

Lottie Moon: A Brief Biography

David Schrock

Upbringing

Lottie Moon was born on December 12, 1840 to Edward Harris and Anna Maria Barclay. Raised in a large, wealthy family, Lottie Moon grew up as a child of the old South. Her uncle had purchased the estate of Thomas Jefferson, and she grew up in a home built by a friend of George Washington. As one biographer reports, “The Moons had money, children (11 born, 7 survived to adulthood), servants (52 in all), and kept a tutor in the home for languages and classical literature” (Tom Nettles, *The Baptists*, 2:363).



But there is one significant difference: Lottie Moon was not the least bit interested in religion as a child. Despite all her earthly advantages, including a religious father, she was a devilish little girl. And when I say little... she only grew to be 4' 3".

To give you a sense of the Christianity she rejected: Her father was originally a Presbyterian, but he became a Baptist when he studied the Scriptures to fight the growing Campbellite movement—this is the religious movement that resulted in the Christian Church, as we know it today. In other words, to resist the teaching of baptismal regeneration, he searched the Scriptures in order to retain his views on infant baptism, and the result was a conversion to the Baptist faith. Sounds a lot like Adoniram Judson.

With his change of theology on baptism, Edward Moon became a founding member of the Scottsville Baptist Church. He was a faithful member and a lifelong deacon. This would be the church where Lottie Moon would grow up.

Further aversion to her parent's Christianity can be seen in Lottie's Sunday habits. In the Moon household, in order to preserve the Sabbath, the Moon's would prepare all their meals on Saturday. However, this never suited Lottie. Instead of attending church, she would sneak off, return to their large home and prepare a meal for herself before the family returned. She was by her own admission a 'naughty' girl. And as she aged this did not change. It only worsened.

So for the first 18 years of Lottie's life, she was an object of wrath and one who violently opposed the faith of her father.

Education

In 1853, at the age of 13, her father died on a business trip. But instead of jarring her into faith, she kept aloof. One year later, at age 14, Lottie was enrolled in the Virginia Female Institute (Albemarle, VA). She proved to be a good student, especially in literature and

foreign languages. But she skipped chapel 26 times in the last two quarters. While Lottie possessed a love for learning, she despised all sorts of religious instruction.

In an essay written on *Grecian Literature*, she wrote, “man’s intellectual powers have ever been the theme and study of the wise” (Nettles 364). For the unconverted Lottie, wisdom was not found in Christ but in literature and classical studies. Tom Nettles writes about her,

For Lottie, “Sunday, unlike home, was not for sitting in a church pew hearing a sermon but for lying in a haystack reading Shakespeare. Her friends, not unprovoked by Lottie’s attitudes, considered her a skeptic. She even insisted that the ‘D’ in her name stood for ‘devil’ instead the family name ‘Digges’ (365).

In fact, Lottie would even sign off on her poetry with the pseudonym, “Deville.” A play on words for the word ‘devil.’ All in all, no one would have suspected that Lottie Moon would be missionary hero that she is today.

Lottie’s life reinforces the truths outlined in the story of the Rich Young Ruler (Matt 19).

- Discipleship is not based on what we bring to Christ, it is what he gives to us.
- Discipleship is not based on our intellect or understanding. It is based on our faith in Christ. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6), and without a daily life of faith it is impossible to be the disciple that God calls us to be.
- In truth, God is not looking for attractive people. He is looking for people who are simply Faithful, Available, and Teachable. God gladly uses anyone who is sold out for him.

In the case of Lottie Moon, it would take a miracle of God to change her heart of stone, into a heart of flesh, and thankfully that is exactly what happened at the end of 1858.

Conversion

Just before Christmas of 1858, Lottie Moon was converted. And I say converted because it is evident that God acted upon her. Like Romans 3 says, she was not seeking after God. As she was pursuing vain things; God’s grace broke into her heart. By God’s grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, she was born again.

Still, while God converted Lottie, the sovereign Lord used means, and she was converted under the ministry of John Broadus. This is the same Broadus who would go on to become one of the four founders of Southern Seminary. Broadus was the pastor of Moon’s church and a principal at the school she attended. In the fall of 1858, Broadus called for a series of evangelistic meetings and prayer services. He called his congregation to come together to pray for the lost. And certainly with family and friends in the church, they were praying for the proud skeptic, Lottie Moon.

During that week, there was a night in which Lottie Moon could not sleep. A barking dog kept her awake, and her mind raced with thoughts of her eternal destiny and the state of her soul before God. This sleepless night prompted her to go to the meeting the next evening. While intending to scoff, she left that service to pray in her room all night.

She was baptized a few days later after professing faith in the God she had spent her life opposing. And her profession was more than just a verbal testimony. A family friend remarked about the immediate change in Lottie: "She was different... in those details of the daily life which at last afforded the most delicate test of Christian character." (W.E. Hatcher quoted by Nettles, 365).

Upon her conversion, she returned to school, to not only finish her degree. While she had taken many courses in religion before, she now pursued them with a renewed vigor. So passionate was she to study, she took every single course that the school offered! And when she graduated in 1860, John Broadus remarked that Lottie Moon was the most educated woman in the South.

A Teaching Life (1860-1872)

Now if you are following along, you know that her graduation came one year before the Civil War. During that time she participated in the life of the Confederate army, assisting where she could. After all, she was a Virginia Belle. But during the Civil War, she also served as a tutor for a family in Georgia. This would lead her into a lifetime of teaching service.

In 1866 she moved to Kentucky to teach in the female academy operated by the First Baptist Church of Danville, Kentucky. Four years later, she would move again to Cartersville, Georgia where she taught for less than a year. Hearing the news that her mother's health was failing, she returned home to care for her mother.

During the remaining days of her mother's life, the two women spoke often about the call of God to use one's short life in the service of the gospel (Nettles 367). This burning question—How to best invest one's life for Christ?—would have tremendous effect on Lottie, for in every future season of her life, she was always asking how she could best use her short life for advancement of the gospel.

And it seems that while her mother lay dying, God birthed in Lottie a desire to reach the nations for Christ. In these maternal conversations her eyes were lifted from the women of the South, to the nations abroad. Moved to action, Lottie began supporting two missionaries as she continued to teach in Georgia. For the next two years she would support these gospel ministers while inquiring herself into service in China.

During this period, she was greatly influenced by her sister, Edmonia, because it was not Lottie's initial idea to travel overseas. She had received great commendation for her work as a pioneering educator in the years after the Civil War, and she was content to stay. In fact, most around her strongly discouraged Lottie from wasting her life upon the foreign mission field. Thus, it took the strong pleading of her sister who had previously sailed to

China and the prayers of the Chinese missionaries to dislodge her from her successful field of labors. Yet, through it all, it was the Lord who was calling, and Lottie as a genuine disciple, simply followed his command.

The result of following Christ, for Lottie, meant that for the next 40 years, she would walk with the people of China, and in the end, she would literally sacrifice her life for the sake of their eternal souls.

In China (1873-1912)

When Lottie arrived in China her attitude was not so Christ-like. Raised in a home of great means and education, Lottie displayed great sophistication and intellect. However, she also held a racial superiority over the Chinese, a way of thinking prevalent in the slaveholding South. As a result, she entered China very prejudiced against the people she was going to reach. Her own words reveal the darkness of her enlightened heart. Reflecting upon a visit to Shanghai, she says, "Where the Caucasian goes he carries energy and an inferior race [the Chinese] is aroused by the contact" (368).

Yet, Lottie's Darwinian view of the Chinese would soon be crushed in the hands of the great potter and reshaped for more useful service. Like Peter and the other disciples, her four decades in China purified her for more useful service to the king. For Lottie, and for us, discipleship is not a point in time, but a process of sanctification and greater obedience to God and His Word. God certainly used his word to refine Lottie, but he also used painful circumstances. There were at least 3 events that made her a more usable disciple.

Edmonia's Return. First, within five years, Lottie's sister and partner in gospel ministry returned home. After suffering severe ailment for two years in China, she would be afflicted in her health until the day of her death. Despite her illness, she was a constant supporter of Lottie's, maintaining a regular correspondence with her and the mission board. Nonetheless, in time, her ailments became too severe and in January 1909, she put a gun to her head and committed suicide. While the tragedy struck only 3 years before Lottie's own death, assuredly the troubles Edmonia felt half-a-world apart would have grieved Lottie for years prior. She missed her sister deeply and when her pen reflected about her personal struggles often she recounted the loneliness she felt after her departure.

Crawford Howell Toy. Second, Lottie Moon's relationship with C.H. Toy served as a severe disappointment for Lottie. In 1877, when Lottie Moon returned with her sister to the States, she rekindled a relationship with her former teacher from the Albemarle Female Institute. Like Lottie, C.H. Toy was educated, sophisticated, and a product of the Antebellum South. He had received his masters from the University of Virginia. After which he taught at Lottie's school, before receiving his ordination in 1860 from John Broadus.

Toy himself for a season was a strong proponent of missions and even sought to go to Japan for missionary work. Yet, his steadfast pursuit of missions would soon change towards a more academic route. Toy's personal testimony is a sad one, because when he went to

Germany for doctoral studies, he returned steeped in the liberal influences of the day. And it appears that he sought to influence Lottie Moon, as well. After Lottie's death, it was noted that she had quite a collection of books in her library devoted to the errors that Toy supported.

Still during all these doubtful seasons, Lottie remained hopeful. While the Baptist papers disparaged Toy and Southern Seminary removed him from the faculty for his heretical views, somehow, Lottie Moon remained hopeful that some kind of marital union was still possible with Toy. Alone on the mission field, without her sister, Moon surely fancied the idea of a partner in marriage and ministry. However, in 1881, these hopes would be finally dashed.

In that fateful year, two of Toy's students, T.P. Bell and John Stout, were rejected from missionary service because of the views they held concerning the Scriptures. Under the influence of his teachers in Germany, Toy had developed a system of thought that denied the historicity of Genesis 1-11 and other portion Scripture that related to science, history, or geography. In this way, Toy denied Scripture's full inspiration and with it, he denied its truthfulness and ability to speak about all matters of life.

Such news caused a crisis in Lottie Moon's life. Her immediate reaction was to leave the mission field and to go to Harvard, the school to which Toy was now employed. But shortly, she reconsidered. Nettles again is helpful, "It was at best impracticable and at worst disloyal to her Redeemer. The critical need for laborers in China, the fatigue and debility of her missionary colleagues, and the clarity of God's prerogative over her life, as well as her increased love for the Chinese people, shoved aside this last shot at romantic and domestic fulfillment" (380-81).

Think about it: Here is an unwed women, whose intellectual gifts were shaped by Toy and who was deeply enamored with him. Yet, she rejects the joys that she could attain in this marriage, because she counts faithfulness to Christ as more valuable. And I think, it was this decision that God used to solidify Moon's lifetime of service in China. For her this decision to abandon the love of her life set a course for Lottie to abandon herself to the bride of Christ in China. This is how disciples are made. What we affirm on paper means nothing until we are put into the trials of life—personal allegiances are often some of the most difficult trials.

Halcomb. A third development during this time was the defection of another missionary on theological grounds. In 1886, N.W. Halcomb resigned his post because of a theological struggle with the Deity of Christ. Lottie worked relentlessly to convince him from the Scriptures of Christ's eternal and divine nature. But despite her best intentions, prayers, and efforts, Halcomb left the field, depleting the number of laborers in China. You can imagine the effect this had on Lottie Moon, both in regard to her spirits and in regards to her commitment to the pure gospel of Jesus Christ.

It seems that in these three trials, God showed Lottie Moon the folly of intellectual attainment and the radical need to simply follow him. She had lost much to serve him in

China, and yet she did not go unrewarded. Despite the loss of a sister, the loss of a spouse, and the loss of a co-laborer, she never lost the one thing she must retain—her faith in God and passion for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We also see in her life the relationship between doctrine and missions. There are many today who would want to minimize the importance of doctrinal precision, saying that: “All that matters is ministry or mission. Do evangelism, preach, pray... don’t bother yourself with doctrine.” Yet what we see in Lottie’s life is that in at least two instances doctrine destroyed missions—this was the case with Toy and Halcomb.

This is true at the level of churches and denominations, but it is also true individually. If you are going to grow in Christ, you must rightly understand his Word. Emotions, feelings, and experience can only carry you so far and for so long. No true disciple of Christ can sustain a lifetime pursuit without a growing knowledge of God in his word.

Service

When Lottie evaluated her ministry in China, she felt that the first 18 years of the work were just sowing with very little reaping. From 1873-1890, she labored to learn the language, the customs, and the best ways to do evangelism. And it was only after 2 decades that she began to see much fruit. Part of this was the way Lottie conceived of conversion. She was not looking for numbers but transformed lives. But also, it was the providence of God. Sometimes in God’s perfect timing, the fruit takes much longer to form than we would want. Yet, this should not have been a surprise to Lottie, for 18 years was the same amount of time it took for her own conversion.

As the years turned into decades, the focus of her ministry changed. In 1873, Lottie began as a school teacher to young girls, but after ten years, she requested a permanent change to a ministry comprised of personal evangelism. She wrote to her supervisor, “Under no circumstances do I wish to continue in school work, but I long to go and talk to the thousands of women around me” (387). This adamant statement was not a disgruntled complaint, but a heart that had traded in her intellectual pursuits for more personal ministry. She continues, “If I am to devote myself to evangelistic work in the city and country I must be free from the school” (387). This change would prepare the way for her most fruitful years of ministry, still eight years away.

It is worth noting the conditions that she endured in China. Her reports describe “long days of teaching, traveling, enduring poor weather and verbal abuse, uncomfortable accommodation, and nauseating food” all of which “had no romantic appeal for her.” Remember, Lottie was a Southern Belle who used to skip church to eat heavy meals.

Like Jesus, she would often go days without personal times of quiet and solitude. While she experienced a kind of loneliness in China, there were other times she could not be left alone. When she would travel into the countryside, the Chinese women and children would badger her with questions, fondle her clothing, and interrogate her manners. They had a childlike inquisitiveness that never failed to verbalize what they were thinking, and there would be times when she would nearly crack under the pressure of constant scrutiny.

For 30 years, this was the majority of her work. Going house-to-house, village-to-village, introducing women and children to the gospel. There were times when she would “preach” to mixed audiences (men and women), because she feared for their souls. She did not want to miss the opportunity to tell the good news, but her standard ministry target was the women and children.

Missions Fund Raiser

Teaching and personal evangelism did not exhaust her duties, because she also served as a valuable reporter from China back to the United States. A compelling writer, she held regular correspondence with the Foreign Mission Board back in Virginia, and her stories were widely circulated among the women’s missionary societies that were springing up in the late 1800’s.

This written correspondence is perhaps what has left the greatest legacy among Southern Baptists. And among all her letters, her plea for funds during the Christmas season in 1887 is the one that has had the longest lasting effect. Writing to Southern Baptist women, she says,

How many there are among our women, alas! Alas! Who imagine that because ‘Jesus Paid It All’ they need pay nothing, forgetting that the prime object of their salvation was that they should following the footsteps of Jesus Christ in bringing back a lost world to God, and so aid in bringing the answer to the petition our Lord taught his disciples: ‘Thy kingdom come’” (383).

She would later say,

Should we not press it home upon our consciences,’ she asked, ‘that the sole object of our conversion was not the salvation of our own souls, but that we might become co-workers with our Lord and Master in the conversion of the world?’ (383)

Lessons

Lottie Moon was a changed woman, from the teenager who once told people her middle name was ‘devil.” But her life in Christ also shows sanctification, for coming to China was racial superiority in her heart, she prepared for her next voyage to heaven consumed with seeing the Chinese come to Christ. In truth, she was a disciple of Christ that had left every thing in order to follow her Savior. Like Jesus words in Mark 10:29-31, she embodied the call of discipleship, and she was rewarded handsomely for all that she left.

Consider Jesus words again, in light of Lottie’s life...

“Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel [Lottie had done all of those things], who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

Lottie's name lives on in mission's history and in the Southern Baptist's yearly Christmas offering which goes exclusively to fund missionaries all over the world. Her life is filled with examples of God's providence and favor, even as she endured many trying times. Overall, she is an inspiration to missional living, one who gives us many lessons for following her faithful example. Let us consider six of them.

- (1) *She was a constant student.* She loved learning about her master and how to reach others with the message of Christ. While she was predisposed towards learning even before her salvation; it is evident that salvation fueled her love for knowing more about her Savior. In this way, she was a true disciple.
- (2) *She accepted the tragedies of life as means of sanctification and guidance in her life.* It is easy to grow embittered by the things God's brings into our life, but in Lottie we see how God turns the poisons of life into useful medicines to cure her of deadly heart diseases.
- (3) *She constantly inquired into how she might best use her life for the service of her king.* She teaches us to not grow satisfied with this life, but to improve our lives with a greater zeal for Christ. At all times, we ought to be willing to leave everything behind and follow Christ. Lottie did, and she challenges us to do the same.
- (4) *She found her treasure in the unseen realities of life.* With such heavenly treasure in her heart, she exhausted her life for the sake of the Chinese and for the sake of the missionary endeavors of Southern Baptist.
- (5) *In Lottie Moon, we see an example of a genuine follower of Christ.* She did not arrive in China as the perfect specimen of missionary service. She was disgusted by the culture and the primitive conditions of the Chinese, and yet, in time God grew her to be Christ-like in her service. She became a living sacrifice, one that we do well to consider and imitate the faithfulness of her life.
- (6) *Finally, her life in comparison to Crawford Toy is a parable for Christian living.* Like the contrast between the rich young ruler and the children who sought Jesus presence, Toy and Moon reflect two kinds of people. In Toy, we see someone who gained the whole world—he achieved academic success, he was Harvard professor beloved of students and acclaimed as a brilliant scholar—but who in the end forfeited his own soul. He lost his luster for Christ and he died as a mere theist. In Lottie Moon, however, we see someone who lost the whole world—she forsook her pedigree, received scorn for leaving US, suffered greatly, experienced innumerable hardships, and she died weighing less than 50 pounds—but gained an eternal reward in heaven. She was or rather became the least, in order that Christ might be prized the most. She left Toy, in order to pursue Christ and his church in China, and accordingly she is an example of someone who gladly counted her life as nothing compared with the exceeding joy of knowing and serving Jesus.

During this season of missions giving, may we consider Lottie's life and imitate her faith.

Soli Deo Gloria, dss

For Further Reading

Most of the resources in this article have come from Tom Nettles eminently helpful chapter on Lottie Moon; however fuller treatments can be found in Catherine Allen's book and Keith Harper's edited volume of Lottie's personal letters and memoirs. Daniel Akin also preached a sermon on Lottie Moon at SEBTS, and it has been transcribed in his little book, Five Who Changed the World.

Books

Catherine B. Allen, *The New Lottie Moon Story*, 2nd Ed. (Birmingham, AL: Women's Missionary Union, 1980).

Lottie Moon, *Send the Light: Lottie Moon's Letters and Other Writings*, ed. Keith Harper (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002)

Chapters

Daniel L. Akin, "The Power of a Consecrated Life: The Ministry of Lottie Moon" in *Five Who Changed the World* (Wake Forest, NC: Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 57-80).

Tom Nettles, "Lottie Moon (1840-1912)" in *The Baptists: Key People Involved In Forming a Baptist Identity*, Vol. 2 (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2005), 363-94.