

## Review

Migliazzo, Arlin C. *Mother of Modern Evangelicalism: The Life and Legacy of Henrietta Mears*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020. 278 pp. ISBN 978-0-8028-7792-5

By Elsie Froment, PhD

The fundamentalism of the early twentieth century was theologically conservative and activist. However, its negativism troubled many and caused some to turn away. While fundamentalism carried on an immensely rich faith tradition, it was characterized by separatism. One gifted and hardworking American educator believed that separatism limited the spread of the gospel. As theologically conservative pastors entrusted her with the Christian education of the next generation of church leaders, she was able to influence her students to rebrand fundamentalism as evangelicalism and foster a vibrant period of growth.

Henrietta Mears grew up Baptist, in the Minneapolis church of fundamentalist leader, William Bell Reilly. Reilly founded the World Christian Fundamentalist Association. That Reilly was a Mears supporter to the end of his life indicates that Mears met his approval theologically. Her father was a businessman, and her mother and grandmother were tireless supporters of the traditional faith. Mears trained as a high school chemistry teacher and served as principal. Her Sunday School class grew so rapidly that the church underwent successive building and acquisition programs to accommodate it. Mears had two crises of faith, when her mother died, which she settled by totally surrendering her life to Christ in the Keswick manner,<sup>1</sup> and again over evolution, which she settled by acknowledging faith in both science and scripture, but scripture over science. She chose to remain single, trusting God to meet her needs, and expended herself in teaching the Bible, administration, encouragement, and hospitality.

After fourteen years of public-school teaching, Mears began to question whether she should enter full-time Christian service. Reilly advised her to take a year off for travel and soul searching. As Mears traveled, Reilly accepted an invitation to preach at First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood, California. That led to First Presbyterian's pastor preaching at First Baptist in Minneapolis and observing Mears at work. An invitation to California to explore a career in Christian Education followed. Mears accepted the opportunity, moved to California, and began a ministry with many facets, all passionately directed at evangelism.

Mears' enduring goal was to win, train and enlist for service. She began writing Sunday School curriculum immediately, an enterprise that grew into Gospel Light. She made the decision to buy Forest Home, a well-equipped campground, for

conferences and camping. With J. Edwin Orr, she established the Hollywood Christian Group to attract and minister to stars and entertainers. These ministries were all interdenominational. Mears drew speakers from across denominations and welcomed students from different faiths to her classes, centred around the College Department. The Sunday School repeated the pattern of Minneapolis – the building programs barely kept up with the growth. Over the years, Mears challenged many young people to become pastors, missionaries, evangelists, and found major Christian organizations. Billy Graham was discouraged by his friendship with the Canadian Charles Templeton. When Mears recommended to the organizers of the 1949 Los Angeles crusade that he be invited to be the evangelist, Graham had to decide where his allegiance lay. Bill Bright who founded Campus Crusade for Christ, Jim Rayburn who founded Young Life, and Dawson Trotman who founded The Navigators, were only some of the leaders who acknowledged their debt to her leadership. Her influence was so strong that when Harold Ockenga and other influential Christian leaders met to establish the National Evangelical Association, Mears was an active participant. Despite the assumption that its professors would be male, Fuller invited her to teach Christian Education. But Mears believed her work at First Presbyterian was not done. She continued to grow the Christian Education ministries of First Presbyterian until the end of her life in 1963.

Mears was an unlikely person for the influence that she acquired. In appearance, she was fashionable but matronly. She was short, stocky, wore thick glasses, and had a husky voice. However, her listeners became lost in that voice as she confidently paced platforms, expounding the scriptures. Mears was enthusiastic, humorous, sociable, generous, not afraid of learning, and valued research. She was exacting – “only the best is good enough” – and could be forceful in her ideas, especially as her health declined. She did not comment on politics and could be thoughtlessly stereotypical in her thinking about race. Consistent with her times and not the life she modeled, Mears identified women for leadership but believed that senior pastoral leadership was for men. She called herself a Bible teacher and would only speak from pulpits on Sunday evenings.

Migliazzo’s biography is exhaustively researched. It is detailed and the chronology is confusing at times. It is under-contextualized, focused on Mears’ life and influence, with little reference to ways in which her life may have been influenced by world events and American culture. There is no sense of what other Christian women were doing, apart from family members. Most contextualization for her life occurs in one paragraph at the end of the book. Contextualization may have been useful in explaining why Mears, a woman who taught the Bible to all ages and genders, was able to do so with little objection. Did the Baptist priesthood of the believer theology endow her with early confidence? Was woman’s engagement still

strong in the early twentieth century? Was she simply an exception, so talented or hard working that her ministry was recognized?

Mears' story should be known by evangelicals. She exercised an enormous influence on a generation of Christian leaders and on the rebranding of fundamentalism as evangelicalism in mid-century America. She pioneered a field where women could exercise their gifts for leadership in the church. Migliazzo's biography is important because it brings awareness of her career to the forefront and establishes it in the annals of evangelicalism. If her life is known, it can continue to influence new generations of evangelicals to work together to win, disciple and serve.

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<sup>1</sup> The Keswick teaching emphasized "complete surrender of the will to God." (259)

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