

## **The Question of Women's Leadership: Tensions in the Life and Thought of Isabel Crawford**

MARILYN FÄRDIG WHITELEY  
Independent Scholar, Guelph, Ontario

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In May 1893, Isabel Crawford awaited her graduation from the Baptist Missionary Training School in Chicago. As she waited, she attended many events of the World's Congress of Representative Women, held as part of the World's Columbian Exposition. Afterwards she wrote indignantly that "Eight female ministers were seated on the platform one day & gave their experiences. I was thoroughly disgusted with the whole caboodle of them. One free Will Baptist said she had baptized fifteen on one occasion & I couldn't help but wish she had been drowned on the spot."<sup>1</sup> More than sixty years later, at the age of ninety, she restated her position: "I'm afraid I'm not a believer in women preachers."<sup>2</sup>

Yet that is not the whole picture. Crawford's sense of call was strong, and both in her writing and in her speaking, she reported that her father had hoped that his one son would follow him into the ministry. She continued, "his prayers were answered only God had quietly called his daughter instead of his son!"<sup>3</sup> As she answered her calling, she frequently did work outside of customary gender boundaries: once, while serving as a missionary on the Seneca reservations in western New York, she even presided at the Lord's Supper. Clearly Crawford's views on women's religious leadership and the ordination of women were more complex than her direct statements might suggest.

Crawford considered Anna Howard Shaw the "leading spirit" of the female preachers she heard at the women's congress in Chicago. In 1880 Shaw was ordained into the ministry of the Methodist Protestant Church,

but she held a pastorate only briefly before devoting her energies to the women's suffrage movement. Others, however, remained in the pastorate, and their voices challenged Crawford and members of both mainline and conservative denominations. Thus the study of Isabel Crawford's life and thought provides insight into how one woman dealt with the dilemma of changing views on women's religious leadership during this period of transition.

Isabel Alice Hartley Crawford was born in Cheltenham, Ontario, in 1865, the fourth child of a Scots-Irish Baptist minister and his Irish wife. John Crawford moved his family first to Woodstock, Ontario, where he taught theology at the Canadian Literary Institute, and then to Rapid City, Manitoba, where he founded Prairie College, to train men for ministry on the prairies. After its failure, John obtained a pastorate in North Dakota, but before his wife and youngest daughter could join him there, Isabel became seriously ill and lost most of her hearing. Following their years in North Dakota, her parents returned to Ontario, and Isabel went to Chicago to study at the American Baptist Missionary Training School. After her graduation in 1893, the Women's Baptist Home Mission Society assigned her to work with the Kiowas in southwestern Oklahoma.

Before she travelled across the country to take up her assignment, Crawford spoke at the Baptist state convention in Jerseyville, Illinois. There she assured the assembled ministers of the traditional views of the women being sent forth:

When we graduate we are not preachers or women wanting to usurp authority over our brethren in the ministry but we are humble followers of Jesus Christ willing in a sweet mild Christ-like way to carry the gospel into the homes & hearts of the women of our land & when we have won them to the blessed Master we bring them to you my brethren to baptize & to help strengthen you & uphold you in your greater work!<sup>4</sup>

During the next two and a half years, Crawford attempted to live out this missionary role as she worked especially among the Kiowa women, teaching them such domestic skills as sewing and polishing their stoves. Yet the needs of the people pushed her across traditional gender boundaries. Following the disappearance of the buffalo, the Kiowas had been placed on a reservation and encouraged to farm. The land was marginal, however, and the people were not taught agricultural skills. By the spring of 1895, Crawford realized that she needed to become "Government

farmer as well as soul farmer for them,” and she attempted to teach Chief Lone Wolf and his people to plough and plant and hoe.<sup>5</sup> Yet at the same time that she took on the male role of farm instructor, she lamented the Kiowas’ lack of what seemed to her appropriate gender roles, for the Kiowa women planted and tended the crops alongside the men. Crawford looked forward to a time when she could expect “the woman to devote her time to the house.”<sup>6</sup>

But Crawford had not come to Oklahoma to teach farming or even domestic skills, and progress along “spiritual” lines was slow. Besides Crawford, a missionary couple was working at Elk Creek, and yet the population of Kiowas there was very low. So when a Kiowa leader invited her to work within a larger Indian community at Saddle Mountain, she first accepted the invitation and then sought permission from the women’s mission society. When she made the move, she impressed the Saddle Mountain Kiowas by coming among them “all alone and no skeered.”<sup>7</sup>

The women’s mission society not only approved Crawford’s decision to open a new mission, but in October, 1897, they sent her an assistant, Mary McLean. McLean freely acknowledged that she could not do “the missionary part of the work,” but, she wrote, “I’m sure I can take some of the responsibilities off your shoulders.”<sup>8</sup> Thus Crawford had an associate who took on much of the role commonly assumed by a missionary’s wife, while Crawford acted as the missionary.

Crawford’s mission work bore fruit, but because she was a woman sent out by the women’s society, she could not form her converts into a church. Instead, in May, 1898, she helped them organize a branch of the women’s missionary society which, with the consent of the denominational organization, admitted men. This seemed to be a satisfactory arrangement until preparation was made to open up the reservation. Before the land was made available to settlers, each Indian was to receive an allotment of land, and similarly each mission church would also receive acreage. Crawford wrote to the Indian Commissioner, W.A. Jones: “Fortunately or unfortunately I am not a believer in women preachers & instead of having a church organized I have had all the converts unite with the nearest one, 17 miles distant, at Rainy Mountain. We have however a missionary organization known as God’s Light upon the Mountain which is recognized as a part of the Women’s Baptist Home Mission Society just as surely as the other missions are branches of the American Baptist Home Mission Society.”<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Crawford’s appeal and Jones’s efforts, the Women’s Home Mission Society received land for the Saddle Mountain

mission just as the denominational Home Mission Society did for the churches on its mission stations.

Raising the money and doing most of the work themselves, the Saddle Mountain Christians built a church on the allotted land. In August, 1903, a church was organized and the building dedicated. Sixty-five people transferred their membership to Saddle Mountain from the Rainy Mountain church. They were familiar with the ordinances of the church, and in September they wanted to celebrate the Lord's Supper. However, they had no pastor. Thanks to her extensive instruction from her father as well as to her formal education, Crawford was confident in her knowledge of Baptist principles, and she told them that a congregation without a pastor could choose one of its own to preside at the ordinance. The members selected Lucius Aitsan, its interpreter and one of its deacons, and the service was held. Yet afterwards Crawford recorded in her journal her uncertainty about what role she ought to play:

Why has the Lord asked me to do work without a *clear pattern*. There were no women preachers [among the 12 or the 70]. A woman's place is making home happy not parading in public. If she hasn't a home of her own she may try to make other homes happy. If public work is not a woman's sphere & a woman tries to do a man's work she surely must be wrong, & if we are to shun the appearance of evil I am surely not shunning it. O for a plain path! Why do I fear thus? Lead me O thou great Jehovah. My heart is burdened & my eyes see not the Light. Lord what wilt *thou* have me do. If the Indians had not consented to Lucius taking the lead in this matter I don't believe I could have gone ahead with it. Then what? Would I have been right or wrong?<sup>10</sup>

Word filtered back to both the denominational and the women's home mission societies that Crawford herself had administered the ordinance herself, and the officials were horrified. The women's society was satisfied after Crawford clarified the situation, but officers in the denominational group were not.<sup>11</sup>

As the resulting controversy continued, Crawford received a letter from Charles Stanton, pastor of an Ohio church of which a good friend of Crawford's was a member. He wrote, "If an ordained administrator is insisted upon why not ask for ordination yourself? Your knowledge of doctrine is sufficient to warrant it. Your ability to succeed in the work could not be questioned. The only objections would be that you are a

woman and then some might falter at your position on the ordinances. Neither of these however need be unsurmountable.” Crawford firmly rejected the suggestion: “It is bad enough to be called an old maid, but to be called A Reverend Old Maid would finish me in 24 hrs!”<sup>12</sup>

At its annual meeting in 1905, the association of Indian Baptist churches passed a resolution expressing its sorrow that one of its churches had “deviated from the orderly practice of Baptist Churches in the administration of the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>13</sup> The next year, the women’s home mission society tried to have the resolution rescinded. When that failed, Crawford resigned, feeling that her influence had been irreparably undermined. She left Saddle Mountain at the beginning of December, 1906.

The Women’s Baptist Home Mission Society faithfully supported Crawford throughout the conflict, and she remained in its employ after leaving Oklahoma. For several years she followed a strenuous itinerary set for her by the society, speaking on behalf of missions. Then, in 1915, she was assigned to work among the Senecas and Tuscaroras on four reservations in western New York. This was not a new field as the Kiowa reservation had been. Missionaries had come to the area many years earlier, and there were even church buildings – but no trained Baptist pastors regularly visited the people. In fact, there was only one resident minister of any denomination on the four reservations. Crawford set to work.

On 11 June 1916, on the Allegany reservation, the native supply pastor did not appear, so Crawford conducted the morning service. Then an old man arrived, carrying all the items needed for the Lord’s Supper. He arranged things on the table in front of the pulpit and then signalled to Crawford that everything was ready. In her journal she wrote:

I fairly gasped & turning to the deacons said simply: “This is good. I am glad you are remembering Jesus as he requested. You deacons can conduct the service.” Deacon Warrior shook his gray head & stepped away. Deacon Amos George sat down in the deacon’s chair. There was no alternative. Rising from my seat in the congregation, after receiving the assurance & approval of the Holy Spirit, I said: “It is not customary for a woman to administer this ordinance. There is a command that we observe it and it is left with the church to arrange how it is to be done. I am not a member of this church, but if you vote to have me take charge of the ordinance I will do so.” Deacon Warrior made the motion, Deacon George seconded it, & we broke bread together!!!<sup>14</sup>

Thus Isabel Crawford did what she had been falsely accused of doing at Saddle Mountain. But here there were no reports and no repercussions.

The following January, Crawford expressed to the women's board her dissatisfaction with the current arrangements. Each of the reservations needed a missionary, and Crawford suggested that she be given a home base in Buffalo from which she could travel to the reservations and make plans for the increased work. She wrote, "If the Board of the Women's American Baptist Home Mission Society thinks favorably on this proposition, Isabel Crawford is willing once more to undertake a man's job in your appreciated employ."<sup>15</sup>

The job was difficult. One of the problems was an untrained native pastor who insisted that it was necessary to be baptized, and specifically to be immersed, in order to be saved. Crawford believed that this was not only unsound in theology but also dangerous in practice, for in his zeal to baptize he brought many into the church who received no further instruction in the faith. Also there were Presbyterians in the community who had no services of their own, but Baptists who espoused the preacher's teaching treated them coldly instead of welcoming them to their services. Yet once when Crawford challenged the pastor on this point of doctrine, he replied, "Are you ordained?"<sup>16</sup>

Crawford mounted a spirited opposition to a plan whereby the Baptist church on the Allegany reservation would become Presbyterian and the Presbyterian church on the Tuscarora reservation would become Baptist. In this she succeeded, but her urgent pleas to the mission boards to staff properly the New York reservations bore no fruit. Finally, in 1921, she resigned, stating that for five years she had been "trying to handle a man's job."<sup>17</sup> But, she explained to a friend, "God has not called me to do a man's work."<sup>18</sup>

For nine more years, Crawford did deputation work, travelling from coast to coast on behalf of the women's board. In New York City in 1930, she fell and broke her leg. The medical treatment she received was woefully inadequate, and she was never again able to walk without crutches. Because of her disability, she retired that year at age 65. During the next years she lived in Florida, and in 1942 she returned to Canada. She lived in Grimsby, Ontario, with two nieces, and died there in 1961. At her request, her body was returned to Saddle Mountain for burial in the Native cemetery there.

Isabel Crawford's ministry shows a certain tension regarding gender

roles. In principle, she maintained the traditional boundaries and committed herself to a “womanly” role. Yet as she herself sometimes recognized, she could on occasion step outside of that limitation and do a “man’s job,” all the while hoping that the native women with whom she worked would someday learn to work within women’s proper sphere.

In her stated views on preaching, she was more consistent. When she spoke at a church in Buffalo in 1896, the program announced that the sermon would be given by Miss B. Crawford. She wrote, “Of course I told them I wasn’t a preacher but a woman trying to do a woman’s work in a womanly way.”<sup>19</sup> Two years later, in a journal entry she stated, “Lord Jesus let me be a teacher but never a preacher!”<sup>20</sup> She believed that “God has called me to teach the gospel not to preach it,”<sup>21</sup> for she felt that Jesus had said “to His brethren, go preach & to His sister ‘go tell.’”<sup>22</sup>

The Saddle Mountain Christians raised almost all the money necessary to construct their church, but the building was graced with several gifts from friends of the mission. Among them were stained glass windows. The centre window at the front proclaimed, “We teach Christ and Him crucified.” Crawford explained, “I didn’t want to see the word ‘preach’ facing me every time I gave the gospel message because it struck me as belonging to the masculine gender.”<sup>23</sup> Yet it is difficult to determine to what extent Crawford’s “gospel message” differed from “preaching.”

Many years later when Crawford visited Oklahoma and attended the Indian Baptist Assembly she was asked to preach the doctrinal sermon. At first she refused, but finally she gave in, saying, “All right. I don’t preach – ’m a women – but as for the doctrines of our faith I’m sound & can speak on any of them & will likely bring them all in.”<sup>24</sup> The sermon was very well received, but its hearers were aware of its novelty: during the rest of the meeting, each of the Indians giving testimony referred to the sermon “preached by a lady.”<sup>25</sup>

Similarly Crawford maintained her views regarding ordination, at least for herself. In a 1937 biographical sketch she stated, “In 1906 I gave up the work because I was not an ordained minister and didn’t want to be.”<sup>26</sup> In the unpublished manuscript that Crawford wrote in 1955, at age ninety, she repeated her longstanding opposition to the ordination of women. After she stated, “I’m afraid I’m not a believer in women preachers,” she continued:

A woman may have to chop wood because there is no man around but because she is able to do it is no reason why she should feel set apart

to do it all the time though a few husbands might not object. There were no women among the twelve apostles and I couldn't find any women preachers mentioned any where in the Bible. They were helpers and mother-teachers though and for these womenly [*sic*] qualities were given a prominent place in the Book.<sup>27</sup>

This is one of several times that Crawford stated her objection to the ordination of women: there were no women among the apostles. In June 1920, the Convention of the Northern Baptists was held in Buffalo. That was near enough to Crawford's mission field so that could attend. There had been an undercurrent of division within the denomination between liberalizing members and anti-modernists, and Curtis Lee Laws, editor of the Baptist *Watchman Examiner*, called for a General Conference on Fundamentals, to be held immediately before the convention. Crawford attended, and she came to identify herself as a fundamentalist, though she could also make light of the designation. (She had a lively wit, and once wrote, "Of course I am a Fundamentalist, strong on the "fun" & weak on the "mental.")<sup>28</sup>

During a number of summers, Crawford spent time at the Chautauqua Institution in New York. In 1920, Shailer Mathews was one of the speakers, and Crawford lamented his liberalism. She wrote, "Bah! My father studied science as much as Dr. M but he chose to stand by the creation in the old Book."<sup>29</sup> Here Crawford showed the basis for the literalism that provided a foundation for her opinions on the proper role for women, namely the teaching of her father. Her parents were not able to provide her with the advanced schooling enjoyed by her two sisters, but they compensated by instructing her during the evening while the three of them lived in North Dakota. John Crawford was a graduate of Stepney College in England, and he received a Doctor of Divinity degree from Acadia University in 1875. While serving his pastorate in North Dakota, Crawford became concerned as he observed the "mischievous doctrine of evolution sweep the country," and he developed a series of lectures presenting his views in churches throughout the state.<sup>30</sup> His daughter Isabel travelled with him to give bits of entertainment as an elocutionist, lighter interludes between sections of her father's weighty lectures.

Crawford felt that her father's instruction had prepared her well for her study at the Missionary Training School, where many of the lectures were given by the leading Baptist clergy in the Chicago area. Her bond with her father was strong, and he remained her authority long after his death 1892; in a letter in 1950, when she was nearly eighty years old, she

continued to extol the virtues of her “wonderful and consecrated father.”<sup>31</sup> As she retained his memory, she also retained his theology, and thus she rejected any modernizing tendencies that came to be accepted within part of the American Baptist church.

Yet at the same time that her father provided Isabel Crawford with a strong example in his adherence to a theological tradition, he sent another example that may have influenced his youngest daughter: he modelled for her a strong, independent spirit. John Crawford’s father, Hugh Crawford, was a Scots-Irish Presbyterian, and when during his teens John was converted and became a Baptist, Hugh disinherited him and tossed him out of the house. Undismayed, John became a Baptist pastor in England, but that life held poor prospects, so he immigrated to Canada with his wife and their two young daughters, selling their wedding presents to pay for their passage. Leaving his family in Halifax, he went on to Toronto and then walked north until he found a Baptist congregation willing to hire him as their pastor; then he returned to Halifax and brought the family with him to Cheltenham. After a relatively settled life there and in Woodstock, he again sold everything he owned in order to found Prairie College in Manitoba. When it failed, he had nothing, but he always trusted that God would provide.

Writing about this in that same 1950 letter, Isabel Crawford attributed her father’s bold actions to his “call from above,” and she asserted that she would not have “shared her lot with the ‘Wild Indians’ and her bed with dogs, hogs, fleas, bedbugs and rain, to say nothing of the privations and hunger, without having heard that same call.”<sup>32</sup> This is the basis that she gave for the courage and the independent spirit that motivated her to withstand the hardships of her mission. It was she, not her brother, who had been called into the ministry. She seemed less aware, however, that her independent spirit and her call to do what need and principle required also drew her to go beyond the usual boundaries of women’s leadership in her denomination and at that time.

Maintaining a literalist interpretation of the Bible, she rejected the idea of women’s ordination, but in the statement that she wrote six years before her death, Crawford made one significant concession. She said, “Although I am not a believer in the ordination of women I am in a believer in others having the right to decide the matter for themselves and being ordained if the church so votes.”<sup>33</sup> Though fiercely loyal to the church that her father had chosen and to which she had dedicated her considerable energies, she no longer retained the antipathy toward women ministers that

she had shown as a student in Chicago. Perhaps others might be ordained, but she had exercised her call to ministry in the way she felt befitted a Baptist loyal to the faith of her father.

### ***Endnotes***

1. Isabel Crawford, "Journal 1891-1893," 131. Isabel Crawford Collection, American Baptist Archives, Atlanta, Georgia (hereafter ABA).
2. Isabel Crawford, "Forever Moving," (January-September 1955), 70. Unpublished manuscript in the possession of Barbara Cross McKinnon, Guelph, Ontario.
3. Crawford, "Journal 1917-1918," 153; see also "Journal 1920-1921," 1, and "Journal 1919," 117. ABA.
4. Crawford, "Journal 1893-1894," 17. ABA.
5. Crawford, "Journal 1894-1896," 94. ABA.
6. Crawford, "Journal 1894-1896," 110. ABA.
7. Isabel Crawford, *Kiowa: A Woman Missionary in Indian Territory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 16.
8. Crawford, *Kiowa*, 74. ABA.
9. Crawford, "Journal 1898-1900," 130. ABA.
10. Crawford, "Journal 1902-1903," 46. ABA. The words in brackets were written in ink over a place where something shorter had been erased.
11. At the time both Southern Baptists and American (northern) Baptists were working in Oklahoma, and part of the American Baptists' concern was the reaction likely when their more conservative southern counterparts found out (see "Journal 1903-1905," 123, ABA).
12. Crawford, "Journal 1905-1906," 53-54. ABA.
13. Crawford, "Journal 1896-1906," 110. ABA.
14. Crawford, "Journal 1915-1916," 81-82. ABA.
15. Crawford, "Journal 1916-1917," 43. ABA.
16. Crawford, "Journal 1920-1921," 124. ABA.
17. Crawford, "Journal 1921," 27. ABA.
18. Crawford, "Journal 1921," 28. ABA.

19. Crawford, "Journal 1896-1897," 135. ABA.
20. Crawford, "Journal 1897-1898," 113. ABA.
21. Crawford, "Journal 1900-1901," n.p. ABA.
22. Crawford, "Journal 1903-1905," 128. ABA.
23. Crawford, "Forever Moving," 70.
24. Crawford, "Journal 1941-1942," 26. ABA.
25. Crawford, "Journal 1941-1942," 30. ABA.
26. Crawford, "Journal 1926-1927," 97. ABA.
27. Crawford, "Forever Moving," 70.
28. Crawford, "Journal 1927-1928," 52. ABA.
29. Crawford, "Journal 1920-1921," 50. ABA.
30. Isabel Crawford, *A Jolly Journal* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1932), 84-85. See also Crawford, "Journal 1919," 163.
31. Isabel Crawford, "Notebook untitled [Miscellaneous 1950-1953]," Crawford to Taylor, 16 February 1950. ABA.
32. Crawford, "Notebook untitled [Miscellaneous 1950-1953]," Crawford to Taylor, 16 February 1950. ABA.
33. Crawford, "Forever Moving," 70.

