THE MISSIONARY POSITION:

ATTITUDES TOWARD MARRIAGE IN OBERLIN 1840-1855

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Sela Wright had been a missionary in the Minnesota Territory for three years when he returned to Oberlin in 1846 to find a "suitable" wife. His visit was brief, but efficient. The principal of the Female Department joined him in reviewing the records of all female students and identifying those most qualified. "From the little company so selected (without their knowledge) having chosen one, she was invited to meet me at the President's house," he wrote. After explaining to candidate Emeline Farnsworth the object of his visit and the "necessary qualifications" for the future Mrs. Wright, he added that "this matter must be settled on short acquaintance," as he was in a hurry to return to Minnesota. The young lady accepted his proposal on the spot, and after two more meetings they married. 1

Nine years later a widowed colleague of Wright's also sought a wife. David Spencer's reasons were health-related. "... the thought occurred to me," he wrote, "[that] a help-meet would materially aid me in my nervous difficulties." He elaborated on the "shattered state of my nervous system which once again had brought me, at least, to the verge of insanity," of his "peculiarly impressionable nature" and his warped judgment - "that, in fine, I was not fit to be alone." He surveyed the somewhat limited field and selected Elvira Ferry, a missionary in nearby Cass Lake, who accepted his proposal of marriage "after she had received from me in writing an explicit and frank statement of all my views on points of doctrine and religion in general." 2

Why did Emeline Farnsworth agree to marry a stranger unilaterally selected for her through the precursor of a computer dating service? What were Elvira Ferry's thoughts about marrying a man who likened a wife to a draught of physic? The nature of the community which trained these missionaries sheds some light on these and similar marriages in the mid-nineteenth century.

"Lamenting the degeneracy of the Church and the deplorable condition of our perishing world," the Oberlin colonists established their utopian community in Connecticut's Western Reserve, safely distant from the sin-infested towns of New England and New York. These post-Calvinist evangelicals shared Professor Charles Grandison Finney's radical views that because sin is voluntary and thus avoidable, humans can work to attain "sanctification;" and that the Christian life demands not only piety, but also assertive moral action. The Oberlin colonists had an urgent sense of mission. They saw themselves as co-workers with God, able to participate in the glorious task of perfecting both themselves and the rest of society and thus hasten the coming of the Millenium. 3

Education was essential to their mission. "The hope is," founder John Shipherd wrote, "that God will call many of the children of the Col.[ony] to the Ministry, & to useful stations in the world. The sole aim [of education] will be to train them up for usefulness [their term for moral influence, and a synonym for missionary work]." 4 From its beginning the Oberlin Collegiate Institute was thus an inextricable part of the community, the means for
training those missionaries who would go forth to transform the world.

Although religiously radical, however, Oberlin students were socially traditional. Like most of their contemporaries, they valued marriage and family and believed in women's moralizing influence in a corrupt world. All but two of the eighty women who graduated from the Oberlin Collegiate Institute during its first decade married, and 65% of those married Oberlin men. 5 Many of these graduates married for the same reasons, wise and unwise, that people marry today: mutual attraction, love, social expectations, loneliness, fear of the future.

While they valued marriage, however, members of the Institute's faculty and staff discouraged early "attachments," since the "youthful feelings and affections" involved would distract students from the studies, prayer and other religious activities that were their reasons for being at Oberlin. Some couples who became engaged early in their college days probably followed Professor Henry Cowles's advice to leave school and marry, even if it meant bidding "farewell to their high hopes of usefulness and farewell to the presence of Christ." 6 Others found creative ways to circumvent the "maternal watchfulness" of their elders, and exchanged letters daily through a mail drop arranged by a sympathetic postmaster. 7

We can readily identify with relationships like these. More difficult for us to appreciate are the reasons behind the loveless, business-like marriage proposals of Sela Wright and David Spencer.

Those reasons were clear to the bridegrooms, however. Wright sought a "companion and co-laborer," Spencer a helpmeet-cum-therapist. Wright believed he "was pretty well qualified to judge what qualifications in a wife were necessary." Spencer was more specific. The solution to his "nervous difficulties" would be found in "a spiritually minded, judicious woman with an affectionate disposition, - matured in mind and experience of sound judgment and discretion. . . ." 8

These men had received an Oberlin education, which included extensive instruction in the nature of marriage and spouse selection. In 1840 Professor Charles Finney devoted six lectures to the subject of matrimony. "Marriage [is] the right of women & no man for slight cause should defraud them," he informed the young men at the Institute. He elaborated on the ten "Indispensable or important qualifications," that a "good wife" should possess, namely good health, a thorough and extensive education, prepossessing appearance, conversational powers, discretion, leadership, gift in prayer, housekeeping abilities, good judgment in the qualities of articles to be bought, and economy. She should also be discreet, egalitarian, modest, unfashionable and willing to be poor. 9

During the same period Female Department Principal Alice Welch Cowles lectured the female students on right and wrong reasons for marriage, how to identify honorable suitors and techniques for tactfully declining unwelcome proposals. She advised the ladies that "a wife has two departments. She may be, and should be a help-meet for her husband, and besides this exert an independent influence. Visit & comfort the sick, guide the ignorant &c."

To Finney's list of wifely qualifications she added skill in child-rearing. 10 Both Finney and Cowles provided further details on the particular qualities that should be cultivated by students aspiring to be ministers and ministers' wives. With such frequent and explicit instruction, no student could leave Oberlin without being well-grounded in the necessary requirements for marriage.

The wife's role as "help-meet" or "co-laborer" was almost mandatory for the family's survival during the early days of settlement in any region.
Although that concept of a wife changed gradually in most places, it prevailed in frontier areas such as the Minnesota Territory, where the need for a helpmeet was great enough to motivate single men like Sela Wright and David Spencer to marry.

Two unusual courtships suggest a further motive for some Oberlin marriages. Professor Henry Cowles was a widower when he married Minerva Dayton Penfield five months after the death of his first wife, Alice Welch Cowles. This courageous woman, knowing she was dying, drew up a list of unmarried friends she considered qualified to succeed her, and advised her husband to marry one of them. Cowles selected the oldest of the candidates, a widowed mother of four, establishing a blended family of astonishing proportions. 11

Henry Cowles had undoubtably known Minerva Penfield for some time before they married in 1844. Four years later, however, widowed missionary Dan Beach Bradley proposed to a woman he had known only twelve days. The seed for this marriage had been planted by Mary Mahan, wife of the Institute's president. She had "broached the subject of [Bradley's] obtaining another wife" and specified Sarah Blachly, a recent graduate of the Institute and a stranger to Bradley. Mrs. Mahan invited the two to meet at her home - the same home in which she and her husband had introduced Sela Wright to his future wife two years earlier. Bradley's courtship was a little longer than Wright's. He pondered Mrs. Mahan's recommendation four days before acting on it. Within hours of his proposal, Sarah Blachly agreed to marry him. 12

Cowles and Bradley were the widowed fathers of very young children, which probably accounts both for the willingness of the community's women to initiate "future connections" for others, and for the men's docile compliance. At the time of their wives' deaths Cowles had five children under age eleven and Bradley had three under age six. Cowles's son reported that his dying mother had selected candidates, not for the role of wife, but as "step mother for her children." Bradley had come to Oberlin seeking foster homes for his children when Mary Mahan urged him to remarry. Oberlinians subscribed to the prevailing view that child-rearing was the chief responsibility of women, and Oberlin's Maternal Association was very much involved in caring for the motherless Bradley children. The apparent motivation for both the Cowles and Bradley second marriages was the need for child care and the preservation of the family. Both widowers and matchmakers acknowledged that women were uniquely qualified to identify suitable step-mothers. 13

Yet the desire for a helpmeet and the need for child care fail to account for the readiness of some Oberlin-trained men to propose marriage to strangers and the alacrity with which women accepted such invitations. Written records suggest two additional factors that distinguish their attitudes toward marriage: the convictions that a decision to marry was a vocational one, and that such a decision must conform to the will of God. Emeline Farnsworth's response to Sela Wright's proposal, as he records it, includes both factors: "... her heart was set to be a missionary and if it should appear that it was the Lord's will that she should engage in the work under such circumstances, she would accept this call." 14 For Farnsworth, Wright's proposal provided a divinely ordained opportunity to fulfill her vocational ambitions.

Women as well as men, these people were career Christians. A survey of women students conducted in 1836 indicates that the future plans of 37 of the 44 respondents included missionary work, teaching, or "lives of Christian usefulness." 15 One form of "Christian usefulness" available to Oberlin women and highly regarded by the community was to serve as the wife of a minister or
missionary. This was indeed a profession; on the mission field particularly, a wife had specific tasks such as nursing, organizing classes and teaching, in addition to responsibilities common to all Christian wives and mothers. For an Oberlin woman to receive a marriage proposal from a theology student or missionary, as Farnsworth did, was both a tribute to her Christian character and a vocational opportunity.

The significance of Christian vocation as a motive for marriage is most poignantly revealed in the diary of seventeen-year-old Helen Cowles, who gave up the man she loved and apparently hoped to marry to accept the proposal of her Bible class teacher, to whom she was not in the least attracted. Helen, daughter of Professor Henry Cowles and Principal Alice Welch Cowles, had lived in Oberlin from the time she was four years old and the Colony two. Her diary, therefore, is a particularly valuable document of the community's values, as well as a unique record of the development of an Oberlin courtship from the viewpoint of the prospective bride. Several aspects of Helen's account are instructive: the primacy of her vocational goals; her struggle to control her conflicting feelings toward both suitors; her conviction that God, the ultimate authority in her life, would direct her choice (not, incidentally, through Scripture, but rather through prayer and introspection); and her appeals for God's guidance in every situation of ambivalence and indecision.

The following entries from Helen's diary deal with her 1849 courtship by both suitors; one unnamed, the other, theological student Sewall Kendall. After several matter-of-fact comments on attending Kendall's Bible class, she writes:

July 21, 1849
Have had quite a talk with mother, and learned that both she and father will be satisfied and pleased, if my acquaintance with Mr. K. should continue on indefinitely. I believe I am willing to follow the direction of Providence implicitly. If I do, I shall of course have to give up some notions of my own.

July 29, 1849
... Another subject which has lately been placed before my mind is that of my future connexions in life. I have formerly had some wrong notions, because the ideal in my mind's eye was a wrong one; but those notions have now vanished, as I have in the fear and love of God, changed my ideal. My own spiritual welfare must be considered in this, as well as in other things. The Lord will direct. I am determined to live for God in Christ, his grace assisting.

August 16, 1849
Received a long call from Mr. W., in behalf of Mr. K., who would not pay his addresses to me personally, until assured that he should not be interfering with the rights of another. This reassurance was given. I do feel, and have for a long time felt, a strong desire to become a missionary, and am determined to control my affections, and listen to no proposal, which would
interfere with the fulfillment of this desire. As it regards the two individuals now before my mind, one I will endeavor to look upon merely with gratitude for his brotherly kindness to me, and the other, as my Bible class teacher, interested in my spirituality as in that of each member of the class. Hope the subject will not be pressed farther at present. I leave the whole matter with my Heavenly Father, and trust him most fully. I am perfectly sure that he will bring all my affairs to a right issue, and that he will answer my prayers and make me useful, and consequently happy.

August 27, 1849
... But there is a kind of sadness and loneliness in my heart tonight - a curious comingling of elements. I am happy and yet sad, anxious and yet at rest. The explanation is, my feelings and judgement are at variance in a certain matter. Well, let the Lord direct.

August 31, 1849
My anxieties and trials of mind continue. I have surely taken such a course as to lose one valuable friend, and yet I have been conscientious, and have acted according to the dictates of my judgment. My feelings rebel, but I must stifle them. Mr. K. is coming soon to have an interview with mother. O, I need grace and divine direction.

September 5, 1849
Mr. K. called and spent some time with mother, and a long time after he left, I went down to her room to make inquiries. She related the conversation fully. She advises me to feel free and unconstrained in his company, as usual, and to take such a course as the circumstances and my own good sense shall direct. I desire only to follow the will of God. Perhaps I shall become interested in him, and be happy; and am sure I can be happy in having the matter proceed no farther.

September 8, 1849.
Mother read my letter from Mr. K., and liked it; but toward night I felt strongly inclined to end the whole matter with a simple negative.

September 10, 1849
Went out into our orchard to write my composition. Finished it, and answered Mr. K.'s letter as follows: MR. KENDALL - Sir: I find that my heart prompts me to devote every moment and every thought I can spare from study, to my sister Josephine [Helen's step-sister
and best friend, home for a visit]; hence I will only say tonight, I am not opposed to a farther acquaintance.

With esteem,

HELEN

September 21, 1849

Received a call from Mr. K. - a very pleasant one. I am glad to obtain a little more knowledge of his ways, habits, thoughts, and ideas. Am so far, well pleased - much better than I expected to be. Not that I doubted his being just right, but I doubted whether every thing would correspond with my taste.

October 16, 1849

Mr. K.'s health is not good. Many think he will soon go into a decline. In the evening I sat a long time thinking - thinking - thinking of the future. Well, if he dies young, he will have accomplished more than many do in a long life. I felt that it would be a privilege to add to his happiness while his life is spared. Still I am not certain how benevolent I should be, when put to the test... He is surely a man of God - it is good for my spiritual life to be in his society.

November 10, 1849

Have had a visit with Mr. K. Am not sure as yet what I ought to do in this matter. It seems to me now that the providence of God is favoring it. I trust him to lead my mind to a right decision. Now if I could but know that he (Mr. K.) had ever felt the slightest regret that he had gone so far in the matter, how quick and how clearly that would shew me my duty. I have almost wished lately to tell him to regard himself as perfectly free as if nothing had passed between us; but as I shall not see him much more before I leave, I dare not run the risk of hurting his feelings by suggesting it. I will continue to trust the Lord.

November 19, 1849

I received a letter from Mr. K., which brought matters to a crisis; but I was still irresolute. Have been consulting parents. They, as well as Josephine, think highly of him, and will not withhold their consent, if I am satisfied myself. My feelings were favorable, but when the time came for me to meet him, I had only two or three thoughts ready; - but to make the record short - the question is settled. We are engaged. I trust in Christ. As I have been holding the matter in suspense, I have said often to myself, I could not rest as quietly as I do, were it not for trust in Christ.
November 26, 1849
Sabbath. The past week has been a long week. I can hardly remember Monday. It has been a week of the Lord's special dealings with me. 16

"He is surely a man of God - it is good for my spiritual life to be in his society." What sort of person was Helen's "man of God"?

Sewall Kendall was consumed by religion. "It moulded his thoughts, shaped his conduct, ... governed his physical life, ... was, in brief, the groove in which his whole life ran." Sewall Kendall was rigid, "... uncompromising, the stuff whereof to make both martyrs and persecutors for the truth." Sewall Kendall was ascetic, "... very severe upon himself, crucifying his body to keep his passions under, subduing jealousy, his emotions, guarding his feelings of mirthfulness lest they should break into levity. He wore no hair cloth upon his body, no spikes upon his feet, but they were on his soul. He humbled himself. He fasted. He denied himself pleasant food, and many innocent things lest they should become a snare to him." Most of all, Sewall Kendall was pious. "Beside his stated devotions which occupied much time, he had seasons of prayer. He rose early to prayer. He spent hours at the duty. He rose at the midnight hour to pray. He began and ended the Study of each lesson with prayer. He entered and left his room with prayer. Coming into a classmates room for a review of the lesson before recitation, he would gently say Let us have a moment of prayer. In the recitation room, and on the side walk as in the Church, his lips would be seen to move in prayer." 17

Kendall was an evangelical par excellence, an influential member of the Institute's highly regarded Theological Department, 18 a suitor approved by Helen's parents and missionary sister, and for seventeen-year-old Helen, a means to her chosen career.

"I ... have for a long time felt a strong desire to become a missionary ... and [will] listen to no proposal, which would interfere with the fulfillment of this desire," Helen wrote the day she decided against marriage for love in favor of marriage as vocation. "I am willing to follow the direction of Providence implicitly."

Discerning and following "the direction of Providence" in vocationally motivated marriages was mandatory and was probably psychologically essential. Such a major commitment, devoid of love and attraction, surely requires the support of a compelling authority. For evangelical Christians in mid-century Oberlin, that authority was God Himself. Emeline Farnsworth believed that marrying a man she had just met was "the Lord's will," and experienced Wright's proposal as a divine "call." Helen Cowles repeatedly entreated God to reveal His will to enable her to make a decision.

The most revealing statements in this regard, however, are Dan Bradley's. Like Helen Cowles, Bradley records in his journal the progress of a courtship, this one from the viewpoint of the prospective groom. Bradley, like Helen Cowles, was determined to seek out and submit to God's will, and to conquer his emotions in the process, if necessary. Two days after deciding to consider seriously Mary Mahan's matchmaking advice he wrote, "My only anxiety was to learn what is the will of my Savior & God. Having once learned that it seemed to me that I should greatly rejoice in doing & suffering it, be it never so diverse from my own natural inclinations." 19

As long as he struggled to discover God's will, he suffered. He found peace only by shifting the entire responsibility for his decision to God. On
August 30, 1848, after wrestling for four days with "the momentous care that rested upon" him, he proposed to Sarah Blachly, believing that God would reveal His will through Sarah's response. "I left it with the Lord to lead the inclination of Miss B which way he would. I was sure that he would do it, and that I should know his will by the answer which she should give me," he wrote. "I thought it as likely to be one way as the other. But I have not the least anxiety about the matter. I stayed myself on God and had perfect peace." After receiving an affirmative answer from Sarah, Bradley rejoiced. "It seemed to me that I should have rejoiced just as much if the answer had been in the negative, because I had so left the discussion of the question with the Lord & had such confidence in his love & faithfulness & power, that either answer would have been equally clear the expression of the will of my God." Confident that God had indeed expressed His will, Bradley relaxed. "As my Father had thus most manifestly given me an affianced bride," he wrote, "I felt at liberty to allow my heart to flow out in love toward her." 20

Many Oberlinians who married in the 1840s were motivated by affection, shared values and common goals - a solid basis for marriage at any period. They viewed wives as having the primary responsibility for child-rearing, and, especially in frontier areas, as helpmeets and co-laborers. In this respect their attitudes toward marriage were common to most Americans of the time.

Distinctive among Oberlin-trained missionaries, however, were their firm belief in marriage as Christian vocation and their conviction that marital choices must conform to the perceived will of God. It is not surprising, therefore, that some of these courtships seem more like job interviews, with personal feelings suppressed, controlled or postponed. In part the Institute functioned as an employment bureau, using its extensive data bank to put inquiring employers in touch with qualified applicants. Occasionally anticipating a need, the bureau's alert head hunters approached potential employers who hadn't yet realized their need for an Oberlin-trained helpmeet/co-laborer/stepmother/missionary. Even David Spencer, who was too far from Oberlin to seek its help directly, had been sufficiently well trained by the Institute to apply his Oberlin-instilled attitudes to his search for a wife. Once the bureau had initiated a relationship the couple sought to discover God's will in the matter and to submit to it. As Chief Executive Officer, God would ultimately decide who got the job. It wasn't always the first applicant. 21

In their introspection and reliance on an external religious authority to validate decisions, Oberlinians were spiritual heirs of New England evangelicals of an earlier day. 22 Paradoxically, such an experience was both a mighty struggle and the way to "perfect peace."
NOTES

1. Rev. S. C. Wright, "Some Reminiscences of the Early Oberlin Missionaries in Northwestern Minnesota" (typescript), (Oberlin, OH: 1890), 5, Oberlin College Library Special Collections (hereafter OCL).

2. David B. Spencer to G. Whipple, 8 December 1855 (microfilm), American Missionary Association Archives (hereafter AMA), #70720 and #70726, Amistad Research Center, Dillard University, New Orleans.

3. Covenant of the Oberlin Colony, Oberlin File (21/1, Box 10, folder 37), Oberlin College Archives (hereafter OCA); J. J. Shipherd to Z. R. Shipherd, May 11, 1830, Treasurer's Office (7/1/5), OCA.

4. J. J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, 13 August, 1832 (typescript), Robert S. Fletcher Papers (30/24, Box 13), OCA.


6. James A. Fairchild to Mary F. Kellogg, 28 August, 1838, Presidents (2/3/1, Box 20, Fairchild Papers), OCA.

7. George Adams to Emily Higgins, 9 July, 1846, George Adams Papers (30/202, Box 1), OCA. For comments on mid-nineteenth-century Oberlin courtships and marriages not included in this article, see Charles Penfield to Sister Helen, November 21st, 1848 (typescript), Fletcher Papers (Box 3), (Charles Finney and Elizabeth Atkinson); T. B. Hudson to George Whipple, Oberlin, September 22, 1850, AMA #104941 and #104942 (Charles Conkling and Mary Ann Adams); John Bardwell to George Whipple, Oberlin, February 9, 1852, AMA #105342 (Elisha Carver and Narcissa Cook); Journals of John Patchin and Elizabeth Wakeley Patchin, as recorded by Claribel L. Bickford (copy of typescript), Oberlin File, Writings By, OCA. I am indebted to Marlene Merrill for bringing the Patchin journals to my attention.

8. Wright, "Reminiscences;" Spencer, letter.


10. Mrs. Cowles's Lectures (typescript), Fletcher Papers (Box 4), OCA.

11. Five years after they married Minerva Cowles wrote to a step-daughter, "I think ... that I was not quite wise in attempting to take care of a family of seventeen without the aid of a hired girl." M. D. P. Cowles to Helen Cowles, Dec. 29, 1849 (typescript), Fletcher Papers (Box 3, Cowles Papers, 1840-50), OCA.

12. Dan Beach Bradley, Journal, 26-30 August, 1848, OCL.
13. "Papers of J. G. W. Cowles . . . 1900" (typescript), Fletcher Papers (Box 3, Cowles Papers, undated & 1835-39), OCA; Maternal Association of Oberlin, October 1847 and May 1848 (31/6/19, Box 13), OCA.


15. "Biographies of Female Students, 1834-36," Treasurer's Office (7/1/3, Box 2), OCA.


17. John H. Robinson (?), "Reminiscences of the Class of 1850," Class Files (0/2, Box 1), OCA.

18. "[T]here was no other name in college that was felt so widely and so powerfully as his." Robinson, "Class of 1850."


21. Dan Bradley's courtship of his first wife, Emilie Royce, was similar to Sela Wright's. Unwilling to accept a missionary post unmarried, Bradley asked colleagues to find him an unmarried woman with missionary aspirations. He met Royce just after she had rejected another suitor. After a day of fasting and prayer, both Bradley and Royce agreed it was God's will that they should wed, and they married. After Emilie's death eleven years later, Bradley fell in love with "S," whom he declined to marry, believing that God instructed him to "relinquish the hope of enjoying her presence with me in my future pilgrimage among the heathen" (Bradley, Journal, 24 April - 15 May, 1833, and 14 April, 1848).