

Free Church Ecclesiology and Public Policy in New Zealand 1890-1914

ABSTRACT

Baptists in Colonial New Zealand faced unexpectedly acute issues of church and state relations. Many, arriving from England in the later nineteenth century, naturally eschewed any state involvement in religious matters. Gradually, however, a nuanced adaptation to the exigencies of colonial life merged. This essay traces the nature of that adjustment, across the contested public policy landscape of religion and education. As Baptists acclimatized to the possibilities and limits of their new environment a compromise between ecclesiology and pragmatism emerged.

The twenty-three Baptist delegates meeting in Nelson, New Zealand, in December 1893 concluded their conference divided. They had failed to agree on the place of religion in state schools. The division revealed a gap between radical Baptist views and the emerging ecclesiology of the colonial churches. In this essay I will explore the parameters and consequences of this divergence of view. The need for colonial baptists to adapt ideas to an environment which was short on resources and infrastructure will be noted, as will the implications of Baptist approaches for our understanding of the dynamics of wider evangelicalism in such societies.

Timothy Larson has recently argued that the political positions taken by the Free Churches in Britain in the nineteenth century have not been properly understood. He traces this to a failure by historians to appreciate the significance the ecclesiologies of these denominations, suggesting that this is especially true for the gathered churches of 'old dissent' (notably Congregationalists and Baptists). Unlike other 'evangelical' groups, such as the Wesleyan Methodists, these argued consistently for the removal of state influence from religious matters. This was not merely disestablishment (although it included that) but extended to divorce laws, Jewish emancipation, education, even liquor laws. What Larsen's analysis suggests is that, especially with regard to

public policy issues, 'evangelicals' should not simply be lumped together, with the aim of identifying *the* evangelical attitude or response.¹

The term 'evangelical' is of course slippery to begin with. As an interdenominational designation it has been notoriously imprecisely classified. David Bebbington's inclusive definition includes no ecclesiological element. In New Zealand the popular (as against the historian's) use of the word has taken a number of trajectories. From the 1920s, with the influence of Rev. Joseph Kemp and the founding of the Bible Training Institute in Auckland, the term took on for some a sharper doctrinal content, increasingly defined over and against 'modernism'. In the colonial period its meaning appears to have been looser. In 1902 Presbyterians approached other 'evangelical' groups for discussion over the possibility of Church Union. Those deemed 'evangelical' were the Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists, along with some Anglicans. Baptists were not approached on this occasion and, in any case, made it clear they did not see any chance of Union. The meaning of the term at this time seems to have orbited around two suns. The first, evangelistic fervour, was common to all parties. Preaching to win souls for Christ was crucial. The second centre of gravity varied. For Presbyterians the word carried the memory of the magisterial reformation, a heritage within which, in different ways, each of its preferred conversation partners could be held to fit but in which Baptists, with their roots in the radical reformation, looked uncomfortable. They might be included as evangelicals, but not for the purposes of union. There was little argument from Baptists themselves. Happy to count themselves as evangelicals, Baptists too knew evangelism alone was not the total picture. For Baptists the necessary extras were adult conversionism and voluntarism. On these grounds Paedobaptists inevitably had ground to make up but, on the evangelism measure, Congregationalists and Methodists (especially Primitive Methodists) ranked well. Presbyterians were a bit suspect but, given the strong voluntarism of the colonial church, they could be accorded the benefit of the doubt. Anglicans on the other hand, with what Baptists rated as merely a territorial approach to salvation, failed to make the cut. Divergences within evangelicalism thus turned on convictions about the church. The key issues may be identified through an examination of a

¹ Timothy Larsen, 'Free Church Politics and the Gathered Church: The Evangelical Case for Religious Pluralism', *Fides et Historia* XXXIII, 1 (Winter/Spring 2001): 109-19, reprinted in *Contested Christianity: The Political and Social Contexts of Victorian Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), 145-156.

public issue which all the churches of the time agreed was of huge significance.

The 1893 Baptist Conference was one of the smallest since the formation of the New Zealand Baptist Union a decade earlier. It generated, however, one of the livelier debates. The question was the place of religion in state education. Larsen has identified this as a key point of difference between evangelical Free Churches and other evangelicals in Victorian Britain, citing those who ‘became convinced that no religious instruction should be offered at all in state schools.’² The question provides a useful test case in New Zealand, as the importance of ecclesiology in the debates has already been established. As is often the case with New Zealand religious history, we are indebted to Ian Breward, whose 1967 study *Godless Schools?* set a benchmark for insightful analysis of an important and long-running controversy.³ This study will revisit those issues, exploring further than Breward was able to the nuances and variations of Free Church positions.

The 1877 Education Act excluded religious instruction from state primary schools. However, various moves had been made to soften or confuse the purity of this principle. In 1890 a Private Schools Bill had been submitted. Regarded as a screen for state funding of Catholic and Anglican schools, this was opposed by other protestant groups. Nevertheless, some protestants sought the inclusion of Bible teaching in the state curriculum. In order to track these debates it is helpful to note the models of religious instruction in schools which developed over the period. Five models, ranging from least to greatest religious input, may be identified.

1. No religious element at all in state schools – (the *status quo* under the 1877 Education Act).
2. The ‘Nelson System’ whereby schools could elect to open late or close early on one day a week to allow for religious instruction outside the state curriculum. (This exploited a loophole, identified by the Nelson Presbyterian Minister James McKenzie, and gradually gained official acceptance from 1897).
3. The use of the Lord’s prayer and scripture readings to begin the day.

² Larsen 153.

³ I. Breward, *Godless Schools?: A Study in Protestant Reactions to the Education Act of 1877* (Christchurch: Presbyterian Bookroom, 1967). The description here of the general course of the controversy is drawn from Breward.

4. Bible knowledge as part of the curriculum but with no instruction or explanation of the religious meaning of the text.
5. Full religious instruction as part of the curriculum (possibly following the system implemented in New South Wales, whereby clergy might supplement general lessons from teachers).

The Presbyterians petitioned Parliament for religious instruction in 1892, with an extra specificity being added from 1893 with the advocacy of an 'Irish Text Book' (of scripture portions) which would supply the necessary teaching and learning resource. This was model four. Anglicans and Methodists took a similar line. Catholics, stung by the repeated denial of state funds, vigorously opposed these moves, suspecting a protestant plot (a view only strengthened by the reference to the Irish text). The move failed but agitation on the issue continued. In 1903 a 'Bible in Schools League' was formed to promote religious instruction and to seek a referendum on the question. Lacking success, the movement faded. It was revived from 1912, only to again fall short of its target with the outbreak of War in 1914.

Catholics, with their developing parallel system, maintained strong opposition to these campaigns. The Presbyterians and Wesleyan Methodists consistently backed them, as did the Anglicans (although with some equivocation as to whether proposals went far enough). Notably, each of these protestant groups operated out of an ecclesiology which assumed a role for the state in the preservation of true religion. Anglicans and Presbyterians had a history of establishment; Wesleyans, of the Methodist groups, had maintained the strongest attachment to the state. Wesleyan Missionaries were, for instance, on the whole more fervent advocates for the Crown during the New Zealand Wars than many from the Church of England.⁴

If there were passionate advocates, there were also opponents of the Bible in Schools movement within New Zealand protestantism. There is a correlation between these and those who gravitated towards a Free Church ecclesiology. James McKenzie, instigator of the Nelson system, had roots in the voluntarist United Presbyterian Church, which combined groups which had seceded from the Church of Scotland in the eighteenth century over the issue of establishment. McKenzie saw no gain in churches seeking state backing. 'Let the church turn from the door of Caesar, with its broken wire bell, and attended to what is her

⁴ See Y. L. Sutherland 'Te Reo O Te Perehi: Messages to Maori in the Wesleyan Newspaper Te Haeata 1859-62' (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1999), 132-168.

happiest and most imperative duty' (the nurture of children).⁵ The Primitive Methodists were another case in point. The 'Prims' had separated from the British Methodist Connexion in 1811 over concerns that the Connexion was too willing to follow the state's direction. New Zealand Primitive Methodists James Guy and E. Drake made submissions against the Bible in Schools movement in 1895.⁶

Congregationalists and Baptists had a more obvious heritage of dissent from state interference in religion. On the Bible in Schools issue, the positions of each evolved between 1893 and 1913.

Congregationalists began the period adamantly opposed to any religious instruction in schools in the conviction that 'it is not the duty nor the right of the state to teach or control religion.'⁷ By 1903, however, a change was evident. The Congregational Union joined the Bible in Schools League and indicated an openness to model four. A decade later, having in the meantime seriously considered union with the Presbyterians and Methodists, the Congregational Assembly expressed 'cordial approval' of the revived league. Whilst remaining committed to model four and rejecting model five the Assembly now favoured a referendum to determine the question. In both 1903 and 1913 there was significant opposition within the denomination to these concessions to State religious instruction, but this was a clear minority.⁸

From the start, the Baptists were divided on the questions. This is evident in the debate at the 1893 Conference. Rev A. H. Collins of the Ponsonby Baptist Church put forward the motion

That this Assembly, being convinced of the urgent importance of the adequate religious instruction of the young, we unanimously affirm: (1) That it is not the function of the State to teach religion and that it has neither the right to control nor enforce it; (2) That in view of both open attempts and covert desires to obtain State aid on behalf of denominational teaching, it is a public duty to resist every effort to alter the present Education System of the Colony; (3) That, while recognising the supreme value of home

⁵ *Christian Outlook*, 28 April 1894, cited Breward 38.

⁶ Breward 33-34. The Primitive Methodists merged with the Wesleyans in 1913 and their individual voice on the issues disappeared.

⁷ Resolution of the 1895 Congregational Assembly cited J.B. Chalmers *'A Peculiar People': Congregationalism in New Zealand* (n.p.: Congregational Union of New Zealand, n.d.), 171.

⁸ See Chalmers 171-3.

training, it is the duty and within the power of the churches to provide religious teaching for the young.⁹

Collins' motion contains a number of crucial elements to which I will return. It was not, however, accepted by the Conference. An 'amendment' (so called, although it effectively negated the motion), promoting the use of the Irish Text of Bible selections, was put but it gained only the vote of its mover, Rev James Blaikie. Next, Rev. Alfred North moved that schools be allowed to open with Scripture and the Lord's prayer (model three). This too was lost, though narrowly. In the end the Conference, again by a small margin, made a very Baptist decision not to decide.

This Assembly declines to commit itself, or the Union it represents, to any action in regard to the Bible-reading-in-Schools movements, and leaves each individual member a liberty to act as his (*sic*) judgement and conscience dictate.

In terms of the models identified above, the Baptist Conference was in 1893 divided between models one and three. Model four was clearly rejected; models two and five were not considered.¹⁰

As was the case with the Congregationalists, by 1903 the situation had changed considerably. R.S. Gray, formerly minister at Nelson and now at Christchurch had secured support for religious instruction in schools at the 1902 Conference.¹¹ He and other Baptists attended the Bible in Schools League conference in 1903 and, at the Baptist Conference in November that year, he and H.H. Driver of Dunedin, presented a report endorsing the work of the League and favouring model four, the model least approved a decade earlier. After 'a long, but able, debate' the report was adopted. The opposition, led by Rev. T.A. Williams of Thames was, however, significant and controversy carried on in the pages of the *N.Z. Baptist* for several months thereafter.¹²

The matter resurfaced with the revival of the League in 1912. H.H. Driver moved 'That we give general approval to the platform of the league.' An amendment offered by R.S. Gray to exclude the 'right of

⁹ See the account in *The New Zealand Baptist* [hereafter NZB] December 1893, 185, 188.

¹⁰ Versions of the 'Nelson System' were emerging as a pragmatic solution in some places but it had not been formally defined and proposed in 1893.

¹¹ NZB Supplement, January 1903, 9.

¹² NZB, December 1903, 188-189. See also NZB, February 1904, 219; March 1904, 236; April 1904, 252-253; May 1904, 267; June 1904, 284 for a vigorous exchange between T. A. Williams and H.H. Driver.

entry' provision in model five was passed but the Conference was once again so divided over the substantive issue that, as in 1893, it was decided that 'no official pronouncement be made.'¹³ A year later the same level of disagreement emerged. No policy on the Bible in Schools League could be adopted. However a motion seeking positive official provision for the Nelson System (model two, the least intrusive change) was adopted with only one dissenting vote.¹⁴

The Baptists had in many ways followed a path similar to the Congregationalists, only with greater internal division. From effective opposition to any but the most minimal religious element in 1893, to a majority for model four in 1903; too divided to endorse the League in 1912 but virtually unanimous over the Nelson System in 1913. The vacillation and indecision should not be allowed to mask the issues. It is clear that the views of Baptist advocates for the League like Gray and Driver matched almost exactly those of the Congregational majority. On the other hand the opponents in each denomination were very strongly opposed indeed. Some (e.g. the Baptist T.A. Williams and the Congregationalist W. Saunders) became active in the National Schools Defence League, a body in direct opposition to the Bible in Schools League.¹⁵

How are we to interpret these events? In particular, what do they say of the usefulness of Larsen's thesis for understanding Baptists in colonial New Zealand? Presbyterians and Wesleyan Methodists generally favoured religious instruction in state schools. Congregationalists and Baptists initially opposed the notion and at best were cautiously supportive. This appears to fit Larsen's pattern reasonably neatly, with 'gathered' churches preferring greater distance from the state. Yet the reality is more complex than that simple reading allows. By the early years of the twentieth century the Free Church tradition in New Zealand had evolved in ways which made it quite different from its antecedents in mid-Victorian Britain. A closer examination of the debates reveals the extent and significance of this transformation.

We must first note the precise nature of the caution expressed by Congregational and Baptist supporters of the Bible in Schools League in 1912-13. Those advocating endorsement of the League's platform in both cases added the rider that they rejected the New South Wales provision of 'right of entry' for clergy. Their objection, then, was not to

¹³ NZB, November 1912, 214. See also NZB, December 1912, 224.

¹⁴ NZB, November 1913, 210.

¹⁵ Breward 60.

religious instruction by the state as such, but instruction by other *denominations*. The issue was more sectarian than a mere matter of separation of church and state. These advocates (a majority among Congregationalists and probably the stronger group among the Baptists) seem not to fit Larsen's pattern at all. They were as disturbed as any Methodist or Presbyterian at the absence of religion from the public square in New Zealand. They were more worried however, that Anglicans or Catholics might proselytise their children. As the observer of the 1912 Baptist Assembly assessed the situation,

the dread of the priest lies heavily on these people, and though they dearly love the Bible and long that all children should read and obey it, they fear lest the priest should gain undue influence over the pupils of the Primary Schools.¹⁶

A glance beyond the issue of religious instruction, to other public questions of interest to Baptists, confirms the suspicion that Larsen's thesis does not sit tidily with the New Zealand experience. On the one hand Baptists were certainly opposed to any state subsidy of churches but, unlike Larsen's mid-Victorian Free Churchers, both Baptists and Congregationalists in New Zealand vigorously opposed liquor licensing and gambling from the outset. There was little reluctance to legislate for morality in 'Greater Britain'.¹⁷

Yet it is just as clear that a purist Free Church ecclesiology of the type Larsen identifies did exist among those opposed to the Bible in Schools League. Here we return to the 1893 motion from A.H. Collins. It begins with obvious Free Church positions. The state has 'neither the right to control nor enforce' religion and there should be no 'state Aid on behalf of denominational teaching'. This much is fairly familiar, but there are added twists.

Firstly, it is a 'public duty' to oppose moves to compromise the existing secular system. There is no hint in Collins' motion of a withdrawal from society. Indeed, far from it. Collins himself was an activist who took a leading part in labour questions of the day. There was no shrinking pietism in this approach. Larsen identifies a 'fresh sense of self-confidence' among British Baptists and Congregationalists in the

¹⁶ NZB, November 1912, 214.

¹⁷ New Zealand Colonists often used such phrases as 'Greater Britain', 'Brighter Britain', 'Better Britain' to communicate their sense that they could create a parallel but improved society in their new setting. On the significance of this concept for colonial New Zealand history see J. Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland: Penguin, 2001).

nineteenth century. The new assurance came from the embracing of evangelicalism and the rise in numbers this generated. 'They now saw themselves as a force in the land that had the potential to provoke change.'¹⁸ This reforming activism need not be seen as an abandonment of Free Church principles. Indeed it could be a fulfilment. Taking up Troeltsch's analysis of 'church-type' and 'sect-type' groups, Larsen pinpoints an important and largely unexplored possibility.

Much has been written about the process whereby a sect evolves over time into a church. Those who narrate this trajectory often take great delight in chronicling the increasing worldliness and respectability of such groups. There is a much more complicated and interesting process than this one, however, in which a sect, finding it has become considerably larger and more influential, then seeks to use its new position to apply sect-type values and insights to the structures of society.¹⁹

Baptists, at 2.3% of the population in 1896, were not a large group in New Zealand, but they were present in greater proportion than in England. Moreover, they had an added factor which could generate the sort of self-confidence that evangelical revival had done for an earlier generation: they had come to a country with no established church. This they took to be an epochal endorsement of their position. They began to wonder if the whole world might not become Baptist and they began to shed the negative trappings of their past. In response to the Bible in Schools debate at the Baptist Conference of 1903, for instance, Rev. John Muirhead saw no need to be defined by anyone else, pointing out that 'in England Non-episcopalians are Free Churchmen and Nonconformists; in New Zealand they are Free Churchmen but not Nonconformists....'The fact is there are no Nonconformists in New Zealand.'²⁰

With such a sense of new possibilities Collins regarded it as a 'public duty' to resist the erosion of secular state education. Williams, too, openly opposed the Bible in Schools League, aligning himself with rationalists and atheists if necessary. J.K. Archer arrived from England in 1908 to be minister of the Napier Baptist Church. A disciple of the radical Baptist John Clifford, Archer became a leading labour activist, eventually being appointed to the Legislative Council (N.Z.'s upper

¹⁸ Larsen 146.

¹⁹ Larsen 151

²⁰ J. Muirhead, 'Nonconformist or Free Churchman', Letter to the Editor, *NZB*, December 1903, 181. See similar arguments raised earlier by Bible in Schools advocate J.G. Fraser *NZB*, September 1896, 129.

house until 1952.)²¹ The nature of this activism needs to be understood. It was not of the type Breward identifies in Rutherford Waddell who declared 'we refuse absolutely to regard the state as a secular institution.'²² The state was not regarded as a key partner. Rather, this assertive ecclesiology placed the state perpetually under the judgment of Christ, exercised through his church. Williams, writing in 1896, allowed no concession to an ungodly magistrate.

The state is Christian only so far as it submits to the will of Christ in its legislation and policy....The state is divine only so far as it is imbued with Christian principles. If the state refuses this submission, and violates any of these principles it becomes in that measure unchristian and undivine.²³

In 1910 J.K. Archer put it this way.

Moses appeared to Christ [in the transfiguration] because all law worth calling law came from Christ. Moses disappeared from Christ because all legislative functions are now merged in Christ. No law can have the consent of Christians unless it has the assent of Christ. Antiquity, ubiquity, utility do not count.²⁴

This approach deeply qualified the standard protestant political ecclesiology which accorded the state a providential dynamic of its own. In the radical Free Church model the state was not a main act. The real action was in the new society, coming to be in the gathered church. The state was always on probation. It had, in the interim, a separate set of responsibilities, but the church was charged to call it to account at all moments, and to resist it when it failed to measure up.

This radical commitment to the gathered church is a characteristic of Free Church ecclesiology which is not always fully appreciated. It is emphasised in the second twist in Collins' motion. The final clause reads 'That, while recognising the supreme value of home training, it is the duty and within the power of the churches to provide religious teaching for the young.' This reservation of a role for the church in religious education beyond the family – an opportunity denied to the state – is

²¹ On Archer see M.P. Sutherland, 'Pulpit or Podium? J.K. Archer and the Dilemma of Christian Politics in New Zealand', *N.Z. Journal of Baptist Research*, Vol. 1 (Oct. 1996): 26-46.

²² *Outlook* 13 August 1912. See Breward 41.

²³ T.A. Williams, 'Religious Instruction in State Schools' *NZB*, November 1896, 165-167, 166.

²⁴ J.K. Archer, 'Jesus Only' (Union Sermon to the 1910 Baptist Assembly), *NZB*, January 1911, 11-13, 11.

another connection with Larsen's analysis. As he points out 'Dissenters believed firmly that they knew what the church was'.²⁵ The church was thus the 'starting point' for theology and practice. The gathered, covenanted community was a new society, which would flourish if freed from the pernicious effects of state interference. Collins had contended that religion 'can only be learned when the fire leaps from heart to heart, and the emotions of the scholar are touched by the emotions of the teacher'.²⁶ Williams similarly declared 'I regard religion as too sacred and too exalted to be entrusted to the keeping of state-paid agents, that I demand that none but the religious shall teach it'.²⁷ An 1898 Leader in the *N.Z. Baptist* declared that only by the removal of religion from the state 'shall we be able to boast that we have shut out the secular intruder from God's holy temple'.²⁸ This was the flip-side of what has been taken to be a process of secularisation to which the Free Churches unwittingly contributed. Larsen contests this view.

They saw the separation of church and state, not as the creating of a godless government, but rather as the creating of a purified church....What some might see as the church's retreating from its strongholds in society, evangelical Dissenters viewed as the state's being forced to retreat from its squatter holdings in the land of Zion.²⁹

This strand of Free Church thinking might have led to a radical form of church, prepared to stand over and against both the state and prevailing structures of society. Collins for instance looked for a time 'when the capitalist will cease out of the land'.³⁰ Williams called for a brave rethink on the plight of New Zealand Maori.³¹ But these were minority voices. What actually developed was more like militant sectarianism than insurgent Christianity - identifying its enemies more in other faith communities than in the systemic evils of society. That Gray and Driver were more concerned about blocking denominational interference in religious education than in seizing the initiative from the

²⁵ Larsen 150.

²⁶ A.H. Collins, 'Our Secular Education - A Reply to 'Holdfast'', Letter to the Editor, *NZB*, May 1894, 78-9.

²⁷ T.A. Williams, 'Religious Instruction in State Schools' *NZB*, August 1896, 113.

²⁸ J. Thomas, 'Our Message for the Times' *NZB*, January 1898, 1. This was an English piece reprinted in *NZB*.

²⁹ Larsen 155-6.

³⁰ Cited M. Davidson, *A History of the Ponsonby Baptist Church*, 6.

³¹ T.A. Williams *NZB*, May 1900, 66-67. See Driver's reply *NZB*, June 1900, 82-83.

state was a symptom of this drift. Even such apparent radicals as A.S. Adams were deflected into single issue activism.³²

Why did the Free Church social radicalism described by Larsen fail to flower in New Zealand? Among the Baptists at least the gradual change from an imported to an indigenous leadership was a crucial factor. In 1893 Collins had just arrived from Britain, as had his key supporter at the Conference that year, Rev. W. Drew. Both spoke out of their English experience. Williams too had been formed for the ministry in England. He arrived in 1895. Archer, similarly, was radicalized in Britain and came to New Zealand in mid-career. These men may be seen to have represented the after-guard of the radicalism Larsen finds. They found surprisingly little fertile ground for their radical visions and lost heart in their chances of propagating them among New Zealand Baptists. Collins left the country in 1902; Williams in 1919. J.K. Archer came to see little hope for progress through the churches and invested his energies into secular politics.

In contrast to these imported ministers. Gray and Driver were colonials, home grown. These men were comfortable seeking legislative change on the very questions (religious education, prohibition, gambling) which Larsen's free radicals wanted removed from state interference. The difference of context is profound. The New Zealanders did not have the automatic bogey of an established church against which to define their approach. On the other hand, by the mid-1890s, they did have before them the record of an interventionist Liberal government. Far more than in Britain, the resources of colonial society were concentrated in central government. In the debate over religion in schools, Dunedin layman J.G. Fraser made these differences specific. In the colony, he pointed out, the state was different, more democratic and inclusive, than that in Britain. Moreover, only the state had shown itself capable of providing free, 'commodious and well-equipped' schools.³³

Few Baptist leaders were willing to retreat to a pietistic separatism by which 'the church can sustain no relation to social problems.'³⁴ Yet engagement in the New Zealand context would inevitably entail interference by the state. A half-way house, with only some elements of the stance that Larsen identifies, developed. The generation of Gray,

³² Adams, a Dunedin solicitor, was a leading Temperance advocate until appointed to the Supreme Court Bench in 1921.

³³ NZB. September 1896, 129.

³⁴ A.S. Adams 'The Relation of the Church to the Social Problems of the Age' (Presidential Address, 1906) *Baptist Handbook* (Wellington: N.Z. Baptist Union, 1907) 9-23.

Driver, J.J. North and A.S. Adams did, in a real sense, set out to 'apply sect-type values and insights to the structures of society'. However Free Church values in the New Zealand of 1900 had developed a different set of priorities from those in Britain in 1850. In the absence of an established church, pure separation of religion and state was less critical. The opportunity was taken to attempt to impose other 'sect-type values' such as positions on drink and gambling. These became the focus of the social conscience of New Zealand Baptists.

But this was a half-way house. Calls for state-led solutions tended to halt at these points. On other matters, notably those relating to labour, Baptists held back. Adams called for the relief of oppressive conditions but specifically eschewed any entry 'into the strife of class with class'.³⁵ There was plenty of interest in the issue. A public 'mass meeting' on the relation of Church to Labour was held during the 1907 Assembly. A panel of ministers 'displayed...a sympathy with the aspirations of Labour, and a hostility towards the iniquities which selfish capitalism inflicts on the toiler.' Nevertheless the way forward was not connected to legislation. The panel operated 'with a belief that the solution of all economic difficulties must be a moral and religious one.'³⁶ Disruption of public life and militant unionism drew little support. H.H. Driver had no sympathy with the Unions during the maritime strike in 1913.³⁷

Ambivalence over labour issues was common to all the churches before World War One. Gradually, however, a point of contrast emerged. Baptists did not adopt social gospel approaches in the way that other 'evangelical' bodies such as the Methodists and Presbyterians did from the 1920s. In 1922, as the Methodists at their Conference were adopting a new Social Creed, the Baptists, at theirs, were being reminded of 'the pre-eminence of the spiritual.'³⁸ In his Presidential address of 1932, J.J. North called for a renewed church, centered on Christ, and was lukewarm on social radicalism.

We shall utterly fail if we merely preach a social gospel. That would be an attempt to bribe the democracy. Others will outbid us there....The social results that are visualized by our religion, and they are very precious results, are fruits from deep roots.³⁹

³⁵ Adams 22-3.

³⁶ NZB, November 1907, 262, 274.

³⁷ NZB, December 1913, 225-6.

³⁸ See A. Davidson, *Christianity in Aotearoa: A History of Church and Society in New Zealand* (Wellington: Education for Ministry, 1991), 107; NZB, November 1922, 297.

³⁹ NZB, November 1932, 352.

The importance of ecclesiology in this divergence of approaches between 'evangelical' groups must be recognised. Evangelicals may have been united on matters relating to conversion, even personal morality but there were clearly *evangelicalisms* with regard to public policy. For a generation after World War One Baptist evangelicals became less prominent in public debates, beyond a narrow compass. This was not because they were uninterested in the issues, but because they saw the solutions in different places. Only with the arrival of an ecumenically-minded leadership in the 1940s did Baptists as a group again engage directly with government.

In the mean time, New Zealand society has become more and more secularized. In 1967 Ian Breward noted that, 'Britain has had the kind of religious instruction asked for by the Bible in Schools League early this century since 1944. It has done nothing to arrest the development of secular attitudes or to enable the churches to appeal to a more educated pool of potential converts.'⁴⁰ Similar conclusions might be drawn about the effects of the social gospel. It is certainly arguable that society itself has improved. Church engagement with public policy may have aided that process, although that assessment awaits convincing evidence. What is clear is that Christianity has faded as a factor in New Zealand public life. This slide has caused considerable distress to the churches, although to different degrees. Until the 1980s (when homosexual law reform galvanized a new activism) Baptists were less troubled by this trend, and less affected numerically, than Presbyterians and Methodists – but, then, they had not expected much in the first place. The state's slide into 'godlessness' was mere confirmation of what they essentially believed of it anyway.

Baptists in New Zealand failed to develop an approach to public issues which radically reflected their ecclesiology. What emerged instead was a colonial compromise, a willingness to seek political backing on a few things, whilst withdrawing from meaningful engagement on others. This essentially defensive strategy preserved for a long time a sense of identity and coherence but it did little to transform the social order and carried only the vestiges of the Free Church vision.

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⁴⁰ Breward 112.