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In the Western imagination, the mission of the church begins with white men, disciples of Jesus and the apostle Paul, who after the death and resurrection of Jesus traveled around the Roman Empire spreading the Gospel. However, from the very beginning of Christianity there were all kinds of people involved in the mission. In this paper, the author gives glimpses of the first missionaries of the Bible. From Paul to the Ethiopian eunuch and from the fisherman Peter and his wife to Roman magistrates and wealthy women supporting the itinerant Christian missionaries, the mission was a joint effort of both wealthy and poor, both men and women and eunuchs, and both Jews, Gentiles, Romans and Africans.

The presentation employs case studies to show the multicultural and multifaceted social reality of the early Christian mission. We will meet the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts, a wealthy man who still was marginalized in the Greco-Roman society because he belonged to a sexual minority, because he was of African origin, and because he was - despite his wealth and influential position - his Queen's slave. We will pay attention to the fact while the New Testament pays more attention to the work of male missionaries, then - as also today - many couples were both active in the work. For example Peter the brothers of Jesus had their wives working with them on their mission journeys (1 Cor. 9:5). They were poor fishermen and craftsmen. Some early missionaries chose poverty more or less voluntary: they were the missionaries walking from village to village, preaching, with no purse, bag or shoes (Luke 10:4). However, these missionaries were supported by wealthier people. Already Jesus and his disciples had had wealthy women supporting them (Luke 8:1-3), and early missionaries, Paul included, enjoyed hospitality of their wealthier brothers and sisters. The examples presented in this paper show the varied backgrounds of the earliest Christian missionaries and the broader Biblical background of the early Christian mission, already beginning during the lifetime of Jesus.

The author of the paper has a doctoral degree in Theology/New Testament studies from the University of Helsinki. Her current scholarly interests include intersecting gender, ethnic and social identities in the New Testament and the postcolonial Bible readings.