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"TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR": MISSIONAL SELF-UNDERSTANDING IN EARLY FREE METHODISM (1860-90)

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> My special mission is to preach the gospel to the poor. I believe that churches should be as free as the grace we preach. The Lord allowed me to be thrust out as I was, because He saw that in this manner this work could be carried on to the best advantage. The work is progressing and I expect to live to see FREE churches all over the land—especially in the cities where the poor are congregated. This is a blessed work! — B. T. Roberts, *The Earnest Christian* (January 1865)

The Free Methodist Church, organized in New York State in 1860, claimed that it was raised up to preach the gospel to the poor. For many decades, the denomination carried this statement near the front of its *Book of Discipline:* "All their churches are required to be as free as the grace they preach. They believe that their mission is twofold—to maintain the Bible standard of Christianity, and to preach the Gospel to the poor." Some paragraphs later the church declared that "special efforts" must be made to reach the poor. "In this respect the Church must follow in the footsteps of Jesus. She must see to it that the gospel is preached to the poor. Thus, the duty of preaching the gospel to the poor, is enjoined by the plainest precepts and examples." The church, from its music to its architecture, must be organized specifically to reach the poor.[1] To adapt the jargon of today, Free Methodism was to be a "poor-friendly church."

The Free Methodist Church is now 132 years old. Beginning in western New York State and Illinois, it spread quickly throughout the Midwest and to the West Coast of the United States. Overseas missionary work began in the 1880s. The denomination is now found in about 27 nations of the world. In general,

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[1]Quotations are from *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church* (Rochester, NY: The General Conference, 1870), pp. ix, xi.

the work in other nations has grown more rapidly than that in the United States and Canada.[2]

Has the Free Methodist Church reached the poor? In many places in the world the denomination is a church of and among the poor. In the United States and Canada, it has become a middle class denomination. Today in North America the denomination does not claim to be a church of the poor or bear special responsibility for reaching the poor. Yet this was a prominent note in the church's origin.

Is Free Methodism a nineteenth-century example of a preferential option for the poor? Some have argued that it is.[3] This paper explores the issue further, raising the questions:

1. What was the source of Free Methodism's early concern for the poor?

2. How was this concern understood?

3. What was the relationship of this concern to the denomination's focus on a Wesleyan understanding of sanctification?

4. To what extent was this concern with the poor sustained over time?[4]

Concern for the Poor in the Origin of Free Methodism

The organization of the Free Methodist Church in 1860 followed a series of controversies in the Methodist Episcopal Church, particularly in the Genesee Conference, over the previous decade. The 1860 schism followed the organization of the abolitionist Wesleyan Methodist Church out of Methodism in 1843 and the North/South division over slavery and related issues in 1844-45.

These slavery-connected controversies were not totally unrelated to the formation of the Free Methodist Church, and early Free Methodists were abolitionists. Free Methodism arose out of a somewhat different complex of issues, however. The most immediate issue concerned the sale or rental of pews, especially in new church buildings. It was this controversy which produced the name “Free Methodist.” The Free Methodists were for “free” pews and “free” church buildings, not for “stock

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[2]That portion of the denomination outside the United States passed the North American church in total membership in the 1960s. Today the denomination counts nearly 300,000 members, with only about 85,000 of those being in the United States and Canada.

[3]William Kostlevy, “Benjamin Titus Roberts and the 'Preferential Option for the Poor' in the Early Free Methodist Church,” in Anthony L. Dunnavant, ed., *Poverty and Ecclesiology: Nineteenth-Century Evangelicals in the Light of Liberation Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 51-67; Donald W. Dayton, *Discovering An Evangelical Heritage,* rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 102-12.

[4]I wish to acknowledge here the help of Christopher Heckaman, my student assistant at United Theological Seminary, in researching this paper.

churches" in which one had to pay in order to get a good seat.

In the 1850s the Genesee Conference was sharply divided along theological, sociocultural, and church-political lines. On the one side was the "Buffalo Regency," made up of leading pastors and other denominational leaders, and on the other the so-called "Nazarites" who were protesting the liberalizing trends in the denomination.[5] "Secret societies" — the Masonic and Odd Fellow lodges — became a key issue in the dispute. A number of leading Methodist clergy, including the book agent, Thomas Carlton, had become Masons. In 1829 the Genesee Conference had passed a resolution against Masonry, saying ". . . we will admit no person on trial, nor admit any into full connection in this conference . . . who shall have ever belonged to the Masonic Fraternity, who will not renounce all connection with Masons as such, by withdrawing from the institution, and promising to have no further connection with Masons."[6] But twenty years later sentiment had changed. After the anti-Masonic movement in the U.S. of the 1830s (which was centered in western New York State), Masonry regained popularity. The number of Masonic lodges in New York State more than doubled between 1846 and 1851, going from 114 to 234.[7] Apparently the lodge appealed to many Methodist clergy in larger city and town churches.

A principal leader of the protest against pew rental, secret societies, and similar issues in the Genesee Conference was Benjamin Titus Roberts (1823-93). Roberts preached and wrote a series of articles against pew rental and what he saw as the spiritual decline of Methodism. His protest provoked a

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[5]The term "Buffalo Regency" suggests an unflattering comparison with the "Albany Regency," the New York State political machine engineered by Martin Van Buren which set much of the pattern for U.S. political parties in the 1820s and 1830s. See Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 485, 488-90. The O.T. term "Nazarite" apparently was first applied to the reform group by the rather eccentric Rev. Joseph McCreery, the main source of the more extreme Nazarite agitation, at a camp meeting in 1855. After the formation of the Free Methodist Church a Nazarite group continued, protesting that the Free Methodists were not sufficiently open to the direct leading of the Spirit. See James Arnold Reinhard, "Personal and Sociological Factors in the Formation of the Free Methodist Church, 1852-1860" (Diss., University of Iowa, 1971), 39.

[6] Conable, *History of the Genesee Annual Conference,* 302, quoted in Reinhard, 138.

[7]This was still much lower than the high of 500 lodges in the state in 1836, before the anti-Mason crusade. See John C. Graves, "Free Masonry Fifty Years Ago," address delivered before Washington Lodge No. 240, Sept. 28, 1916, cited in Reinhard, 139. Kathleen Kutolowski notes that Genesee County in western New York was the "birthplace of the [Antimasonic political] party and seedbed for its early ideology, imagery, and organization. Here Freemasonry had flourished (with seventeen lodges and three Roual Arch chapters in the twenty-two towns), and here Antimasonry would triumph, with the party's candidates winning every county office from 1827 to 1833, averaging 69 percent of the vote." Kathleen Smith Kutolowski, "Antimasonry Reexamined: Social Bases of the Grass-Roots Party," *Journal of American History* 71:2 (September, 1984),

church trial and his expulsion from the Methodist Episcopal Church (along with Joseph McCreery) in 1858.

A series of Laymen's Conventions[8] over the next three years resulted in the organization of the Free Methodist Church in August, 1860, and the denomination's first general conference the following October. It was this first general conference which proclaimed the denomination's twofold mission to maintain biblical Christianity and to preach the gospel to the poor.

In the minds of Roberts and other early Free Methodist leaders, preaching the gospel to the poor and free pews were related issues. This is clear from the statement of mission quoted above, which reads more fully:

> All their churches are required to be as free as the grace they preach. They believe that their mission is twofold—to maintain the Bible standard of Christianity, and to preach the Gospel to the poor. Hence they require that all seats in their houses of worship should BE FREE. No pews can be rented or sold among them. The world will never become converted to Christ, so long as the Churches are conducted upon the exclusive system. It has always been contrary to the economy of the Christian Church, to build houses of worship with pews to rent. But the spirit of the world has encroached, by little and little, until, in many parts of the United States, not a single free church can be found in any of the cities or larger villages. The pew system generally prevails among all denominations. We are thoroughly convinced that this system is wrong in principle and bad in tendency. It is a corruption of Christianity. *Free Churches are essential to reach the masses*.[9]

The Pew Rental System

Renting or selling the exclusive right to particular pews in church buildings had in fact become a

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[8]This series of conventions was part of a broader "lay" movement in Methodism seeking increased participation of members and more democratic process in the church, and particularly "lay" representation in annual and general conferences. A number of Laymen's Conventions were held in various places during the 1850s. See Donald B. Marti, "Rich Methodists: The Rise and Consequences of Lay Philanthropy in the Mid-19th Century," in Russell E. Richey and Kenneth E. Rowe, eds., *Rethinking Methodist History* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1985), 164-65.

[9]*The Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church,* 1870, ix-x. This statement (edited somewhat) is still found in the current (1989) Free Methodist *Book of Discipline,* p. 294 (the Historical Appendix).

widespread practice by the mid 1850s.[10] The practice often produced considerable income in larger churches. The *Chicago Post* reported in 1869,

> At the sale of pews at Grace Church, on Monday evening and Tuesday, the prices obtained for sittings in that house of worship were greater, we believe, than ever realized in Chicago. The pew admitted to be the best went off to S. Mason Loomis, at the modest figure of $2,150, he having gallantly bid $950 for the first choice.—– From that sum down to more moderate rates, the descent was easy—–the sale of the evening closing by knocking off No. 136 to Dr. E. M. Hale, the abortionist, at the extraordinary low sum of $400.[11]

A little calculation shows the dimensions of this sale. If the average price was $1,200 (less than half the average between the highest and lowest paid), and 136 pews were sold, $163,200 would have been raised in this sale —– an enormous amount at the time.[12] The *Post* article went on to comment,

> . . . while indulging in the conceits of ecclesiastical architecture, the sweet strains of operatic music, the luxury of a house complete in all its appointments, all in the name and for the glory of God, it is well enough for them to remember that the Protestant poor of Chicago are lapsing into unbelief and darkness, because with the exception of the few Mission churches, there is no place in the House of God for them . . . . No man who labors with his hands will find a place in Grace Church. . . . What we say of Grace Church is true of all like establishments in Chicago and throughout the whole country. In them a certain number of lawyers, doctors, politicians, editors, speculators, merchants, and sometimes abortionists, meet to loll away an hour and a half of each Sunday, on luxuriously

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[10]Though the practice was relatively new in American Methodism, pew sale or rental has a long history. The Methodist *Discipline* in 1820 added a prohibition against the practice, saying Methodist edifices were to be built "with free seats," but this was effectively nullified in 1852 by adding, "wherever practicable." Nolan B. Harmon, ed., *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), 2:1892-93.

[11]Article from the *Chicago Post,* reported in *The Earnest Christian and Golden Rule* (January, 1870), 31-32. Whether this was the Grace M. E. Church in Chicago or a church of another denomination is unclear.

[12]Grace M. E. Church in Chicago was valued at $115,000 in 1869 and with 232 members was the fifth largest M. E. church in Chicago, though it was declining. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Year 1869* (New York: Carlton & Lanahan), 271. The highest "probable value" of any church building in the Genesee Conference in 1858 was $28,000 (the value listed for both the Niagara Street and Grace churches in Buffalo), while the average value of the 144 church buildings in the conference was only $2,620. Significantly, the average value of the four Buffalo church edifices listed was over seven times greater than the conference average. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist*

cushioned seats . . . . In all of them, the men who labor, no matter at what, nor how faithfully and intelligently, are practically forbidden as if an angel with a flaming sword stood at the entrance.[13]

This article gives some sense of the growing affluence, sophistication, and status-consciousness of many city churches of the day. Prospering urban Methodists increasingly fit this pattern.

The pew rental controversy was an issue of economic justice in two senses. Obviously it constituted a form of discrimination against the poor. But it was at the same time a market-driven system of church economics that gave large influence to the wealthy while undermining community and shared stewardship by enforcing economic distinctions. Pew sale or rental, where practiced, became a whole system of church economics.[14]

The protest against "pewed churches" was twofold: the system was poor stewardship, indicating an unacceptably low standard of Christian discipleship and experience; and it discriminated against the poor, violating the biblical standard of community and subverting the church's ministry to preach the gospel to the poor. The practice effectively made the poor unwelcome in the church, directly violating James 2:1-7.

The link between the pew rental protest and concern for the poor is fairly obvious. It is perhaps less obvious why Roberts and the early Free Methodists should have made this particular argument. They opposed pew rental in part as a violation of biblical stewardship. On the same principle they opposed bazaars, raffles, and fund-raising dinners. But why specifically this concern with the poor?

One answer lies in the increasing affluence and prosperity of urban Methodists. This was reflected not only in their personal lifestyles but also in church architecture and worship patterns. Methodist church buildings in the larger cities were becoming stately and luxurious, music was becoming more professional, and expensive organs with paid organists were not uncommon. This was the period when

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Episcopal Church for the Years 1858, 1859 (New York: Carlton & Porter), 7:322-24.

[13]Ibid.

[14]For an understanding of pew-renting as an ecclesiastical economic system, see Callum G. Brown, "The Costs of Pew-renting: Church Management, Church-going and Social Class in Nineteenth-century Glasgow," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 38:3 (July, 1987), 347-61. Brown's summary applies largely to the American scene as well: "It was of great significance that pew-renting reached its height in the nineteenth century. Its growth was closely related to the evolution of modern society. . . . In the nineteenth century the renting of pews became a device for creating and sustaining social exclusivity: those who could pay rents proved their worldly success, confirmed their allegiance to the prevailing moral values of thrift and self-reliance and, within the church-going community, established their place on the social hierarchy by the price they paid for seats — a fact observable to all by the location of pews within the church" (p. 361).

newly prosperous Methodist businessmen and entrepreneurs like Daniel Drew and the Harper brothers in New York were endowing universities and seminaries and helping to fund local churches. Donald Marti notes,

> The idea that Methodists might be rich was novel in the middle third of the 19th century. Methodists had always been characterized, in and out of their fellowship, as very ordinary people. . . . Methodists themselves agreed that their denomination had first grown among poor folk. The Reverend Gilbert Haven of the New England Conference, later a bishop in post-Civil Ward South Carolina, thought that some of the denomination's special virtue arose from that fact.[15]

Marti notes that in 1855 Bishop Matthew Simpson

> encouraged some of the wealthier brethren in Pittsburgh to erect Christ Church, the first American Methodist church built in the Gothic Revival style. . . . When Christ Church and other grand edifices arose, Methodists discovered that their new churches needed formal pews, rather than the plain benches to which they had been accustomed. They called for liturgical embellishments as well. Simpson welcomed all of that. Certainly men who had earned fine homes and "social refinement" had the right to expect similar graces in their churches. The fact that they were willing to pay for them made their claim all the stronger.[16]

These dynamics are reflected in an 1857 editorial in the Methodist *Buffalo Christian Advocate.* In a piece entitled "Wealth and Piety—A Bright Side," editor John Robie defended the value of wealthy churches. It is well "to hold them up before the Christian world as model Church examples. Such churches always prosper. . . . the monied power of the Church is superadded to all the other gifts of God, and the whole brought under contribution in the blessed work of the Gospel. How shall such Churches be multiplied?"[17]

A clear sociocultural difference distinguished prospering urban Methodists from the many Methodists who opposed pew rentals. For the most part the protesters, or at least their main constituency, were from small town and rural congregations or from poorer city churches. These differences became clearer once the Free Methodist Church was organized. With a few exceptions, early Free Methodist churches were

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[15]Marti, 159.
[16]Ibid., 159-60.

located in towns and rural areas. They weren't necessarily poor, but were somewhat culturally isolated from the growing affluence and sophistication of the large urban churches. Early Free Methodist churches located in large cities (for example, New York, Buffalo, and St. Louis) appear to have been primarily working-class congregations.

Socioeconomic factors thus underlay the protest against pew rentals. James Reinhard comments in his dissertation, "Personal and Sociological Factors in the Formation of the Free Methodist Church, 1852-1860": "New School Methodism [which Roberts opposed] was, by and large, coterminous with a particular social class. Upper-class attitudes were incongruous to the revivalism Roberts sought to foster."[18] Reinhard goes on to say,

> . . . a decision-making elite, economically and socially, had developed among the Methodists in the Buffalo, New York area. Personal tensions and animosities quickly developed. Churches located in the poorer rural areas engaged in severe condemnation of wealth, worldly fashions, and pleasures. The crisis religious experiences, conversion and sanctification, commonly associated with lower-class religious movements, was the boast of the Genesee revivalists.
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> Emotionalism in religion, often incongruous with prosperity and social position, was disruptive to progress for others. In western New York the perfectionistic dynamic of Methodism, as elsewhere, tended to disappear as people rose in the social scale. The upper classes found it easy to disparage and displace this more vigorous expression of faith.[19]

This rural/urban split as a dynamic in the origin of the Free Methodist Church casts its shadow down to the present. The Free Methodist Church has been primarily a small town denomination. With the growth of the suburbs in the 1950s the pattern changed somewhat, so that now many North American

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[17]Quoted in Reinhard, 86.

[18]Reinhard, 85.

[19]Ibid., 97. Concern with entire sanctification certainly wasn't limited to the "lower classes," however; witness the widespread influence of Phoebe Palmer. But Roberts and other early Free Methodists clearly advocated a more "radical" form of holiness — more emotionally expressive, and carrying more specific and uncompromising social and economic implications. For example, Palmer thought Roberts and the Free Methodists discredited the holiness message by linking it to the political question of abolitionism. Roberts and Redfield felt Palmer presented a compromised view of holiness by not supporting abolitionism, which they saw as a moral question inseparable from holiness. See Charles Edward White, *The Beauty of Holiness: Phoebe Palmer as Theologian, Revivalist, Feminist, and Humanitarian* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury / Zondervan, 1986), 42, 100, 228.

Free Methodist churches are suburban. Even today, however, the denomination has few strong urban churches.

In the 1850s, it does appear that the primary supporters of the pew rental protest came from outside the large city churches. The leading spokespersons of this protest, however — people like B. T. Roberts and others — were not poor. Nor were they confined to rural or small town congregations, as the itineracy system tended to place them in a variety of contexts.

It should also be noted that the protesting pastors represented a younger element in the conference, a group concerned with reform in the church and with the denomination's drift from traditional Methodist doctrine as it grew and became more affluent. The comparative youth of Roberts and some of the other reformers seems to have been a factor in the controversy. Roberts was in his early thirties when he first began to call for reform, and only 36 when he was expelled from the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1856 the Rev. John B. Wentworth of the Genesee Conference decried "these unfledged and beardless and brainless boys" who are "allowed to insult the manhood, to question the honesty, and to malign the character of the Fathers of the Conference."[20]

Whatever the socioeconomic factors underlying the controversy, clearly the protest was also theologically based. In fact, Roberts' protest explicitly linked theology and economic concerns, as we shall see.

B. T. Roberts' Protest

B. T. Roberts was born in 1823, when the Methodist Episcopal Church was scarcely forty years old. He grew up during the period of rapid Methodist growth, which was also the period of a growing socioeconomic rift between multiplying frontier Methodists and prospering city congregations. More immediately volatile was the dispute over slavery and slave-holding. From early on Roberts' sympathies were with the abolitionists and with aggressively reaching the common people with the gospel.[21]

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[20]Junius [J. B. Wentworth], "Nazarite Reformers and Reformation," *Medina Tribune* (Sept. 11, 1856), p. 1. Quoted in Reinhard, 24.

[21]No fully comprehensive biography of Roberts has yet been written. The best source is Clarence Howard Zahniser, *Earnest Christian: Life and Works of Benjamin Titus Roberts* (Circleville, OH: Advocate Publishing House, 1957). See also Benson Howard Roberts, B*enjamin Titus Roberts, Late General Superintendent of the Free Methodist Church. A*

Roberts' concerns included, in addition to abolition, farmers' rights, temperance, economic reform, and the right of women to preach. His 1891 book *Ordaining Women,* prompted by Free Methodism's refusal to approve full ordination for women in 1890, has been called "one of the most radical and consistently egalitarian feminist tracts in the nineteenth century."[22]

Appointed to the prominent Niagara Street Church in Buffalo in 1852, where pew-renting was already in effect, Roberts began to work against the system both locally and in the conference. He wrote in the *Buffalo Christian Advocate,* "Is there any good reason for renting pews in churches? It tends to debase the poor. . . . It exalts the rich. . . . Renting pews is saying, in substance, we want none in our congregation but those who are able to move in fashionable circles, and can pay ten, twenty, fifty or one hundred dollars a year for a pew."[23] In a letter about this time Roberts noted that Thomas Carlton, the newly-appointed Methodist book agent, on a visit to Buffalo had commented that "the free seat system did not work well in New York, and they were getting out of it fast as they could. He said they have lately repaired Allen Street Church and he believed they had made it a stock church." Roberts added, "Here all our churches are stock churches, and several of the men or preachers in this Conference say they would never build a church upon any other plan."[24]

The writing which led most directly to Roberts' expulsion from the Methodist Episcopal Church was an article entitled "New School Methodism," published in the newly-founded Methodist reform paper, the *Northern Independent,* in 1857.[25] The article attacked pew rental and other departures from "Old School

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Biography (North Chili, NY: "The Earnest Christian" Office, 1900); Esther M. Roberts, *The Bishop and His Lady* (Winona Lake, IN: Light and Life Press, 1962); Richard R. Blews, *Master Workmen: Biographies of the Late Bishops of the Free Methodist Church During Her First Century 1860-1960* (Winona Lake, IN: Light and Life Press, 1960), 17-46, in addi-tion to denominational histories. Much original source material which was used somewhat by Zahniser in his biography has recently become available; it is lodged in the Library of Congress, with copies in the library of Roberts Wesleyan College, Rochester, New York.

[22]Donald W. Dayton, "Reclaiming Our Roots: The Social Vision of B. T. Roberts," unpubl. manuscript (1992), 7.

[23]Quoted in Reinhard, 93.

[24]Quoted in Benson Roberts, 77-78. Carlton was a member of the Genesee Conference and was prominent in the "Buffalo Regency" group, though as denominational book agent (publisher) from 1852 to 1872 he was stationed in New York City. He had succeeded George Lane, Ellen Roberts' uncle, in this position.

[25]The *Northern Independent* was established in late 1856 by William Hosmer, who had previously edited the *Northern Christian Advocate.* Roberts was a contributing editor. Reinhard notes, "What Hosmer had done in the *Northern Christian Advocate,* he did even more ardently in

Methodism," including the identification of sanctification with justification. Later, after establishing the monthly journal *The Earnest Christian* in 1860, Roberts would continue periodically to editorialize against the pew rental system.

In "New School Methodism" Roberts argued that a "new theory of religion" was being spread in the conference by "a class of preachers," numbering about thirty, "whose teaching is very different from that of the fathers of Methodism." The conference was divided. "Two distinct parties exist," and the controversy concerned "nothing less than the nature itself of Christianity."

The key theological errors of these New School Methodists, Roberts felt, were putting good works in the place of faith in Christ and holding that justification and sanctification were the same. What, then, are the results? Roberts says,

> Differing thus in their views of religion, the Old and New School Methodists necessarily differed in their measures for its promotion. The latter build stock Churches, and furnish them with pews to accommodate a select congregation; and with organs, melodeons, violins, and professional singers, to execute difficult pieces of music for a fashionable audience. The former favor free Churches, congregational singing, and spirituality, simplicity and fervency in worship. They endeavor to promote revivals, deep and thorough; such as . . . have made Methodism the leading denomination of the land. The leaders of the New Divinity movement are not remarkable for promoting revivals. . . . When these desire to raise money for the benefit of the Church, they have recourse to the selling of pews to the highest bidder; to parties of pleasure, oyster suppers, fairs, grab-bags, festivals and lotteries; the others for this purpose, appeal to the love the people bear to Christ. In short, the Old School Methodists rely . . . upon the agency of the Holy Ghost, and the purity of the Church. The New School Methodists appear to depend upon the patronage of the worldly, the favor of the proud

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his new business venture, the *Northern Independent.* Readers, disappointed with the conciliating denominational papers, rejoiced at Hosmer's return to antislaveryism" (Reinhard, 108). Roberts' "New School Methodism" is reprinted various places, including B. T. Roberts, *Why Another Sect: Containing a Review of Articles by Bishop Simpson and Others on the Free Methodist Church* (Rochester, NY: "The Earnest Christian" Publishing House, 1879), 85-96; Benson Roberts, *Benjamin Titus Roberts,* 112-21; Wilson T. Hogue, *History of the Free Methodist Church of North America* (Chicago: Free Methodist Publishing House, 1915), 1:96-103; and Leslie R. Marston, *From Age to Age A Living Witness: A Historical Interpretation of Free Methodism's First Century* (Winona Lake, IN: Light and Life Press, 1960), 573-78.

and aspiring; and the various artifices of worldly policy.[26]

The special mission of Methodism, Roberts says, is "not to gather into her fold the proud and fashionable, the devotees of pleasure and ambition, but, 'to spread Scriptural holiness over these lands.'"[27]

Roberts here says nothing specifically about the gospel for the poor, though he warns that "prosperity is producing upon us, as a denomination, the same intoxicating effect that it too often does upon individuals and societies." His main concern in "New School Methodism" is the drift away from historic Methodism in both doctrine and practice.

Roberts most clearly articulates his concern with preaching the gospel to the poor in his article "Free Churches," which appeared in the first issue of *The Earnest Christian* in 1860. This piece functions practically as a manifesto for the Free Methodist Church, formed several months later. It became, in fact, the basis of the introductory statement inserted in early issues of the Free Methodist *Discipline* (quoted above).

In "Free Churches," Roberts argues that the church has a special and specific commission from Jesus Christ to preach the gospel to the poor. Preceding the article in a brief piece entitled "Object and Scope of This Magazine," Roberts says that his intent is "to publish a revival journal" promoting "Experimental Religion," "the doctrine of Christian Holiness, as taught by Wesley and Fletcher," and "the claims of the neglected poor." He writes,

> *The claims of the neglected poor,* the class to which Christ and the Apostles belonged, the class for whose special benefit the Gospel was designed, . . . will be advocated with all the candor and ability we can command. In order that the masses, who have a peculiar claim to the Gospel of Christ may be reached, the necessity of plain Churches, with the seats free, of plainness of dress, of spirituality and simplicity in worship, will, we trust, be set forth with convincing arguments.[28]

In "Free Churches," Roberts argues that if Christianity prevailed in its purity it "would bring Paradise back to earth." But it is being corrupted by a number of things, and in particular the growing practice of

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[26]Marston, 576.

[27]Ibid., 578.

[28]B. T. Roberts, "Object and Scope of This Magazine," *The Earnest Christian* (January, 1860), 1-2.

pew rental. This practice is "wrong in principle, and bad in tendency." Not some but "*all* churches should be free"; ". . . our houses of worship should be, like the grace we preach, and the air we breathe, free to all." Then Roberts gives his central argument:

Free Churches are essential to reach the masses.

The wealth of the world is in the hands of a few. In every country the poor abound. . . . Sin has diffused itself every where, often causing poverty and suffering.

God assured his ancient people, favored above all others with precautions against want, that "the poor shall never cease out of the land." These are the ones upon whom the ills of life fall with crushing weight. Extortion wrings from them their scanty pittance. The law may endeavor to protect them; but they are without the means to obtain redress at her courts. If famine visits the land, she comes unbidden to their table, and remains their guest until they are consumed.

The provisions of the gospel are for all. The "glad tidings" must be proclaimed to every individual of the human race. God sends THE TRUE LIGHT to illuminate and melt every heart. It visits the palace and the dungeon, saluting the kind and the captive. The good news falls soothingly upon the ear of the victim of slavery, and tells him of a happy land, beyond the grave, where the crack of the driver's whip, and the baying of blood-hounds are never heard. The master is assured, that though he be a sinner above all other sinners, yet even he, by doing works meet for repentance, may be forgiven, and gain heaven. To civilized and savage, bond and free, black and white, the ignorant and the learned, is freely offered the great salvation.

But for whose benefit are special efforts to be put forth?

Who must be *particularly* cared for? Jesus settles this question. He leaves no room for cavil. When John sent to know who he was, Christ charged the messengers to return and show John the things which they had seen and heard. "The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up," and as if all this would be insufficient to satisfy John of the validity of his claims, he adds, "AND THE POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM." This was the crowning proof that He was the ONE THAT SHOULD COME. It does not appear that after this John ever had any doubts of the Messiahship of Christ. He that thus cared for the poor must be from God.

In this respect the Church must follow in the footsteps of Jesus. She must see to it, that the gospel is preached to the poor. With them, peculiar pains must be taken. The message of the minister must be adapted to their wants and conditions. The greatest trophies of saving grace must be sought among them. This was the view taken by the first heralds of the cross. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "for ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chose the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chose, yea, and things which are not, to bring to naught things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence."

Similar statements in regard to the rich are not to be found in the Bible. On the contrary, the Apostle James asks the brethren, "do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? . . ." He also refers to it, as an undeniable fact, that the poor are elected to special privileges under the gospel dispensation. "Hearken my beloved brethren, hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which He had promised to them that love him?"

Thus the duty of preaching the gospel to the poor is enjoined, by the plainest precepts and examples. This is the standing proof of the Divine mission of the Church. In her regard for the poor, Christianity asserts her superiority to all systems of human origin. The pride of man regards most the mere accidents of humanity; but God passes by these, and looks at that which is alone essential and imperishable. In his sight, position, power, and wealth, are the merest trifles. They do not add to the value or dignity of the possessor. God has magnified man by making him free and immortal. Like a good father, he provides for all his family, but in a special manner for the largest number, and the most destitute. He takes the most pains with those that by others are most neglected.[29]

Here Roberts quotes three paragraphs from Dr. Stephen Olin, "that great, good man." More important than questions of polity, Olin argues, is preaching the gospel to the poor: "There can be no [Church] without a gospel, and a gospel for the poor." If a church's ministers "preach a saving gospel to the poor, . . . that is enough. It is an Apostolic church." Roberts then applies this principle to the question of pew rental:

> If the gospel is to be preached to the poor, then it follows, as a necessary consequence, that all the arrangements for preaching the gospel, should be so made as to secure this object. There must not be a mere incidental provision for having the poor hear the gospel; this is the main thing to be looked after.
>
> . . . Hence, houses of worship should be, not like the first class car on a European railway, for the exclusive, but like the streets we walk, free for all. Their portals should be opened as wide for the common laborer, or the indigent widow, as for the assuming, or the wealthy.[30]

Roberts clearly is arguing here for a "preferential option for the poor," though using other language. The gospel was designed for the "special benefit" of the poor, who have a "peculiar claim" to it. The poor have "special privileges" in the gospel, and therefore the Church must exert "special efforts" and "peculiar pains" to reach them. As preaching the gospel to the poor was the "crowning proof" that Jesus was the Messiah, so the church's faithfulness in reaching them is the essential sign that it truly is the church of Jesus Christ.

The argument here is both christological and ecclesiological. God sent Jesus Christ to preach the gospel to the poor and gave the church the same commission. Roberts goes so far as to affirm (quoting Olin) that while issues of doctrine and polity may be matters of legitimate dispute, there can be no doubt here. A church which does not preach the gospel to the poor is not the church of Jesus Christ.

What did Roberts mean by "preaching the gospel to the poor"? Clearly he meant primarily evangelism. Roberts understood evangelism, however, as more than the winning of converts. As a good Methodist and one committed to Wesley's emphasis on sanctification and discipleship, Roberts understood the gospel to mean salvation from all sin, with inner cleansing and empowerment for Christ-like, self-sacrificing service.

This is clear in Roberts' statement that the mission of the Free Methodist Church was "to maintain the Bible standard of Christianity, and to preach the Gospel to the poor." To "maintain the Bible standard of Christianity" appears to be equivalent to the common formulation, "to spread scriptural holiness over these lands." The "Bible standard" for Roberts meant no compromise on the doctrine of entire

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[29]B. T. Roberts, "Free Churches," *The Earnest Christian* (January, 1860), 7-8.
[30]Ibid., 9.

sanctification and on the fundamental doctrines of justification and regeneration.[31]

Ten years later, in another editorial entitled “Free Churches,” Roberts wrote:

> Where the object is to *introduce* the Gospel, no one thinks of selling *the right* to join in the public worship of God. But it is too often the case, that when a church has been built up and become financially strong under the free-seat system, a new and elegant house of worship must be erected, and the table of the changers of money introduced, and the seats sold, and God's poor shut out. This is dishonest. . . .
>
> . . . If a Church must preach the Gospel to the poor to gain God's blessing, it must continue to do the same work to keep God's blessing. Turn the poor out of a church, and you turn Christ out. “The poor have the Gospel preached to them.” That which is preached to the rich *exclusively* is not the Gospel. It may be faultless oratory, sound philosophy, refined morality, but it is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Where Jesus is, the poor hear him saying, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”[32]

Turn the poor away and you turn away Christ, Roberts insists.

Roberts' views are further illuminated by an editorial entitled “The Rich” in the January, 1870, *Earnest Christian.* Here Roberts argues:

> There is no class of society in such imminent danger of eternal damnation as the rich. If any among them are saved, it will be like Lot coming out of Sodom—the exception not the rule. . . . It is not merely *trust* in riches, that renders it so difficult to enter the kingdom of God, but *their possession.* Yet whoever possessed riches without trusting in them, at least for influence and consideration, if not for salvation? . . .
>
> Jesus forbids his disciples to amass wealth. His language is plain. It requires a great deal of ingenuity to pervert it. . . .
>
> . . . Must we take our choice between laying up treasures on earth or treasures in heaven? To do both is impossible. Deliberately take your choice. Not to choose is inevitably to drift into the current

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[31]It may be that Roberts here prefers the wording “the Bible standard of Christianity” to the specific reference to “scriptural holiness” because he felt that the whole foundation of Methodist doctrine, not just entire sanctification, was at risk.

[32]B. T. Roberts, “Free Churches,” *The Earnest Christian and Golden Rule* (October, 1870),

of worldliness—To choose the world is to choose sorrow, and trouble, and eternal death.

If you resolve to lay up treasures in Heaven, begin at once. Give yourself to God to do good to the utmost of your ability to your fellow-men. Adopt the motto of Wesley, "Gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can."

In the light of these truths, we see the utter criminality of the course taken by the popular churches to secure the patronage of the rich. The very vices which ensure their damnation are encouraged.—Their love of distinction is gratified by being able to buy the exclusive right to the occupancy of the best pews in the house; and their pride is strengthened and encouraged by the splendor that surrounds them and the deference that is paid to them in the house of God. Plain, free churches, are everywhere needed, quite as much to save the rich as to reach the masses and carry the Gospel to the poor.[33]

In his focus on Jesus Christ as our model, Roberts linked poverty and community. When the first Christians shared their possessions, they were simply following Jesus' example. Roberts wrote in 1870,

When we see how the Saviour sanctified Poverty, by eating her bread and drinking her water—walking in her lowliest vales, and choosing His companions from her despised sons—we no longer wonder, that in the palmy days of Christianity, "as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need." This also helps solve the mystery why the poor are generally so much more willing to receive the gospel in its purity than the rich. They can say, emphatically, "He was one of us."[34]

The Influence of Stephen Olin

Stephen Olin (1797-1851), president of Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, during Roberts' student days there, clearly had a large impact on Roberts. A prominent preacher and educator

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128-29.

[33]B. T. Roberts, "The Rich," *The Earnest Christian and Golden Rule* (January, 1870), 30-31. See also B. T. Roberts, "Gospel to the Rich," *The Earnest Christian and Golden Rule* (February, 1865), 60-62, where Roberts says, "You cannot at the same time be devoted to the acquisition of wealth and to the service of Christ," but also: "A talent for business is as much the gift of God as a talent for preaching." The "ability to get wealth" is to be used "for the good of your race," but not for luxury or self-indulgence.

[34]B. T. Roberts, "Riches and Poverty of Christ," *The Earnest Christian and Golden Rule*

in the Methodist Episcopal Church, Olin served as president of Wesleyan University from 1834 until his death at age 54. He gave his blessing to John Wesley Redfield's remarkable revival on campus and in the Middletown community about 1847 which profoundly affected Roberts. As a student Roberts may possibly have heard Olin's sermon, “The Adaptation of the Gospel to the Poor,” which Roberts later quoted.

Roberts entered Wesleyan University in the fall of 1845. Earlier that year President Olin had exhorted the university's graduating class, “It ought to be well understood, that the multiplication of magnificent churches is daily making the line of demarcation between the rich and poor more and more palpable and impassable. . . . It should ever be kept in mind, that such a church virtually writes above its sculptured portals an irrevocable prohibition to the poor.”[35] There are “signs of apostleship older and surer than this mission to the rich,” Olin continued —- namely, to “appeal, as their Master did, to eminent success among the masses, and affirm like Him, that through their instrumentality 'the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and THE POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM.'“[36]

Olin's sermon “The Adaptation of the Gospel to the Poor” uses the same text (Matthew 11:5) which is central to Roberts' key article, “Free Churches.” Olin says that preaching the Gospel to the poor “is a *permanent* proof” of Christ's divinity and the truth of his doctrine. He adds (in a statement Roberts later paraphrases), “The Father of all provides in the Gospel for all his family, and cares especially for the greatest number, and the most needy.”[37]

Olin's concluding section, “Inferences,” begins with three paragraphs which Roberts quotes exactly in “Free Churches”:

> 1. The Gospel is preached to the poor—to the masses. It is made for them—it suits them. Is it not for the rich—for the cultivated—the intellectual? Not as such. They must come down to the common platform. They must be saved just like so many plowmen or common day-laborers. They

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(September, 1870), 72.

[35]Stephen Olin, “Resources and Duties of Christian Young Men. A Discourse to the Graduating Class of the Wesleyan University, 1845,” *The Works of Stephen Olin, D.D., LL.D.: Late President of the Wesleyan University* (New York: Harper, 1860), 2:144.

[36]Ibid., 146 (Emphasis in the original).

[37]Stephen Olin, “The Adaptation of the Gospel to the Poor,” *The Works of Stephen Olin,*

must feel themselves sinners—must repent—trust in Christ, like beggars—like publicans. Sometimes we hear men prate about "preaching that may do for common people, while it is good for nothing for the refined and the educated." This is a damning heresy. It is a ruinous delusion. All breathe the same air. All are of one blood. All die. There is precisely one Gospel for all; and that is the Gospel that the poor have preached to them. The poor are the favored ones. They are not called up. The great are called down. They may dress, and feed, and ride, and live in ways of their own choosing; but as to getting to heaven, there is only God's way—the way of the poor. They may fare sumptuously every day, but there is only one sort of Manna.

2. That *is* the Gospel which is effectually preached to the poor, and which converts the people. The result shows it. It has demonstration in its fruits. A great many things held and preached may be above the common mind—intricate—requiring logic and grasp of intellect to embrace them. They may be true—important, but they are not the Gospel—not its vital, central truths. Take them away, and the Gospel will remain. Add them and you do not help the Gospel. That is preached to the poor. Common people can understand it. This is a good test. All the rest is, at least, not essential.

3. There are hot controversies about the true Church. What constitutes it—what is essential to it—what vitiates it? These may be important questions, but there are more important ones. It may be that there can not be a Church without a bishop, or that there can. There can be none without a Gospel, and a Gospel for the poor. Does a Church preach the Gospel to the poor—preach it effectively? Does it convert and sanctify the people? Are its preaching, its forms, its doctrines adapted *specially* to these results? If not, we need not take the trouble of asking any more questions about it. It has missed the main matter. It does not do what Jesus did—what the apostles did. Is there a Church—a ministry—that converts, reforms, sanctifies the people? Do the poor really learn to love Christ? Do they live purely and die happy? I hope that Church conforms to the New Testament in its government and forms as far as may be. I trust it has nothing anti-Republican, or schismatic, or disorderly in its fundamental principles and policy. I wish its ministers may be men of the best training, and eloquent. I hope they worship in goodly temples, and all that; but I can not think or talk gravely about these matters on the Sabbath. They preach a saving Gospel to the poor,

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1:341-42. Note the similar passage in Roberts, "Free Churches," above.

and that is enough. It is an apostolic Church. Christ is the corner-stone. The main thing is secured, thank God.[38]

Roberts graduated from Wesleyan University in 1848 (a classmate was Daniel Steele) at the age of 25 and began his ministry in the Methodist Episcopal Church. The influence of Olin apparently remained with him. A decade later when Roberts affirmed the gospel to the poor as an argument against the pew rental system, Olin became a primary source.[39]

Roberts' Work Among the Poor

For Roberts, a preferential option for the poor was no mere theory. He practiced it in costly ways—most dramatically perhaps in 1860 when, after being expelled from the Methodist Episcopal Church (surely an experience of marginalization!) he sold own house in Buffalo so he could minister to the poor. From the proceeds of the sale Roberts bought a theatre building in downtown Buffalo, though the transaction left him with a worrisome debt. Roberts' wife Ellen[40] describes the incident:

My husband felt we must get a place for worship in the heart of the city, where the gospel could be preached to the poor. He could see no way of doing it except he gave our home toward it. It was all we had. I looked the matter over. We had three children. I thought of the way the disciples were led, at that marvelous outpouring of the Spirit, when they "sold their possessions and goods and parted them to all men as every man had need." . . . Let those who have prayed long for blessings

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[38]Ibid., 345-46. Cf. *The Earnest Christian* (January, 1860), 8-9, where Roberts quotes this passage.

[39]Roberts was also in occasional contact with Bishop Thomas A. Morris (1794-1874) who was senior M. E. bishop from 1858 on. In November, 1856, Roberts wrote Morris about the divisions in the Genesee Conference, making some of the points which later appeared in "New School Methodism." Morris himself in 1854 published a sermon entitled "The Privileges of the Poor" (also based on Mt. 11:5) in which he observed, "While the Gospel is to be preached 'to every creature'—while it is 'glad tidings of great joy which shall be unto all people,' let it be specially observed for the honor of our holy religion, that 'the poor have the Gospel preached to them.' . . . the Lord sends his choice favors to the poorest of his subjects." Morris goes on to affirm that the biblical text means "those poor in regard to temporal blessings," not just the spiritually poor. T. A. Morris, Sermon XVII, "The Privileges of the Poor," in Morris, *Sermons on Various Subjects* (Cincinnati: L. Swordstedt & A. Poe, Methodist Book Concern, 1854), 177, 178. See Matthew Simpson, ed., *Cyclopedia of Methodism,* rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1880), 630-31; Zahniser, 347-49.

[40]Ellen Lois Stowe (1825-1908) married B. T. Roberts in 1849 in New York City where she had been living with her uncle, the Rev. George Lane, Methodist book agent from 1844 to 1852. Ellen was strongly influenced by the Lanes and also to some extent by Phoebe and Walter Palmer who, like the Lanes, attended the Allen Street M. E. Church. She was related to Calvin Stowe, husband of Harriet Beecher Stowe and (on her mother's side) to Judge Lane, founder of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati.

not received, begin to feed the poor, clothe the naked, and yield themselves and their substance to the Lord as if they meant it, and He will pour them out blessings that will measure beyond their desires and expectations.[41]

Two years later, while serving as the Free Methodist Church's first general superintendent, Roberts opened a mission above a saloon in Buffalo's notorious Five Points area where, he said, "almost every building . . . had a brothel and a bar." Roberts wrote in *The Earnest Christian,* "To the young women who become converted we furnish a home in our family, until the way is opened for them to take care of themselves in a respectable manner."[42] Since Roberts was traveling much of this time in the interests of the expanding denomination, it appears that his wife Ellen provided the primary leadership at the Five Points mission. Roberts wrote to her from Spencerport on May 2, 1862, "Darling you have a great work to do for the Lord, and I pray often for you that you may have all the grace you need. . . . Look after your mission and have the brethren get new seats."[43]

It appears that Roberts in fact saw his work in leading early Free Methodism as a form of preaching the gospel to the poor. About the time of the formation of the denomination he wrote that it had become

> necessary to provide a humble shelter for ourselves and for such poor, wayfaring pilgrims as may wish to journey with us to heaven. We are very firm in the conviction that it is the will of the Lord that we should establish free churches—the seats to be forever free—where the gospel can be preached to the poor. . . . We have no wealth; no sympathy from powerful ecclesiastical or political or secret societies to help on the enterprise; but all these against us, so that if we succeed, it must be by the blessings of heaven upon our feeble endeavors.[44]

This concern for the poor was not unrelated to Roberts' educational work. Ellen Roberts noted that not long after the formtion of the Free Methodist Church her husband "began to talk about a school,

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Carpenter, *Ellen Lois Roberts,* 18, 28.

[41]Ellen Lois Roberts, "Give and Receive," article in *The Earnest Christian,* quoted in Adella P. Carpenter, *Ellen Lois Roberts: Life and Writings* (Chicago: Woman's Missionary Society, Free Methodist Church, 1926), 162-63. The Roberts had purchased a home in Buffalo several years earlier since the Niagara Street M. E. Church, to which Roberts was appointed, had no parsonage.

[42]B. T. Roberts, "Mission Field," *The Earnest Christian* (June, 1862), 187; Marston, 236, 446; Benson Roberts, 217-19, 308; Zahniser, 208-10.

[43]Quoted in Benson Roberts, 294.

where poor boys and girls could be helped to an education."[45]

Roberts as Economic Reformer

Roberts' theology and praxis were not confined to personal evangelism or rescue work or denomination building, however. He called for national economic reform, particularly in light of the disputed monetary question and the amassing of huge sums of capital and political influence by rich businessmen. His 1886 book *First Lessons on Money* is partly an explanation of basic monetary economics, partly a call for fundamental economic reform. His main concern was that "The people should see to it that their representatives in Congress pass laws in their interest, and not in favor of the moneyed class and rich corporations in the injury of community generally."[46] "Some of the views presented are in advance of their times; but we trust they will be seen to be sound," he wrote in the Preface.

In his analysis, Roberts drew upon two of the leading young reform economists of the day, Richard T. Ely and Francis A. Walker. Ely (1854-1943) was a professor at Johns Hopkins University (1881-92), where one of his students was Woodrow Wilson, and later at the University of Wisconsin. He led in the development of the "new economics," claiming economics was less a matter of fixed laws and more of cultural patterns and government policy. Sharply critical of laissez-faire capitalism, Ely argued that society was an interdependent organism in which the state should play a leading role for the benefit of all. Wise policies would lead eventually, he thought, to a cooperative commonwealth.

A committed Christian, Ely promoted the views of English Christian Socialists and called for the church to take the lead in social reform. "It is the mission of Christianity to bring to pass here a kingdom of righteousness," he wrote in 1889. His first influential book, *The Past and Present of Political Economy,* was published two years before Robert's book.[47] Ely was later to play a key role in rise of the Social Gospel in America and thus constitutes a theological link between Roberts and the later Social Gospel. Robert Handy includes Ely with Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch as seminal figures in the movement, describing Ely as its "most influential lay exponent," one who "played a conspicuous role

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[44]Quoted in Carpenter, 75.
[45]Ibid., 178.
[46]B. T. Roberts, *First Lessons on Money* (Rochester, NY: B. T. Roberts, 1886), 160.
[47]*Dictionary of American Biography,* 23:248-51.

in the shaping of the social gospel."[48]

Francis A. Walker's 1878 book, *Money,*was another of Robert's main sources. Walker (1840-1897) was the son of businessman and economist Amasa Walker, one of the founders of Oberlin College. The younger Walker became a leading economist and statistician. As chief of the U. S. Bureau of Statistics he reformed the bureau and directed the 1880 census. Influential in Europe, particularly England, Walker became "unquestionably the most prominent and the best known of American writers" on economics, according to an 1897 report. As president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1881 to 1897, he set the school on a solid basis and saw its enrollment triple. A reformer and critic of laissez-faire business practices, Walker led in the newer inductive, historical approach to economics.[49]

In *First Lessons on Money* Roberts quotes Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*as well as Ely, Walker, and other writers. Noting the political influence of money, Roberts protests that money power "controls legislation until it becomes so oppressive that the people rise up against its control. It places men, simply because they are rich, in official positions for which they are totally unfitted."[50] The $308,000,000 currently tied up in government bonds should be released for industrial development, he argued. "The resources of this country, to a great extent, are yet undeveloped. There are plenty of men willing to work but no man hires them. The capitalist, who should set the unemployed to building and manning ships, and railroads, and working mines and farms and factories, spends at his office an hour or two a day examining securities, reckoning his interest, and cutting off his coupons." Releasing capital for productive industry "would make many homes comfortable that are now destitute. It would increase immensely the wealth of the country, by encouraging labor, the only source of wealth."[51]

Roberts argued that property and business should be spread equitably among the populace for the the best interest of all. "Good order and general prosperity prevail in our cities in proportion as the

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[48]Robert T. Handy, ed., *The Social Gospel in America 1870-1920: Gladden, Ely, Rauschenbusch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 15, 173. Handy quotes John Everett: "There was probably no other man of the period who had as much influence on the economic thinking of parsons and the general religious public" (John R. Everett, *Religion in Economics: A Study of John Bates Clark, Richard T. Ely, Simon N. Patten* [New York, 1946], 16).

[49]Ibid., 10:338-44.

[50]Roberts, *First Lessons on Money,* 16.

[51]Ibid., 75-76.

business is divided up among the inhabitants," he wrote. "The greater the proportion of men who work for others, the greater danger there is of riotous disturbances. It is as advantageous to the city, as it is to the country, to have the property and the business divided up among a large number of owners."[52]

Roberts did not expect total economic equality but did see the Old Testament economy, and particularly the Jubilee laws, as providing principles for economic life. He wrote,

> It is impossible that there should be an equality of property among a people free to act and possessing an equality of rights. If an equal division of the property of the country were made among the people, there would be great difference in the amounts which different persons would possess in a year afterward. In the old Jewish republic, the greatest possible precautions were taken that each family should possess a competence. The land was divided among them. Every one had a farm, a homestead, in the country. If one was compelled to sell his inheritance, he could alienate it from his family for only fifty years at the longest. At the year of jubilee debts were cancelled and inheritances restored. Yet in their palmiest days they had their poor among them. But they had none, while the republic lasted, enormously rich, and probably none who suffered from poverty. All, while obedient to God, were in comfortable circumstances.[53]

Roberts argued that "vast accumulations of fortune in the hands of a few" were detrimental and were bringing civil unrest. "All laws which specially favor the gaining and the holding of great fortunes should be changed," he said.[54] He called for regulations on joint stock companies, stock speculation, and monopolies. It should be illegal, for example, for the owners of the New York Central Railroad to own any part of the Erie or the West Shore railroads. Similarly, laws of inheritance should be much more restrictive:

> Our laws should make provision for the breaking up of great estates upon the death of the owners. The steady aim of our Government should be to afford to all, every just and proper facility for acquiring a moderate competence. To do this, the whole bent of our laws must be unfavorable to the acquisition of a vast amount of property by any one person, and to the handing of it down unbroken

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[52]Ibid., 122-23.
[53]Ibid., 121-22.
[54]Ibid., 127.

from generation to generation.[55]

Roberts' book amounts to a fairly radical challenge to the dominant business practices of the day. Many of his proposals were, however, enacted into law over the next generation, including the nation's first anti-trust legislation. It does not appear that the book had much impact within Free Methodism.[56]

Holiness and the Poor

B. T. Roberts and Free Methodism were in a broad sense part of the Holiness Movement within American Methodism. This movement was committed to the doctrine of entire sanctification as taught by John Wesley (and as interpreted by the leaders of the movement).[57] Roberts shared the concern with sanctification. Yet, not everyone in the Holiness Movement shared Roberts' particular concern with the poor. In general, early Free Methodism espoused a more “radical” understanding of entire sanctification as well as a more radical commitment to the poor.

We may make several observations about how Roberts understood “the poor” and the church's special mission to them, and relate these to the doctrine of sanctification.

1. By “the poor,” Roberts meant “the masses,” particularly in distinction from “the rich” who were gaining increased political and economic power in his day. For Roberts, “the poor” constituted at once a moral and economic category. He did not speak of a middle class, but rather saw society as divided largely between rich and poor. His concern seems to have been with those who suffer most, and especially with the victims of political and economic injustice.

2. Roberts' concern with the poor was related to his economic interests and theories. His economics were a part of his theology, as his book *First Lessons on Money* makes clear. In this book he presupposes the interrelationship of economic and spiritual principles and argues that economic justice is a primary duty of government.

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[55]Ibid., 142.

[56]See, however, Marston, 391-97. Roberts includes seven suggestions on “how to make money” in his book: 1) Do not aim at getting rich; 2) Be diligent in business; 3) Be careful about going into debt; 4) Never become responsible for the debts of others; 5) Maintain good habits; 6) Be willing to commence business on a small scale; 7) Be benevolent in the use of money. He concludes with Wesley's three rules on money.

[57]See especially Melvin E. Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980), and Charles Edwin Jones, *Perfectionist Persuasion: The Holiness Movement and American Methodism, 1867-1936* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1974).

3. Roberts' emphasis on simplicity, sobriety, and plainness of dress also needs to be understood in light of his concern for the poor. As Donald Dayton comments,

Prohibition was urged in part because [drinking] was perceived to generate poverty and to oppress especially the poor. Simple dress was adopted not primarily for modesty or simplicity, but in an effort to make the poor feel comfortable in church if they could not afford fine clothes or jewelry—–a consistent Free Methodist dresses down to go to church! Congregational singing and the banishment of musical instruments from worship was an effort to maintain a more populist style against the emerging cultivated tastes for a "higher class" of music represented by choirs and paid musicians.[58]

As the accent on the poor faded, plain dress tended to develop into a legalism, a sort of mark of spirituality. Even so, in Free Methodism's first half-century it also signalled solidarity —– solidarity internally with one another, first of all, but also solidarity with the poor. Perhaps it is this, more than anything else, that accounts for the remarkable chain of Free Methodist city missions and rescue homes that grew up just before and after the turn of the century. "It was not uncommon for even small Free Methodist congregations to sponsor rescue missions or homes for unwed mothers, hold street meetings, or, at least, circulate religious literature among the poor."[59]

For the first two or three generations Free Methodism was primarily a church of the poor, or at least of the lower middle class. In many towns and smaller cities its plain wood-frame church building was found on the "wrong" side of the tracks. Kostlevy notes,

> Free Methodists were generally lower-middle-class property owners, although poor people did make up a sizeable part of the total Church membership. Among the poor within the Free Methodist congregations, one could frequently include the pastor. The 1906 religious census indicated that Free Methodist pastors, with an annual salary of $370 were, along with Wesleyan Methodist pastors, Salvation Army officers, and the pastors of a number of predominantly African American Churches, the lowest paid clergy in America.[60]

In other words, Free Methodists continued to be in fact, socioeconomically, more a church of the poor

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[58]Dayton, "Reclaiming Our Roots," 9.

[59]Kostlevy, 66. Kostlevy details some of this work. See also Howard A. Snyder, "A Heritage of Caring: Free Methodist Social Ministry" (unpublished outline, 1992).

[60]Kostlevy, 56-57.

than of the rich or the upper middle class. Douglas Strong posits this as one reason for greater sensitivity to the poor: "Since holiness churches were comprised of the economically poor more often than the increasingly-bourgeois mainline Methodist churches, the holiness folks more easily embraced the causes and struggles of their lower class constituency."[61] Yet theologically Free Methodists gradually forgot Roberts' specific mission to the poor.[62]

4. Roberts' views on wealth, poverty, and preaching to the poor are essentially those of John Wesley. He saw himself as a defender of historic Methodism as much as a reformer. His concern was to be Wesleyan, and in fact his writings contain many echoes of Wesley's comments on preaching to the poor and his warnings about the dangers of riches.

Did Roberts or other early Free Methodists make any specific theological connection between entire sanctification and evangelizing the poor? Or do these two concerns run, in effect, on separate tracks?

I cannot find that Roberts makes an explicit theological connection between the two themes, other than to claim that both are essential to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Roberts' basic posture was that the Methodist Church in his day was departing from historic Methodism, and that both the gospel for the poor and entire sanctification were essential parts of the Wesleyan message. Thus we might well push the question back to Wesley himself. While that is beyond the scope of this paper, my view is that Wesley grounds both themes in his theology of God's grace; in salvation which is "free for all and free in all." This, of course, in based in Wesley's understanding of the gospel as found in Scripture and in the practice and teaching of Jesus Christ.

The first answer, then, to the conjunction of sanctification and concern for the poor in B. T. Roberts is that this was the tradition Roberts inherited and was committed to maintain. This is the gospel which must be preached.

One could, of course, argue that an inherent logic links Roberts' concern for the poor and entire sanctification. The link is christological: Entire sanctification makes the believer like Jesus Christ, doing

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[61]Douglas M. Strong, "'The Deliverance of God's Oppressed Poor': The Ambivalent Legacy of Nineteenth Century North American Perfectionist Social Reform (unpublished Working Group paper, 1992 Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies), 3.

[62]Free Methodist history may helpfully be schematized as the movement phase (1860-90), the sect phase (1890-1950), and the denomination phase (1950 to the present). These phases are fairly clearly marked in the church's ethos, self-understanding, institutions, leading

his works — and Jesus preached the gospel to the poor. "An individual who is holy cannot consistently belong to a Church that despises the poor," Roberts wrote.[63] Yet neither Roberts nor other early Free Methodists specifically developed this connection.[64] Perhaps partly for this reason, it was perfectly possible for the denomination to continue to espouse the doctrine of entire sanctification without stressing the corresponding accent on the gospel to the poor. The accent on the poor could drop out seemingly without doing any damage to the doctrine of entire sanctification. This is, in fact, what happened in Free Methodism, particularly after Roberts' death in 1893.

Clearly Roberts had a broader theological, reform, and evangelistic vision than did the Free Methodist church generally. Once the denomination was formed, much energy went into developing denominational structures and patterns. Roberts was severely overworked, and there were few if any other leaders in the denomination who fully shared his vision. Within thirty years, and particularly after 1890, the denomination developed into an inwardly-focused counterculture with a considerably lessened reform and evangelistic focus.[65] The disciplines of early Free Methodism developed into legalisms. As this happened, most of the concern with preaching the gospel to the poor either waned or was channeled into the emerging Foreign Mission enterprise, scattered missions and rescue homes, or into the work of the Pentecost Bands which in 1895 left the denomination and became an independent movement.[66]

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personalities, and even in its statistics.

[63]B. T. Roberts, *Holiness Teachings* (North Chili, NY: Earnest Christian Publishing House, 1893), 71.

[64]The connection is certainly implicit, however, in Roberts' writings. For instance: "St. Paul says, 'Now if any man have not the spirit of Christ he is none of his.' If we have the spirit of Christ we shall do according to our opportunities and circumstances the work that Christ did. His work among men was teaching the ignorant the way of salvation, preaching the gospel to the poor, and relieving the distressed." B. T. Roberts, "Preface," in Jane Dunning, *Brands from the Burning: An Account of a Work among the Sick and Destitute in Connection with Providence Mission, New York City* (Chicago: T. B. Arnold, 1881), iii.

[65]Free Methodist growth was rapid in the 1860-90 period, but slowed considerably after 1890. According to denominational statistics, the denomination more than tripled in size from 1870 to 1890 (growing from 6,684 to 22,154 members), but grew to only 34,135 members in 1910 and 40,943 in 1930.

[66]The Pentecost Bands, begun by Vivian A. Dake, were an evangelistic and church planting movement within Free Methodism involving several hundred young men and women (women outnumbering men in a proportion of about two to one). After withdrawing from the denomination in 1895 the group was renamed the Missionary Bands of the World, and eventually united with the Wesleyan Methodist Church in the 1950s. See Howard A. Snyder, "Radical Holiness Evangelism: Vivian A. Dake and the Pentecost Bands," paper presented at a conference of the Wesleyan-Holiness Studies Project, Asbury Theological Seminary, February, 1990.

A possible criticism of Roberts' theology would be this failure to develop an essential link between preaching the gospel to the poor and sanctification — or to speak more generally, the failure to fully develop this side of his soteriology. His concern with both the poor and with holiness were soteriologically based. But the link between them was not clarified. Yet this may be an unfair critique since Roberts intended simply to affirm the Methodist tradition which he had inherited.

There is little evidence that many of Roberts' early Free Methodist colleagues stressed preaching the gospel to the poor to the extent that he did. Apparently this concern was assumed to some degree in early Free Methodism and in Roberts' circles within Methodism prior to 1860. But it appears that an explicit, self-conscious commitment to preach the gospel to the poor never penetrated deeply into Free Methodist self-understanding, and the concern seems to have waned following Roberts' death.[67]

One who certainly did share Roberts' passion for the poor was the colorful “lay” evangelist, John Wesley Redfield. Redfield, who in many respects should be viewed as the co-founder of Free Methodism, had as least as great an impact on Roberts as did Stephen Olin. Many of the first Free Methodist churches sprang up in places where Redfield held revivals in the late 1850s. Redfield shared many of Roberts' convictions, including abolitionism, simplicity, and the right of women to preach.[68] His impact on Free Methodism doubtlessly would have been much greater had he not died in 1863, at the age of 53.

Redfield's biographer, J. G. Terrill, who was converted under Redfield, noted: “He labored to bring all to the gospel level by noticing the poor, and especially the colored poor.”[69] On one occasion in Cleveland Redfield helped an escaped slave flee across Lake Erie into Canada via the Underground

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[67]This question deserves further research, however. It would require a thorough search of *The Earnest Christian* up to the time it ceased publication, and particularly of *The Free Methodist* (now continued as *Light and Life* magazine), as well as the fairly voluminous Free Methodist missionary and biographical literature. M'Geary's *Outline History* of the denomination says nothing specifically about the gospel to the poor and very little about the issue of pew rental, though it gives considerable attention to the secret society issue and some to abolitionism. “The real issue was between worldliness and formality on the one hand and a vital, Spirit-baptized type of religion on the other.” John S. M'Geary, *The Free Methodist Church: A Brief Outline History of its Origin and Development,* 3rd ed. (Chicago: W. B. Rose, 1908, 1910), 20.

[68]In a letter to Ellen Roberts in early 1860 Redfield said he was expecting a great revival and was “sure that God will open this era by means and instrumentalities quite out of the old stereotyped forms. Among these instrumentalities I believe woman is to take a very prominent part.” Ibid., 438.

[69]Joseph Goodwin Terrill, *The Life of Rev. John Wesley Redfield, M.D.* (Chicago: Free

Railroad. Redfield's view of this incident is instructive: "What had I to do with protecting my own freedom and rights when there stood my suffering Jesus in the person of this poor outcast. I seemed to hear his voice ringing in my ears, 'Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brothers you have done it unto me.'"[70]

From early on in the history of Free Methodism, however, one senses a certain tension between mission to the poor and to "all classes." A. A. Phelps, for example, in an early article in *The Earnest Christian* speaks of the new denomination's being raised up "to seek the salvation of all classes," opening its "doors alike for the rich and the poor . . . ."[71] It is instructive that a denominational pamphlet published in 1927 entitled *The WHAT and the WHY of Free Methodism* shifts the emphasis from the poor to all people. The pamphlet asks: "What did the leaders of the church in its beginning conceive to be the mission of the Free Methodist Church?" Claiming to base its answer on "articles published in the *Earnest Christian* for 1860" the pamphlet states:

> . . . the mission of the Free Methodist Church, negatively considered, was not to
>
> 1. Aim at numerical enlargement.
> 2. Not one of ecclesiastical rivalry.
> 3. Not comprehended in the idea of carnal warfare.
>
> On the contrary, it was to:
>
> 1. Exemplify an earnest, practical, saving Christianity among its own membership.
> 2. To publish an unmutilited gospel to others.
> 3. To seek the salvation of all classes.
> 4. Specicically, "to spread scriptural holiness over these lands"[72]

Intentionally or not, the specific emphasis on the poor drops out—even at a time when Free

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Methodist Publishing House, 1889, 1912), 259.

[70]Ibid., 71.

[71]A. A. Phelps, "Mission of the Free Methodist Church," *The Earnest Christian* (February, 1861), 48.

[72]Executive Committee of the Free Methodist Church, *The WHAT and the WHY of Free Methodism* (Chicago: Free Methodist Publishing House, 1927), 30-31. The 32-page pamphlet begins *Discipline,* including the introductory section which affirms "preaching Gospel to the poor." Though it claims this statement of mission comes from articles in *The Earnest Christian* in 1860, these points come directly from Phelps' 1861 article, not from Roberts. By "an unmutilated Gospel" Phelps meant, he said, "the *anti-slavery* Gospel," among other things.

Methodists still clustered toward the lower end of the socioeconomic scale and there were very few wealthy persons among them.

The denominational mission statement adopted about 1980 reads: "The mission of the Free Methodist Church is to make known to people everywhere God's call to wholeness through forgiveness and holiness in Jesus Christ, and to invite into membership and to equip for ministry all who respond in faith."[73] Here the words "people everywhere" replace the earlier focus on the poor. In 1974 the original statement, which included reference to the mission of preaching the gospel to the poor, was consigned to an historical section at the back of the *Book of Discipline* and replaced by a new introductory statement.

The Charism of Early Free Methodism

What does the concern with preaching the gospel to the poor suggest about the self-identity and mission of early Free Methodism?

The Second Vatican Council asked Catholic religious orders to seek renewal by studying the charism of their founders. The "Apostolic Exhortation on the Renewal of Religious Life" urged members of religious orders "to reawaken hearts to truth and to divine love in accordance with the charisms of your founders who were raised up by God within his Church." Thus religious are "to be faithful to the spirit of their founders, to their evangelical intentions and to the example of their sanctity." Herein lies "one of the principles for the present renewal and one of the most secure criteria for judging what each institute should undertake," according to Vatican II.[74]

In the case of Free Methodism, the question would be whether the denomination (whose leaders have sometimes conceived it as an "order" within the larger church) has or had a "charism" to preach the gospel to the poor. Early Free Methodists announced to the world that the new denomination's calling was to preach the gospel to the poor and to maintain the Bible standard of Christianity. The second part of this twofold mission was understood to include the first. Biblical Christianity is that expression of the gospel which preaches Good News to the poor.

Just as many religious and social movements tend over time to depart from their original sense of

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[73] *Yearbook 1988,* Free Methodist Church (Winona Lake, IN: Free Methodist World Headquarters, 1988), 5.

[74] "Apostolic Exhortation on the Renewal of Religious Life," ¶ 11, in Austin P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 685.

calling, so did Free Methodism. Meanwhile others today, ranging from liberation theologians to some within the Methodist traditions, call for a new “preferential option” for the poor. It remains to be seen whether this early charism of Free Methodism will experience a substantial rediscovery in the 1990s.

But this raises a more basic question. Can preaching the gospel to the poor ever be anything less than the charism of the gospel itself ? —and therefore of the church, in all its branches? Liberation theology insists it cannot, and this was certainly the position of Olin and Roberts, as well. It seems, in fact, to have been the position of Jesus Christ. God's grace *(charis)* in Jesus Christ is Good News for the poor. A church which does not preach the gospel to the poor is apostate, not apostolic.

If the Free Methodist Church has a *particular* charism, it probably lies in the combination of preaching the gospel to the poor *and* maintaining “the Bible standard of Christianity” with its specifically Wesleyan accents of prevenient, converting, and sanctifying grace, the image of God, the atonement as moral, social, and cosmic healing, and the church as accountable, interdependent community — all grounded in earnest love for God and all people.