

FREE METHODIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# Newsletter

SPRING 2014 — Volume 14, No. 3



B.T. Roberts  
(1823-93)

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

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## Continuing the Vision

As the deadline for this issue of the newsletter approached, I admit I became nervous. How can I possibly fill Howard Snyder's shoes? I'm extremely humbled to have the chance to direct the content for the *Free Methodist Historical Society Newsletter*. I see this newsletter as a chance for anyone interested in Free Methodist history, both in North America and around the world, to have a platform for their stories. Looking through the past ten years of publication, I see that the strength of the newsletter has been its commitment to promoting Free Methodist scholarship and recording the stories of individual Free Methodists. This is something I would like to continue.

However, unlike Howard Snyder, I don't have thirty plus years of connections to call on for articles. I need you — the reader — to send article suggestions to me at [christywinckles@gmail.com](mailto:christywinckles@gmail.com). I am particularly looking for feature articles by Free Methodists with a unique history to tell, such as our Winter 2013 article "Growing up in the Dust Bowl" by Donald Marvin Joy. Our history is rich and diverse; it's global and I would love for our newsletter to begin to reflect that diversity.

While continuing to feature the stories of Free Methodists, I want to place an emphasis on remembering the women who have served in our denomination. This month's featured article by Benjamin Wayman, "More Radical than First Wave Feminism? The Gospel According to B. T. Roberts," is an abbreviated version of a scholarly article that is in a forthcoming issue of *Women's Studies*. In it, Wayman makes the important point that encouraging women's participation in ministry is not simply an issue of equal rights, it is a *gospel* imperative, and the church is only as strong as its embrace of this imperative. As my own scholarly research focuses on the history of women in ministry and continuing obstacles to female leadership, I am pleased to inaugurate my editorship with Wayman's excellent article.

In future issues, I plan to alternate personal narratives and scholarly articles examining our denomination's impact on society at large. However, I cannot emphasize enough that I cannot do this job without the help of the readers. Please contact me with story ideas; and more importantly be willing to not only offer those story ideas but to write them! □

▷ STAY IN THE LOOP WITH HISTORICAL UPDATES — Go to this site to be added to the email sign up list <http://eepurl.com/eB9b6>

▷ THANKS TO Sandy Lefler, Ruth Cook, Louise Carpenter and Carolyn Simpson (pictured right) who volunteered to help sort and store missionary photographs. Marston appreciates all our amazing volunteers!



Photo courtesy of Louise Carpenter

News  
Notes

The Mission of the Free Methodist Historical Society is to preserve Free Methodist heritage and transmit it faithfully to each generation in order to assist the Free Methodist Church in fulfilling its mission.

# MORE RADICAL THAN FIRST WAVE FEMINISM?

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO B. T. ROBERTS

BY BENJAMIN D. WAYMAN

**B.T.** Roberts believed that ordaining women was a gospel mandate. Because of this, he was capable of a far more radical approach to the question of women's equality in the late nineteenth century than was his progressive contemporary and leader of the early women's rights movement, Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

To demonstrate this, I compare the biblical interpretation of Stanton in *The Woman's Bible* (1895) to that of Roberts in his *Ordaining Women* (1891). My aim is not to disparage Stanton or first-wave feminism, but rather to show how Roberts' interpretation of the Bible modeled an interpretation more radical and more far-reaching than that offered by Stanton and her colleagues.

In the introduction to *The Woman's Bible*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote, "Whatever the Bible may be made to do in Hebrew or Greek, in plain English it does not exalt and dignify woman." Stanton, an early leader of the women's rights movement, shaped the narrative of how the movement has been understood. One of the central struts of the nineteenth-century women's movement was that Scripture presented a major obstacle to the empowerment of women. Stanton's solution was to offer an "egalitarian" model for interpreting and, if needed, rejecting those scriptural passages that proved problematic for women's equality. Three characteristics comprised the approach: her denial of the Bible's divine authority, her antipathy toward Christianity, and her belief that gender equality is essential to human nature.

The first characteristic of Stanton's egalitarian interpretation is her rejection of the Bible's authority. In Stanton's words to the revising committee: "Do not regard the Bible as the 'Word of God,' but like any other book, to be judged by its merits." By denying Scripture's divine authority, Stanton sought to lessen its influence and address the problem it posed for the women's movement. *The Woman's Bible* was an attempt to reinterpret those passages used to subordinate women and show how the Bible could be read to support the women's movement.

Stanton not only prioritized her heightened consciousness of



Elizabeth Cady Stanton



B.T. Roberts

women's rights over biblical texts which seemed to contradict those principles, but also set herself against the Christianity she saw perpetuating such readings. Stanton belonged to a religious community known as the Theosophists, which took an adversarial position against Christianity and was deeply committed to gender equality. Stanton's professed approach to Scripture in *The Woman's Bible* was to produce readings to effect reform, and so her biblical interpretation was rigorously applied toward this end.

### ROBERTS & STANTON'S BIBLICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Roberts also challenged what he considered misreadings of Scripture, but he did so through a decidedly less antagonistic and more constructive "Galatian" model. He proposed an approach to the Bible that not only empowered and dignified women, but also affirmed Scripture's authority *and* the gospel it proclaimed. His three principle aims were to: acknowledge the Bible's authority, reform the church that he loved, and make Galatians 3:28 the "key text" on the issue of women's ordination.

First, Roberts regarded the Bible as the inspired and authoritative Word of God. He insisted that the Bible was the *solution* to the church's limitation on women and that it contained the antidote for their mistreatment. He believed an interpretation based *in Scripture* was critical to read Scripture rightly. So where Stanton found the problem in Scripture itself and *rejected* its authority, Roberts found the challenge in Scrip-

ture's interpretation and *affirmed* its authority.

Second, where Stanton set herself in opposition to the church, Roberts sought to correct the church's misreading of Scripture. While the broader American culture and its reading of the Bible was Stanton's concern, the church was Roberts' starting and ending point. A Free Methodist pastor and general superintendent, Roberts addressed his *Ordaining Women* to Free Methodists and other Christians in an effort to reshape *the church's* interpretation of the Bible.

Finally, Roberts' biblical interpretation was fundamentally

rooted in Galatians 3:28 which reads: “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.*” Aiming to reform the church’s position on the full ordination of women, Roberts adopted Galatians 3:28 as the orienting text for the issue. He instructed, “Make this the KEY TEXT upon this subject, and give to other passages such a construction as will make them agree with it, and all is harmony. The apparent conflict is at an end. The fetters are taken off from woman, and she is left free to serve Christ in any position she may be qualified and called to fill. Why should this not be done?” Roberts reasoned, “If this gives to *men* of all nations the right to become ministers of the Gospel, it gives to *women* precisely the same right.” He believed that Galatians 3:28 *required* women’s ordination and their equal status in the church.

## SUPPORTERS OF THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

While Stanton’s and Roberts’ interpretations of Scripture differed greatly, both did address biblical texts they saw being used to subordinate women. The comparisons show a churchman contemporary to Stanton who, far from constructing obstacles to the women’s movement, arrived at conclusions similar to and even more far-reaching than those of Stanton. For Roberts, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 were the two primary passages used as biblical evidence forbidding women’s ordination. (Due to space constraints, I will focus only on 1 Corinthians 14:34-35; an extended version of this article is available online.)

Stanton’s egalitarian approach can be seen in three efficient moves. First, she contextualized the Corinthian church as being “peculiarly given to diversion and to disputation,” and therein highlighted the historical context of Paul’s instruction. Second, she demonstrated that “wise men” disagree whether or not women should “discuss knotty points with their husbands,” and in so doing, called into question Paul’s counsel in verse 35. Finally, Stanton advised that in light of the “wide difference of opinion on this point among wise men, perhaps it would be as safe to leave women to be guided by their own unassisted common sense.” Thus, in three strategic sentences, Stanton: (1) restricted this Pauline teaching to its original context, (2) dismissed Paul’s patriarchal counsel and questioned his authority, and (3) defended the capability of women to decide when to speak and when to refrain, and thereby encouraged women to exercise their reason over and against the Bible.

In contrast, Roberts committed several pages to addressing the supposed Pauline prohibition to women becoming ordained. By referencing 1 Corinthians 11:5 (“*But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head...*”), Roberts employed an approach that focused on looking within a single text to show that the Apostle “certainly assumes that she was to pray and prophesy in public.” He then went on to highlight a number of women in Scripture who were clearly active in the early church’s ministry of proclamation. Drawing from biblical commentator Adam Clarke, Roberts corroborated his view that “Christian women, as well as men, labored in ministry of the word.”

Roberts employed 2 Peter 3:15 (“Peter says that in all of Paul’s epistles *are some things hard to be understood*”) to make the additional point that we have a limited understanding of Scripture and its gospel. In underlining that Paul’s letters present challenges for interpretation, Roberts suggested, “Why not class

among these things *hard to be understood*, what he says about women keeping silence in the churches, and conform our practice to what we find, in other passages, that women actually did in the apostolic church?”

In his closing remarks, Roberts insisted that the church “must either go back or we must go ahead.... The present position of the churches is not only wrong, but inconsistent.” His concern here was for the church to embrace the gospel in its fullness. He concluded, “If woman, in using her voice, in praising God, or declaring His truth, in your churches, is a transgressor, then silence her at whatever cost; if she is doing right then remove all shackles and give her the liberty of the Gospel.”

In conclusion, Stanton and Roberts both interpreted controversial passages in a way championing women’s equality. But it was Roberts’ reverence for Scripture’s divine authority, his role as a church leader, and his focus on Galatians 3:28 that enabled him to offer an interpretation capable of reshaping nineteenth-century readings of Scripture because Roberts’ reading reinforced rather than undermined Scripture’s authority. Though Stanton was convinced that her movement needed to “deal with” the Bible, her “egalitarian” interpretation apart from Scriptural authority couldn’t be embraced by Christians because it set the ideals of the women’s movement against those of the church. In contrast, Roberts modeled what I call the “Galatian model” that supported women’s *ordination*, the highest level of service in the church’s ministry. Thus by underlining the true meaning of the gospel, Roberts situated the efforts of first-wave feminism within the larger story of God’s creation of a new people in Christ, which demanded nothing less than the ordination of women.

Despite the possible appeal of Roberts’ “Galatian” interpretation for nineteenth-century Christians or that of the “egalitarian” model for the women’s movement, neither approach effected a widespread reconsideration of these issues in their time. *The Woman’s Bible* was formally repudiated by the National American Women’s Suffrage Association shortly after its publication, and Roberts’ *Ordaining Women* could not overturn the ruling made against women’s ordination by the 1890 General Conference of the Free Methodist Church. But what was untimely for both Stanton and Roberts gained support nearly a century later when, in 1974, The Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion reprinted *The Woman’s Bible* “to promote the equality of women in all areas of religious life,” and the Free Methodist Church finally resolved to ordain women.

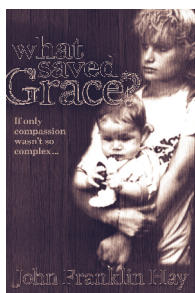
Free Methodists are still straining to see the gospel as B. T. Roberts saw it. Proposals and initiatives and impassioned pleas for women in leadership in Free Methodist churches abound. The problem with such approaches is that they will never attain the clarity of vision of our denomination’s founding father until we see this issue not through egalitarian or utilitarian lenses – that women too offer gifts than can help grow the church – but rather, as a gospel imperative. The gospel according to Roberts is no less radical in our time than it was over a hundred years ago. ▢

*This is an abridged version of Dr. Wayman’s article. To read the full article visit the Marston website at [fmchr.ch/Wayman](http://fmchr.ch/Wayman).*



# Book Review

***What Saved Grace?***, by John Franklin Hay (First published in 2013 as an e-book on Smashwords.com, also available at Amazon.com, BN.com and from iTunes.)



“Directly opposite to this [the approach of the desert mystics] is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. 'Holy solitaires' is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.” – John Wesley, *Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), in Wesley's *Works* (Abingdon ed.) 13:39.

John Wesley's statement regarding holiness is not a direct call for social action but something deeper than that – an assertion that holiness, and indeed the Christian faith, must of necessity be expressed in community. Holiness social ethics and social activism was further developed by 19th century church leaders like Phineas F. Bresee (Church of the Nazarene), Phoebe Palmer (Five Points Mission), William Booth (Salvation Army), and B. T. Roberts (Free Methodist Church).

John Franklin Hay in his book *What Saved Grace?* presents a case study of both social action and social holiness. By stepping into the shoes of Grace, a poverty-stricken young mother living in a rundown inner-city neighborhood, we are introduced to a variety of motives and means that individuals, churches, and organizations have for offering assistance to the poor.

**Compassion and Evangelism:** Pastor Rick of First Wesleyan Church is responsible for instituting a weekly food pantry as a means of evangelism. Individuals are able to receive food from the pantry only after attending a chapel service. His underlying belief is that a person's spiritual need is the most pressing need.

**Advocacy and Solidarity:** Sister Amber of St. Francis Roman Catholic Church is passionate about social justice and advocacy for the poor. The food pantry meets immediate needs, but their advocacy work on behalf of the poor attempts to change the system that breeds poverty. Her underlying belief is that the need for social justice is a spiritual need.

**Neighborliness and Community:** David, the neighbor who lives across the street from Grace, is just that – a good neighbor.

He loves the neighborhood and is involved with the Neighborhood Association and helps establish a community garden. His underlying belief is that saving the neighborhood, and the people in it, will happen only as the people in the community work together.

So what saved Grace? Not any one of these things, but rather all of them combined. John Hay challenges his readers to consider salvation (and holiness) as a holistic and multi-faceted process that touches every aspect of our lives – physically, economically, socially, emotionally, and relationally as well as spiritually. This is what Jesus taught, but it is something that has been forgotten by many today.

— Reviewed by Larry Winckles

## LETTERS

Thank you for the invitation to comment on the recent piece about connectionalism (Winter 2013 issue). As it rightly says, a myriad of thriving agencies around the world certainly does reflect the interconnectedness of Free Methodism.

When the Free Methodist Church was organized on August 23, 1860, this was done on the basis of a founding document. Then, in 1915 the general conference summarized these founding commitments in a constitution. That constitution is intended to define what it means to be a Free Methodist, answering such questions as these: To what doctrines must one commit?; what are the standards of membership?; and how are Free Methodist bodies to be governed?

The piece you have published on "connectionalism" reflects clearly the flowering of the denomination in dynamic ways. But the more complex and global the Free Methodist Church becomes will it not become increasingly more important to be defined and governed by a constitution? Otherwise doctrine, if it is not even considered in the equation, can't be said to matter; membership standards may begin to vary from place to place; and governing may depend on the whim or design of leaders rather than the rule of law. Social connections and even spiritual connections alone are not enough, as valuable as they may be. There must be organizational connections.

Thank you for allowing me to share these thoughts.

— Bishop Donald Bastian

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