

Missionary Marriage Issues: What about Dorothy?

Replying to some of his critics, Paul said, “Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas?” (1 Corinthians 9:5). As this indicates, some early Christian workers took their spouses to other cultures as they served there. Priscilla and Aquila in Acts 18 are examples in Scripture where this was done.

To find a well-documented account of a married couple serving cross-culturally recently, we have to move forward in time about 1700 years to the beginning of the modern missionary movement. We also have to move several thousand miles from the Middle East to central England.

Wife of a Shoemaker

Dorothy was born into a farming family in England in 1756. Her family attended a small country church, and it was there that Dorothy met William who was apprenticed to the village shoemaker. Like most young women in her day, Dorothy could not read or write; however William read continually and became a prolific writer as well. All seemed to be going well when they married on June 10, 1781, as the war with the thirteen colonies in America was coming to a close. Two and a half years later William and Dorothy inherited the shoemaking business when the shoemaker died, and their marriage seemed to be off to a good start. They were two Christian young people who grew up in Christian families, attended the same church, married, and set out to serve Christ in business in their village.

Wife of a Pastor

However, things changed within a few years when William began preaching in village churches. Four years later (1785) they moved to Moulton where he became an ordained minister. Four years later (1789) they moved to Leicester so he could teach school during the day, work as a shoemaker, and preach seven times every two weeks. Still the family struggled financially, at times coming close to starving. During this time they had six children, and two of those died at the age of two. Up to this point they were a rather “typical” struggling pastoral family.

However, William became more and more burdened for the “heathen” overseas as the years passed. In 1792 he published a pamphlet about the obligations of Christians to convert “heathens” in the different nations of the world. Later that year he became a central figure in the formation of a new missionary sending agency. Soon William volunteered to go to India as a missionary, and he wanted to take Dorothy and their children with him. Here are events during the first half of 1793:

- January 9: William and his friend John were appointed as the agency’s first missionaries.
- January 16: Knowing that Dorothy was reluctant to go as a missionary, Andrew (representing the agency) met with a friend to lay plans to talk with Dorothy. She refused when they met with her.
- February 1: France declared war on Britain.
- March 17: William preached his last sermon in England.
- March 26: Dorothy, William, and their three sons (Felix, William Jr., and Peter) said their goodbyes to each other, not

knowing when (or even if) they would meet together again as a family.

- April 4: William, John, and 8-year-old Felix departed on a ship to meet up with a convoy for India, but they were delayed six weeks on the Isle of Wight because of the war (Dorothy remained at home).
- About May 3: Dorothy gave birth to a son and named him Jabez (because I bore him in sorrow).
- May 22: Still waiting for the convoy, William and John learned of a Danish ship soon to sail for India. William wanted to see if Dorothy would go.
- May 24: After traveling all night William, John, and Felix arrived for breakfast. They pled with Dorothy during the meal, but she still refused to go.
- May 24: On their way to ask someone for more money, John suggested that they go back to talk to Dorothy, but William refused. John said he was going back alone. William said he could, but it was a waste of time.
- May 24: John met with Dorothy and told her that “...her family would be dispersed and divided forever—she would repent of it as long as she lived...” Dorothy agreed to go to India on the condition that her sister come with them too. Dorothy and William then convinced Catharine to go with them, packed, sold other possessions, said goodbye to family and friends, and raised money for travel in less than 24 hours.
- May 25: The whole family, including 3-month-old Jabez left for Dover!
- May 30: Representing the agency, Andrew wrote a fund-raising letter saying, that William’s “heart is happy, having his family with him. An objection against the Mission is removed, of its separating a

man from his wife...” Andrew went on to say that if William had not “taken his family he must have come home again in a few years. Now there will be no need of that. He will live and die in the midst of 100 millions of heathens...”

Andrew also concluded that God had prevented the departure so that William’s family might accompany him so that “all reproaches on that score might be prevented.”

John was pleased. William’s heart was happy. Andrew, the agency, and supporters were satisfied.

What about Dorothy?

Wife of a Missionary

The couple thought they barely had time to catch the ship, but it was more than two weeks late. June 13, 1793, they sailed from England with four children under the age of eight, one of them only six weeks old. They sailed for nearly five months without a single stop in a port and arrived in India on November 11, 1793. During the few days remaining in that year they lived in two places, first in Calcutta where Dorothy and Felix became ill with dysentery (which lasted a full year) and then in the Portuguese community of Bandel.

1794 was a year of moving, loss, and stress. In January they lived in Manicktullo which William thought was too civilized. In February-April they began to build a home in the Sunderbunds which was characterized as a “malarious uncultivated district” in which tigers had killed 12 men during the previous year. In May they began a three-week river trip to their next home, but Dorothy’s sister remained to marry a man she met there. June-July they lived with acquaintances in Malda, and William commuted to Mudnabatti

to work. In August the whole family moved again to be near William's work. Their son Peter (age 5) died there in October. Following are quotes from William's letters and journals during the next 12 years.

- 1795: "You know that Dorothy sent a letter express yesterday to me.." (in the letter she accused William of being "unfaithful" to her).
- 1796: "If he goes out of his door by day or by night, she follows him; and declares in the most solemn manner that she has caught him with his servants, with his friends, with Mrs. Thomas, and that he is guilty every day and every night."
- 1797: "Some attempts on my life have been made.... I am sorely distressed to see my dear children before whom the greatest indecencies and most shocking expressions of rage are constantly uttered."
- 1798: "Dorothy is as wretched as insanity can make her almost and often makes all the family so too."
- 1799: "...such a time of wandering up and down and perplexity as we have never had."
- 1800: "Dorothy is stark mad."
- 1801: "She has been cursing tonight in the most awful manner, till weary with exhaustion she is gone to sleep."
- 1802: "Dorothy is quite insane, and raving, and is obliged to be constantly confined."
- 1803: "Dorothy is as bad as ever."
- 1804: "Dorothy is if anything worse..."
- 1805: "Her insanity increases, and is of that unhappy cast which fills her with continual rage or anxiety."
- 1806: "Poor Dorothy grows worse, she is a most distressing object."
- 1807: "My poor wife remains a melancholy spectacle of mental imbecility." Much more is available in James Beck's (1992)

excellent book, *Dorothy Carey*, published by Baker Books.

What about Dorothy?

During their years in India the family moved from one site to another. They had little or no contact with other Europeans during that time. They had no Indian converts in the first seven years, though some expatriates from other countries were converted. They were often in danger from flooding rivers, tigers, jackals and other things. They repeatedly had many diseases including dysentery, malaria, and other parasites. Several times they actually thought they were going to die.

On December 12, 1807, William wrote a colleague that "...it pleased God to remove my wife by death. She had been in a state of the most distressing derangement for these last twelve years..." Dorothy, the woman who had expected the life of a wife of a shoemaker in England, died at the age of 51 after 14 miserable years in India.

Dorothy was the wife of William Carey, widely acclaimed to be the "father of modern missions." No one can question the commitment, dedication, effectiveness, and discipline of William Carey—but what about Dorothy? What about their marriage relationship? How did this marriage of the "father of modern missions" influence those of missionaries that followed? Did William learn anything from this sad ending? Did mission agencies learn anything from it?

We will return to this story repeatedly in future chapters as we consider missionary marriage issues. (To find out immediately what the people involved learned, read the "What about Charlotte?" brochure, the conclusion to this series.)

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Missionary Marriage Issues: What about Dorothy? (Introduction)

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