency and later collected in Living Messages. Writing in Davis' voice, Holcomb maintains language of the period.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: In her last address in 1931, Davis said: "Each life is a contribution to history; but few lives have their historian." Ironically, Mary Hill Davis' life had no historian.

We have no biography of her and almost no information about the first 20 years of life. In nearly 25 years of presidential addresses, I could not find a single personal reference. Her words were devoted singularly to the cause of Christ.

Background

What was your last place of service, and how long did you serve?

I was president of the Woman's Missionary Union of Texas from 1906 to 1931.

Where else have you served in ministry, and what were your positions there?

I served as the recording secretary for our state WMU from 1896 to 1906, just before becoming state WMU president.

Where did you grow up?

I was born in Georgia, but in 1870, when I was about 7 years old, my family moved across the country to Dallas, Texas.

How did you come to faith in Christ?

My commitment to Christ and to the church was nurtured in me from an early age. When we arrived in Dallas, my family joined First Baptist Church there. We were very nearly charter members of the church, since it was only three years old when we joined.

What thinkers, writers and leaders influenced you?

My addresses are littered with literary references, such as Rudyard Kipling, Henry Van Dyke, Mark Twain, Bellamy, Tennyson and Emerson.

As I look back on these annual speeches, they reveal a broad knowledge of world history. I mingled references to Pompey with the wisdom of John Chrysostom. In 1921, I urged women to tithe by invoking the words of British Prime Minister William Gladstone.

Of course, I also shared quotes from the leading Baptist voices of my day, like Sunday School Board President J.M. Frost, National WMU President Fannie E.S. Heck, and that indomitable Texas Baptist educator Elli Moore Townsend.

During World War I, I wanted to acknowledge the suffering of Baptist women, but also encourage them. So, I included messages and poems from

the “Western Front.” In 1919, I drew upon the images of the recent war to call Texas Baptist women to action and inspire in them a global vision. The world was calling and Baptists, in particular, had a great deal to offer a hurting world.

“With the red footprints on Flander’s field still moist with the blood of our martyr heroes—and the nations of earth turning to us for material and spiritual help, the challenge of the Great Commissioner was never so pronounced, so commanding nor so appealing as now!”

Ministry life

Why do you feel called into ministry?

I believe my central calling is to enlist and empower women for service in Christ’s kingdom. I want women to expand their vision of what the gospel means for the world and for their own potential. I long for women to join me in this great enterprise of missions.

What is your favorite aspect of ministry? Why?

It is hard to choose just one area, but I would say it is my special joy to help women understand they are important and useful in God’s kingdom.

Consider my comments from 1921: “Our women are realizing, in a very practical way, that the day is short, and the work is great, and the Master is urging—and that there is no such thing as failure except to those who accept and believe in failure.

“We are between Egypt and the Red Sea, but God can lead us over. Back in the far reaches of the past, far beyond the time of our Redeemer, women chosen of God took their places in the front of the battle line and waged their warfare for God and his cause with self-sacrifice and heroism—great women who outflashed into the sacred record and left their impress for all

time upon its pages.”

Miriam, Deborah, Jael and others answered the high call of God. I want the women of Texas to “flare up” and burn their mark into history.

Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing your ministry.

I like to speak in terms of opportunities rather than challenges. My primary commitment is to share the whole gospel with the whole world.

As Texas Baptist women, we have to look in two directions—at the foreign field and at home. As president of WMU of Texas, I worked to show the unity between the work of home and foreign missions.

“The field is the world, and wherever souls can be saved, and Christ be magnified, our Christian sympathies and services must move.”

Education

There are several areas of opportunity we must focus on to carry out the Great Commission on the home field. The first is education. We need to equip and educate Baptist women if we want to reach the world with the gospel.

One of the earliest projects I tackled as WMU president was helping establish the Annie Jenkins Sallee School for Girls in Kaifeng, China. Of course, I took every opportunity to promote and publicize our own women’s college located in Belton, Texas.

For example, in my address to WMU in Abilene in 1914, I noted, “Baylor College in Belton is older than the State of Texas.” I then recited a little of its history and reported: “Five hundred young women are in its halls this year. Who can measure the power these Texas girls are to wield in affairs religious when they go out into their separate walks of life?”

The Texas education board started a campaign in 1913 to raise \$300,000 for the women's college, and I committed Texas Baptist women to raise one third of the total. We joyfully shared in this enterprise.

I also supported the Missionary Training School for Women that opened in conjunction with Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. By 1914, women were being granted full seminary degrees at Southwestern, making it the first seminary to admit women on an equal basis. I was pleased to announce in 1915 that our building at Southwestern Seminary had been completed, dedicated and opened for work.

Social ministry

Another area of work that remains central to our kingdom work is social ministry. Texas Baptist women always have understood ministry must engage every aspect of people's lives—social, physical and spiritual. This work includes poverty relief, kindergartens, orphanages, hospitals and care for retirees, to name only a few.

When the WMU training school opened in Fort Worth, its programs included a social settlement. At its opening, the settlement offered a free kindergarten, a night school and a reading room. Baptist women were able to serve the community, as well as teach the fundamentals of practical social work to seminary students.

Texas Baptist women also are deeply concerned about children. At one point in 1913, I even suggested we should pension mothers in the same way we pension soldiers, so mothers and children never would go hungry.

I frequently have promoted Dr. Robert Cooke Buckner's work with orphans in my speeches. I must confess, in 1916, my remarks were fairly pointed as I chastised Baptist women for giving such "puny mites" when the Buckner orphans were in desperate need.

I have challenged Texas Baptists to support the work of Baptist hospitals and am particularly concerned with developing a pension program for retired ministers and their widows. Repeatedly, I have urged Baptists to develop a plan to care for retired ministers.

“It seems to me a peculiar duty that we cannot in any wise shun or avoid what falls upon Texas Baptist women with regard to the widows of our Texas Baptist ministers. ... To me, this is a tragedy so overwhelming that it should leave us all in tears.”

Immigration

During my time as WMU president, large numbers of immigrants made their way to American shores. I was excited to see Texas Baptists develop an interest in the Spanish-speaking communities very early on. In 1912, there were 30 “Mexican Baptist churches within our borders.”

In 1913, I described the work of Marie Buhlmaier—a Baptist missionary to immigrants at the port of Baltimore—to Texas Baptist women: “I refer to the care and conservation of our immigrants. ... Why could this not be done in Texas? Our foreigners have come to be a part of the very warp and woof and heart throb of the nation’s life.”

I then quoted at length from a poem celebrating the contributions of immigrants to the American economy and encouraged Baptist women to see immigrants as a welcome opportunity to share the gospel with the world without ever having to leave Texas. God has brought the world to us.

“The sun does not shine for a few trees and flowers, but for the wide world’s joy,” said Henry Ward Beecher. “So [also] God is not for the favored few, but for the universe of life.”

We must be actively engaged in alleviating human suffering because that is part and parcel of our gospel call.

What do you want women to know about their contributions to ministry?

As I said in my WMU address in 1912: "On the pages of the Old Testament, woman appears as poetess, prophetess, judge and queen, as well as taking her honored place in the home. In the New Testament, she is the mother of our Lord and the prophetess of his messiahship, and women were deaconesses in the early Christian churches.

"Women attended the public ministries of Christ, were his sympathetic friends, were the last who lingered at the cross, the first divinely commissioned heralds of the risen Lord. ... It was a woman who was the first recorded convert to Christianity on European shores, and ever since, she has been a pioneer and evangel of the kingdom of God."

Women have been called to a "heavenly mission" and given a "divine honor" to be the bearers of the message of Christ Jesus. As "daughters of the King of kings, let us reflect honor on our royalty" and renew our dedication to our "labor of love."

Women are equally called and equally sent. The fields are white unto harvest. Let us stop locking up half of our workers. Instead, we should be in the business of equipping and supporting "whosoever will" answer the call.

As I said in Mineral Wells in 1928: "This hour calls for a farseeing vision, radiant faith and Christly service. A time to put aside all that doth hinder or beset our way ... Lift up your hearts! Lift up your eyes to the hills. Look far beyond the confused and troubled present. ... They are only passing phases of a Christian's life experience.

"Despite everything, never lose sight of the goal; never see anything else. Truly, eye hath not seen, nor ear hear, neither hath it entered into the heart of any man, the blessings God has prepared for his children."

About Baptists

Why are you Baptist?

I believe Baptist principles can transform societies and improve the lives of people around the world. Baptists have championed the concepts of freedom of conscience and religious liberty more than any other denomination.

As I said in Austin in 1915: "If Baptist principles, which have so blessed the world, and which have been the harbingers of freedom of conscience and liberty of speech wherever they have gone, are to be perpetuated in the world, they must be rightly impressed upon the hearts and minds of our children."

Our schools must cling to these Baptist convictions.

At the close of World War I, Baptists understood the global triumph of democracy as an affirmation of Baptist principles.

"There never has been a period in all times when the principles of our common faith were so in demand and were so much honored and invited as today. The word 'democracy' in its broadest sense is but another name for Baptist policy; and by so much as this word democracy shall come to be known, recognized and appreciated, by just that much will Baptist principles overspread the whole world."

As you can see, I am an unequivocal denominational loyalist. Baptists should be teaching and training the next generation to be *Baptists*.

That being said, I want to note this does not mean I believe Baptists should be isolationist or ignorant. We should listen to the voice of wisdom wherever it may be found.

As you can see in my lectures, I refer to the renowned Catholic missionary Francis Xavier and to Rabbi Ben Ezra. I note the words of that brilliant Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson and, like most Americans, cherish the words of Mark Twain.

I love the work of temperance activist and Methodist leader Frances E. Willard. The words of that British Salvation Army evangelist Rodney “Gypsy” Smith are so dear to me that I can quote them seamlessly as if they are my own.

Baptists need to find balance. We need to celebrate and preserve the best of who we are, while at the same time be open to change and correction. The church, even our own Baptist one, always is in need of reformation. Those who live in an echo chamber rarely can hear a wise voice.

What excites you most about the Baptist General Convention of Texas?

The “colossal preacher” B.H. Carroll, Baptist educator Samuel Taylor Brooks, the incomparable orator Willie Turner Dawson, and the philanthropist Robert Buckner are just some of the many Texas Baptists we should all know.

Already, our Baptist colleges are making an impact on the world. As I said before, “Who knows what these Texas girls [and boys] can do” when they go out into the world?

The only thing that can stop Texas Baptists is a failure of imagination—or common sense.

As I said in Dallas in 1921: “The old Scotch divine of Aberdeen knew the value of common sense when he said to his class: ‘My dear young gentlemen, as you are about to begin the study of Theology, there are three things you very much need—grace, knowledge, and common sense. If you

haven't the first, go to the Lord and he will give it to you. The second, I propose to give you myself. If you haven't the third, go home, for neither the Lord nor myself can do anything for you. Common sense means tolerance, unselfishness and the capacity to lead in the right course, with intelligence, love and honesty."