

HOW B.T. ROBERTS voted

BY HOWARD A. SNYDER

Joseph Terrill was shocked. It was election day and Brother Terrill, a prominent Free Methodist leader, accompanied Brother Roberts to the polls. It had been “one of the most exciting of our campaigns,” Terrill said.

Terrill assumed that B. T. Roberts, as a devout Christian, would of course vote the Prohibition ticket. Many—probably most—Free Methodists did in those days. But Roberts’ vote was “a mixture of the Democrat, the Republican, and the Prohibitionist.” Terrill adds, “Third party prohibitionist as I was, we had a spicy discussion over the course he took; but I could not doubt his conscientiousness in the matter.”

Why didn’t Roberts vote straight Prohibitionist? He supported the temperance cause and believed the sale of alcoholic beverages should be banned. But for Roberts, that wasn’t the only issue.

After Roberts’ death in 1893, Terrill wrote:

His attitude on the temperance question has been greatly misunderstood by many. The frequent discussions I have had with him in the past, enable me to speak with authority as to his views on this subject. He was a prohibitionist of the most radical stamp; but doubted the wisdom of organizing a party on that issue. He was not a party man. He was not a Republican, though often charged with being one. He was a Democrat as to the tariff question, but not on some other questions. He, like many others, thought the Republican party [rather than the Prohibition Party] would do the best for temperance.

support one political party?

The temperance movement, which promoted banning alcoholic beverages, was a major reform movement in Roberts’ day. The Prohibition Party was founded in 1869, when the Free Methodist denomination was still young, and in the 1880s was growing in influence. With their strong pro-temperance views, many Free Methodists supported the party and thought the church should officially endorse it. This was a hot issue in some General Conference debates.

Roberts opposed committing the denomination politically. As C. H. Zahniser wrote, “It had always been the position of Mr. Roberts that the church should not align itself with any one political party, but be free to vote for the best candidates for office, regardless of party affiliation.”

An ardent abolitionist in pre-Civil War days, Roberts later drew parallels between the abolition of slavery and the prohibition of alcohol. In 1885 he recalled Charles Finney’s words a half-century earlier, at the height of the abolitionist movement: “The grace of God will make any man an abolitionist.” So today, Roberts argued, “The grace of God will make any man a prohibitionist.”



An 1891 Republican cartoon lampooned the new People’s Party as an unstable patchwork of the Farmer’s Alliance, socialists, prohibitionists, and other groups. B.T. Roberts led in founding the first populist Farmers’ Alliance.

ROBERTS’ political views

From time to time Roberts was politically active on a selective basis. In the 1870s he was instrumental in founding the Farmers’ Alliance, a key step toward the rise of the Populist Movement in America. For awhile he participated in the National Christian Association, an anti-secret-society organization founded in 1867 by Wheaton College president Jonathan Blanchard. One of Theodore Weld’s abolitionist organizers in the 1830s, Blanchard, like Roberts, drew a parallel between the earlier abolitionist movement and the later movement to free people from the shackles of alcoholism.

As editor of *The Free Methodist* for four years, Roberts occasionally addressed farmers’ and other issues. In a January 1889 editorial on “Protection of Farmers” he commented that though he did “not, as a rule, take an active part in politics,” yet “on questions which affect the religious as well as the material well-being of the people at large, it is our duty, as a Christian editor, to give audible expression to our opinion.” Especially this is the case regarding “measures which have a direct tendency to impoverish the many in order to enrich the few.”

Roberts viewed war itself as a political and moral issue. “War is an act of barbarism. When resorted to for the sake of conquest it is no better than organized robbery on a large scale.” Strong nations should not dominate weak ones just because they can, but should seek equity and justice. “If the world ever reaches true

Christian civilization, standing armies will be disbanded and an international tribunal established, by which all disputes between nations shall be authoritatively decided" (*The Free Methodist* 20:9 [Mar. 2, 1887], 1).

Roberts viewed social reform efforts as important but secondary, not ultimate. Nothing must distract us from total loyalty to Jesus Christ. "Reform is not our salvation," he wrote. "One may be wholly devoted to the promotion of beneficent reforms and yet not be saved." Reform efforts have their own dangers: "The Christian may be swallowed up in the partisan. He may unconsciously exaggerate facts that favor his position, and suppress those that militate against it, until he has suffered a serious loss of candor and simplicity." It was for this reason that Roberts always opposed committing the church to any one political party or cause.

Though Roberts addressed political issues only occasionally, his views on holiness, revival, and reform gave a certain prophetic edge to all he wrote. He was constantly trying to push the meaning of holiness into life in the public sphere. He opposed any split-level view that would put spirituality on one plane and business, politics, and economics on another.

guidance for today

Do Roberts' views on voting and politics give any guidance for today?

Living more than a century ago, Roberts did not address many of today's political issues, such as health care, climate change, or nuclear proliferation. His approach seems to embody five basic principles, however, that are still relevant in 2008:

1 In a democracy, Christians should participate in the political process as part of their Christian discipleship and civic duty. This includes becoming reasonably informed about issues and candidates.

2 Christians should not be uncritically committed to any one political organization. They should not fall for the ideology of any party, whether Democratic or Republican; Prohibitionist, Libertarian, or Green. Political ideology prevents one from sorting out the candidates and issues based on their specifics and merits. Christians should be aware of (and discount) the ideological biases of political parties and media commentators and consultants.

3 Government has a legitimate and key role to play in protecting the interests of the public against monopolies and other special interests. The government should "break up, by law, these conspiracies to control prices," he wrote in his "Protection of Farmers" editorial. He supported a bill pending in Congress that would "afford substantial relief" to farmers by giving them low-interest loans.

4 Christians should have an overriding concern with how political issues affect the common people, and especially the poor. This was always central in Roberts' mind. It was the heart of what might be called his evangelical populism. Does a particular position, or proposed legislation, promote the best interests of the most people? Does it tend to lift up the poor, or to oppress them?

5 More generally, Christians should bring a kingdom-of-God perspective to bear on their politics. They should understand that the gospel of the kingdom is a higher value than economic prosperity, patriotism, or national security; that God is concerned to bless and secure all nations, not just our own. As part of the worldwide body of Christ, Christians might ask themselves: How

would this political position look to my brothers and sisters in Haiti, Zimbabwe, or the Philippines? How would it affect their lives?

B. T. Roberts wrote in his still-prophetic book *First Lessons on Money*, "It is a gross caricature of Christianity to represent that it teaches that happiness in the future world is to be secured by neglecting the duties which we owe to our fellow men in the present world. It teaches quite the contrary. It insists upon the faithful performance of all the duties we owe to others in every relation of life."

This is how B. T. Roberts voted—not just for the party, but for candidates whose positions and character were most consistent with Christian beliefs and the vision of the kingdom of God. □

Bibliographic Note: See *Populist Saints: B. T. and Ellen Roberts and the First Free Methodists* (Eerdmans, 2006). See also: B. T. Roberts, *First Lessons on Money* (1886); B. T. Roberts, "Protection of Farmers," *The Free Methodist* 22, no. 3 (Jan. 16, 1889), 8; J. G. Terrill, "Some Reminiscences of Rev. B. T. Roberts," *The Earnest Christian* 65, no. 4 (Apr. 1893), 112; C. H. Zahniser, *Earnest Christian: Life and Works of Benjamin Titus Roberts* (1957), 298.

STORY CONT'D FROM PAGE 1

woman from the local paper interviewed Cathy and me, very interested in Roberts and the FMC. Our interview was front-page news the next day, but time passed slowly in the church. As the minutes ticked I reflected on my disappointment. Why had I expected something special from my first camp meeting visit? Especially in May.

Eventually the United Methodists arrived and the service began. Rev. Ralph Tanner read Benson Roberts' gracious and thoughtful 1910 response to the Methodist Church. I sat a little straighter in my pew. Then Bishop Emeritus Richard Snyder spoke, and I found myself interested. Bishop Robert Webster from the AME Zion then preached—reminding us that, still, he thought, the church ought to do something about the many injustices around us.

By the time UM Bishop Thomas Bickerton preached on religion as the glue that not only holds society together but compels us to adhere, I felt something stir.

It was not until after the preaching, though, that the tears began to fall. Ralph Tanner called us all to the front. We each laid hands on the person in front of us and prayed for LaMar Carlson, a United Methodist superintendent who was seriously ill, with Bishop Bickerton standing surrogate. When the prayer ended we walked back to our seats singing "Amazing Grace." And I felt it—that moment when God's goodness and graciousness and power overwhelm us.

As I sat I thought, and why not? After all, I have just come from a camp meeting. — *Kate McGinn, Archivist*

LIVE TO DO
Good

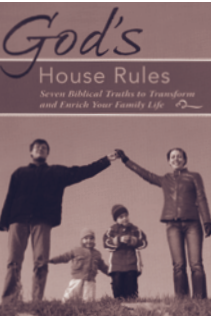
You profess to be a Christian; are you living to do good? Seriously ask yourself the question. Are you daily doing something for the good of others? Do you go where there are the greatest opportunities for usefulness? Are you as ready to help as be helped? Do you count it more blessed to give than to receive?

— B. T. Roberts, "Do Good,"
The Earnest Christian (April 1885), 124.

Book Review

God's House Rules: Seven Biblical Truths to Transform and Enrich Your Family Life, by Donald N. Bastian (Toronto: BPS Books, 2007). 158 pp. ISBN 0-9784402-0-X (paper). (Available through Wesleyan Publishing House.)

Why is it that children (or adults) raised in Christian homes often seem more influenced by contemporary culture than by their parents' teaching and example? Is there a problem with the quality of Christian family life today?



Bishop Emeritus Donald N. Bastian's *God's House Rules* addresses the need to strengthen Christian families. This timely book recently won first prize in the Christian Living category in the World Guild 2008 Canadian Christian Writing Awards.

Bastian wrote this book at "the persistent urging of my children," he says. It is an exposition especially of the "house rules" found in Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, and 1 Peter 3 but deals also with other passages, as in the first chapter, "How Adam Got His Wife."

Strong, intentional Christian homes are necessary as a bulwark against the culture in which we live and breathe, Bastian maintains. Referencing Francis Schaeffer, he writes: "Ideas are like germs. They float in the air undetected and we catch them, scarcely realizing we have done so until the disease has incubated.

Then, Christian or not, we succumb. Without realizing what is happening, we can gradually shift in our thinking" on key moral issues.

The book's seven chapters include "Submission Is For Everyone," "Husbands, Take the High Road," "What God Says to Children (and Their Parents)," and "The Family at Work." In his chapter on "Recovering Fatherhood," Bastian teaches how to balance authority with compassion. For example: "A father does something special for a son when he teaches him to fly a kite or ride a bike or catch a fish. There are a hundred possibilities, all according to a father's skills and interests."

An appendix provides "A Special Word to Fathers." Bastian emphasizes the role of fathers but he notes, "In the life of the Christian, *submission is for everyone, whether in the church or family.*"

Bastian points out that the biblical "house rules" are set forth in pairs. The "instructions are reciprocal," he says; "We might say that no one is told to perform in a solo fashion. The house rules are laid out to be performed as duets."

The author provides practical guidance for applying biblical principles. He recommends daily family devotions, "Christian biographies for Sunday-afternoon reading," and other helpful practices. The book is full of illustrations and personal stories that add to the book's usefulness and interest.

— Howard A. Snyder

Non-Profit Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Indianapolis, IN
Permit No. 8783

Free Methodist Church of North America
Free Methodist Historical Society
Box 535002
Indianapolis, IN 46253-5002
(800) 342-5531

FREE METHODIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

SUMMER/FALL 2008 — Volume 9 , No. 1



B.T. Roberts
(1823-93)

Published by the
**Marston Memorial
Historical Center**
ISSN 1546-4199

Cathy Fortner, Director
Kate McGinn, Archivist

World Ministries Center
Box 535002
770 N High School Road
Indianapolis, IN 46253-5002

(800) 342-5531

E-mail: history@fmcna.org

Website:
www.freemethodistchurch.org
(Select "About Us," then click
on Marston Historical Center)

Editorial Committee

Howard Snyder, Editor
Cathy Fortner
David Bundy
Kate McGinn

Layout & Design

Erin Newton

Visit to Pleasantville Camp and Titusville



“You can’t go home again,” they say. The forest is never as big as we remember or the bleachers as tall. The moon pies and RC Colas just don’t taste the same on a hot summer’s day. And camp meetings don’t seem quite as holy as they used to. The tabernacles are either worn down or modern. Folks dress casually and the old songs are new.

So it was with some trepidation that I hopped into the car with Cathy Fortner and headed to Pleasantville Campground in Pennsylvania. Actually I had never been to that or any other Free Methodist campground. But we see the photographs all the time in the archive.

After a meeting with United Methodist archivists and historians we headed over to Pleasantville. The weather was cold and wet, the heater where we conducted our workshop working overtime. A member of the local church served us wonderful pretzel sandwiches, a camp favorite. The participants, all FMs, were far more knowledgeable about the denomination’s rich history than myself.

And yet, I was disappointed. Pleasantville lacked something, and

my imagination could not be satisfied. I joined the group driving over to Titusville Free Methodist Church for the grand event that had taken us to western Pennsylvania. Bishops from the FM, United Methodist, and AME Zion churches met to commemorate the restoration of B. T. Roberts’s ministerial credentials by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1910.

An organist and pianist played Ira Sankey and Charles Wesley as we waited for the Methodists to arrive. They had visited historic Drake’s Well and were behind schedule. A young

(CONTINUES ON PAGE 3)

▷ **FM SESQUICENTENNIAL** — Plans are now beginning for celebrating the Free Methodist Sesquicentennial in 2010-2011.

▷ **RESTORATION** of the historic “Stagecoach Inn” at North Chili, New York, has finally begun! (See photo.) ▶▶▶▶

▷ **FM BLOG** — About 15 people a day are now viewing the new “Soul Searching” blogsite sponsored by the Historical Center. The site is “An open conversation engaging the history of the Free Methodist Church.” To view the posts (by Greg Coates, Kathy Callahan-Howell, Joanna DeWolf, and others), go to www.fmcna.typepad.com/soul_searching/

▷ **RECENT ACQUISITIONS:** *A Brief History of the Holiness Movement and Free Methodist Missions In Egypt, 1899-1986* by Doreen Hawley; Oral History interview of Chaplain Dean Cook; Tillman Houser’s *Let Me Tell You . . . A Memoir*; files of Bishop David Foster; several books from author David McKenna; Rachel Smiley, missionary to the Dominican Republic, letters dated 1926-1942.



News
Notes