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New Zealand Baptists and the Great Depression of 1929-35: How the Baptists Responded during a Time of National Economic Distress

ABSTRACT

The Great Depression of 1929-35 marked a painful and difficult era in New Zealand history. As export prices plunged and unemployment figures soared, the churches could not ignore the suffering around them. New Zealand Baptists, known for their social activism, had been largely silent on political matters. However, as the economic outlook worsened and Baptists daily came face to face with desperate and hungry people, how were they to respond? This essay will map New Zealand Baptist responses to social issues and political agitation during the Great Depression. A shift from a markedly pietistic and individualistic response to a far more thoroughly politically active one took place. In the decade prior to the depression, two influential (and often competing) theological strands within the denomination may be identified. The impact of these will be explored in an analysis of which notes three phases: 1929-31, 1931-33 and 1934-35.

Baptist theology prior to the Great Depression

The decade prior to the Great Depression was one of international theological controversy. Debates and disputes over 'modernism; and its conservative opposition in fundamentalism were not lost on the New Zealand churches. New Zealand was affected by these two movements, and the raw tension that they brought. As Martin

Sutherland notes, New Zealand Baptists were not a monolithic group.[1] A spectrum of theological positions can be identified

Joseph Kemp (1872-1933) was perhaps the most well-known leader of the fundamental expression in Baptist circles in New Zealand. Prior to his arrival in New Zealand in 1920, Kemp had spent some time in America and had forged relationships with leading fundamentalists over there. When he came to New Zealand, he brought that theological framework with him and subsequently translated it into the New Zealand context. Thus, Jane Simpson has observed that he was 'the prime interpreter of American fundamentalism in New Zealand in the 1920's.'[2] After his arrival in New Zealand, Kemp became a pastor of the Baptist Tabernacle and became an influential leader amongst the Baptist Union.[3] Kemp's fundamentalism—coupled with an evangelistic zeal and emphasis upon revivalism—caused him to have a rather narrow view of the gospel. He was far more interested in human souls than he was in human social situations. As such, he often espoused a rather pietistic gospel denouncing the likes of alcohol, gambling and dancing.

John Tucker notes two more reasons for this narrow view of the gospel within the conservatives. First, premillennial theology was coming to the fore.[4] Premillennial theology asserts that morality will continue to decay until Christ's return. Therefore, it is better to think about the soul and what one can do to prepare it for Christ's return than it is to spend time thinking about easing the lives of others. Considering the horrors that had befallen the country in 1910-20's period—horrors like World War One and the Influenza Epidemic—the upsurge of this theology is not surprising. A second influence was that the Keswick movement was steadily gaining adherents within Baptist circles. This movement, encouraged in

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[1] Martin Sutherland, *Conflict and Connection: Baptist Identity in New Zealand* (Auckland: Archer Press, 2011), 157-158.
[2] Jane Simpson, *Joseph W. Kemp and the Impact of American Fundamentalism in New Zealand* (Thesis: University of Waikato, 1987), 3.
[3] John Tucker, 'A Braided River: new Zealand Baptists and Public Issues 1882-2000' (PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2010), 108.
[4] Ibid, 111.

New Zealand by Kemp and other Baptist leaders, focused purely on the development of the Christian spiritual life.[5] It highlighted the importance of personal holiness. This 'spiritual' focus caused an almost militant response to the perceived moral decay that was occurring during that period.[6] Due to these factors—including the rise of fundamentalism—time and again throughout the 1920's the need for spiritual regeneration was constantly being articulated by many Baptists.[7] This kind of mentality led to an individualistic and moralistic worldview which had no real desire to engage with wider societal issues.[8] Tucker summarizes the period leading up to the depression by suggesting that Baptist churches generally were leaning 'in a more pietistic direction' and so 'found less time to debate broader social issues.'[9] Similarly, Laurie Guy asserts that many Baptists held to this narrower view of the gospel during this period.[10] This kind of thinking led those Baptists to challenge only societal norms that impinged upon individualistic morality like gambling, alcoholism, dancing and Sunday observance. It seems that this group held the balance of power within Baptist leadership when the 1929 economic crisis hit.

There was, however, another strand that held to a broader view of the gospel. This strand saw that the gospel had implications for all aspects of life including society, economics and politics. This is aptly demonstrated by the Baptist leader J.K. Archer (1865-1949). On arriving in New Zealand in 1908, Archer was bitterly disappointed with the lack of political engagement that New

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[5] Walter Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 654.
[6] Issues of dancing, drinking, gambling and the cinema were high issues of the day. See Tucker, *A Braided River*, 113.
[7] Ibid, 110.
[8] Brian Smith, 'N.Z. Baptists and the 'Labour Question,' *The New Zealand Journal of Baptist Research* 4, October 1999: 23.
[9] Ibid, 114. This is especially true of the North island Baptist churches where leaders like Kemp were more influential. See Martin Sutherland, 'Joseph Kemp and the Establishment of the N.Z. Baptist College, 1922-33,' *The New Zealand Journal of Baptist Research* 8, October 2003: 33-34.
[10] Laurie Guy, ed., *Baptists in Twentieth Century New Zealand: Douments Illustrating Baptist Life and Development* (Auckland: New Zealand Baptists Research and Historical Society, 2005), 90.

Zealand Baptists demonstrated.[11] However, he fully believed that the gospel had significant implications for all aspects of life, and so by 1918, Archer immersed himself in secular politics. This became the preferred conduit for his socialist gospel.[12] This kind of thinking led some Baptists to believe that the gospel has a wider dimension that challenges the status quo of society. However, even within this scope, very few Baptists chose to engage politically—unless it had to do with alcohol.[13] Therefore, even for those Baptists who held to a broad view of the gospel, actively being involved in issues of politics and economics remained outside of their scope.

New Zealand society before and during the Great Depression

The Great Depression has left an indelible mark on the psyche and memory of New Zealand society. The decade leading up to the Great Depression was one of significant change. New Zealand was recovering from the trauma of World War One and the deadly Influenza Epidemic of 1918. There had been incredible technological change.[14] New Zealand also had found itself dealing with a turbulent economy which included three mini economic slumps in 1922, 1926 and 128-29.[15] These brief economic set-backs, however, did not prepare the country for what was to come. On 29 October, 1929, Wall Street suffered a market crash which triggered a world-wide economic depression.[16] Tony Simpson called this depression and its effect in New Zealand 'an

[11] Sutherland, *Conflict and Connection*, 109. Brian Smith further notes that New Zealand Baptists have rarely been politically active unless it has had to do with drink. See Smith, 'N.Z. Baptists,' 23.
[12] Ibid, 110.
[13] Smith, 'N.Z. Baptists,' 23.
[14] James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 247-248.
[15] Laurie Guy, *Shaping Godzone: Public Issues and Church Voices in New Zealand 1840-2000* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2011), 214.
[16] Ibid.

unspeakable disaster'.[17] By 1933, exporting receipts were down 44% on what they were in 1929.[18] Unemployment figures went through the roof with around 100,000 people out of a job at the peak of the depression—that is about 40% of the male workforce.[19] To demonstrate the economic potency of this time, Michael King says,

> The Court of Arbitration was given the power to lower wages and minimum rates disappeared. Old age and war pensions were cut and family allowances abolished. The result was unemployment for tens of thousands and reduced purchasing power for others. Shopkeepers began to go bankrupt as customers could no longer pay bills. [20]

The Depression had significant social ramifications also. Out of fear of having to feed another mouth, the number of abortions induced rose significantly to about one abortion for every five pregnancies.[21] The unemployment relief work that the government established was degrading and meaningless which caused further frustration and agitation. The overall affect—psychological stress, lack of food, fear of the future—caused major rioting in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin.[22] These deplorable years are often called the 'sugarbag years' because some of those who were affected most significantly lived in clothes made from the hessian sacks used to hold sugar at the Chelsea Sugar Refinery factory in Birkenhead.[23] Furthermore, the government of the day has largely been accused of being too passive and markedly

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[17] Tony Simpson, *The Sugarbag Years: A People's History of the 1930s Depression in New Zealand*, 3rd ed. (Auckland: Godwit, 1997), 13.
[18] Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 243.
[19] Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003), 347. Belich argues that these numbers are probably somewhat exaggerated. He claims that scholarly estimates range between 12-32% of the workforce were unemployed. However, if one were to include Maori and woman in their calculations, then the higher number is probably more likely. See Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 255.
[20] King, *The Penguin History*, 346.
[21] Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 256.
[22] Ibid, 257.
[23] Ibid, 255.

incompetent, and therefore largely ineffective at helping the people of New Zealand during this crisis.[24] As a result, the depression has been marked by some as the 'great nadir of the twentieth century.'[25]

Baptists and the Great Depression

Allan Davidson notes that the churches response to the Great Depression was largely palliative.[26] Even within churches with activist traditions such as the Methodists and Roman Catholics a significant majority of church members were not politically active.[27] Nonetheless, there was still a significant minority who sought to address the underlying conditions that gave rise to the absurd situation where there were such a large number of hungry people in a country of plenty. Kevin Clements provides a helpful analysis for understanding how churches in New Zealand responded to the Great Depression.[28] He splits this period into three distinct stages. First, the 1929-31 stage was a period where leaders of most denominations were complicit with the status quo. Churches were more focused on helping people at an individual level. They often had a more pietistic response proclaiming that individual morality should be upheld. Secondly, the 1931-34 stage marked a shift from this individualistic focus to focusing on social issues that were underlying the plight of the poor. This occurred especially in light of rising unemployment rates, civil unrest and rioting and

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[24] Guy, *Shaping Godzone*, 214.
[25] Ibid, 254. Some have argued whether the depression was in fact as severe as has been painted in the minds of New Zealanders and the history books that have been written. Whatever the nuances that come of these debates is not especially pertinent to this essay. What is more important is that there was clearly a depression which significantly impacted all strata of New Zealand society. The depth of suffering during this time cannot be underestimated. See Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 255.
[26] Allan Davidson, *Christianity in Aotearoa: A History of Church and Society in New Zealand* (Wellington: Education for Ministry, 2004), 109.
[27] John Tucker, *A Braided River: New Zealand Baptists and Public Issues 1882-2000* (PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2010), 137.
[28] See K. Clements, 'The Religious Variable: Dependent, Independent or Interdependent?' in *A Sociological Year Book of Religion in Britain*, ed., M Hill, (London: SCM, 1971), 39-43.

community protests.[29] Church leaders concerned themselves more with questioning the status quo. Churches were under no illusion that they had the answers; however, they were not content with the current government policies.[30] Thirdly, during the 1934-35 stage, Christian leaders' values had changed considerably. This caused a marked shift toward articulating radical social and political change. This period is characterised by a call for a new economic order.[31] Whilst Christian leaders did not openly endorse the Labour political party, many of their attitudes were similar to the values of Labour. This was an important factor for Labour gaining parliamentary power for the first time in 1935. During this period—while not completely radical in their opposition to the government—[32] churches were far more outspoken and upfront in their challenge of the government. Therefore, Clements analysis demonstrates a clear shift in Christian attitudes as the depression persisted.

As much as this period was the 'nadir of the twentieth century', Tucker argues that it was also a watershed moment in history for New Zealand Baptists.[33] He claims that the heartache and depth of suffering in the Great Depression 'stimulated among Baptists a significant level of engagement with issues of social justice.[34] This engagement, while not wholly unprecedented, was an important one for a denomination that has largely consisted of members with 'more prestigious occupations' with 'higher than average incomes' and that traditionally has had a higher degree of religious conservatism.[35] Furthermore, Brian Smith asserts that the Baptist tradition of individual conscience makes it difficult for Baptists to

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[29] Davidson, *Christianity in Aotearoa,* 109.
[30] Ibid, 110.
[31] Smith, 'N.Z. Baptists,' 37.
[32] Ibid, 110.
[33] Tucker, *A Braided River*, 136-137.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Brian K. Smith, *Baptists and the Working Class in New Zealand* (Birmingham: Unpublished Thesis, 1990), 80. Brian Smith notes that the Baptists often shunned political engagement, unless it had to with the issue of alcoholism (Ibid, 72).

witness and address systemic evil.[36] Hence, during the great nadir of the twentieth century, Baptist response—especially of Baptist leaders—to the Great Depression was a watershed moment as they responded to the horrors of the depression with a heart for social justice and involving themselves politically.[37] However, the Baptist leaders—save for a few—were not politically active until sometime after the depression had begun. For the remainder of this essay, through the frame provided by Clements, I will look at how Baptists responded to the Great Depression and the marked change in their public voice that occurred throughout these three stages: 1929-31, 1931-33 and 1934-35.

1929-31

Heretofore, I have attempted to juxtapose two currents within the New Zealand Baptists leading up to 1929. On the one hand, I have attempted to argue that a significant wing in the Baptists clung to a narrower view of the gospel—one that was primarily concerned only with personal morality. On the other hand, I have attempted to paint a picture of a group with a broader view of the gospel. However, even within this group, except for a few like J.K. Archer, politics was barely ever delved into. It seems that this more fundamental group held the balance of power as the Great Depression began. It is, therefore, within this context that we begin our exploration.

The reaction of the Baptists in 1929-31 can perhaps be characterized by two concurrent responses. The first rejoinder was a pietistic one. There was a call to intensify the efforts of winning

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[36] Smith, 'N.Z. Baptists,' 39.

[37] It has been well-documented that whilst political activism in the New Zealand Baptist tradition is not wholly unprecedented, it most certainly flowered during the first forty years of the twentieth century, especially in the face of economic discontent as we shall see. Unfortunately, this flowering only lasted a generation, and issues of social justice and politics fell off the agenda shortly after World War Two. See for example Martin Sutherland, 'Pulpit or Podium? J.K. Archer and the Dilemma of Christian Politics in New Zealand,' *The New Zealand Journal of Baptist Research* 1, October 1996: 26.

souls.[38] Kemp wrote in *The New Zealand Baptist* that churches should focus on evangelism as it is the true aim of the church.[39] Furthermore, the plight of the poor was sometimes blamed on the unholy acts committed by society. For example, an article titled 'How to save Money in Hard Times' appeared in the *Baptist* articulating that alcohol was a major cause of the pervasive lack of funds.[40] Thus, there were those who were more concerned with the infringements of personal morality than they were about the quickly expanding unemployment rates.[41] These kinds of 'pietistic' responses were a significant Baptist voice in the early stages of the Depression.

The second response regards how the church helped the poor at a personal and practical level. The Baptists rose well to the challenge that had beset the country. Baptist leader J.J. North asserted that 'a church which ignores the poor has forfeited the Christian name.'[42] For North, it was important to recognise that human beings are made up of both 'bodies as well as souls', and the church would 'do well to remember it'.[43] Time and again, Baptist leaders would call their members to give what they could to the desperate, hungry and cold.[44] As a result, there were some good initiatives established through this time, including the Auckland Baptist Social Service Association (ABSSA). The ABSSA persistently asked for provisions so they could distribute food, clothing and other essentials to families in need.[45] One poignant story tells of a woman whose son was so beaten down that he wished he was dead. One day he had trudged nine miles to get to a job only to find out that someone had beaten him to it. Even worse, on his way home he was caught in heavy rainfall which left him sick, stiff and in bed. However, after a visit from the ABSSA the young man perked up and said, 'Well, mother, the world is not such a bad place after all.

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[38] Tucker, *A Braided River*, 121-122.
[39] *The New Zealand Baptist* [hereafter *NZB*], March 1930, 72-73.
[40] *NZB*, May 1931, 135.
[41] Tucker, *A Braided River*, 122.
[42] *NZB*, August 1930, 241.
[43] Ibid.
[44] For example, *NZB*, September 1930, 273 and *NZB*, October 1931, 293.
[45] See for example *NZB,* August 1932, 237 and *NZB*, July 1933, 205.

Somebody's been thinking of us.'[46] Such groups as the ABSSA and the Dorcas Society alongside the willingness of the church to help the poor restored hope and gave help where it was desperately needed. It called for harmony amongst the Christian church in the face of worsening economic conditions. This palliative ministry was an important aspect of Baptist ministry for church and society, and an overarching one that lasted throughout the depression years.[47]

Yet, there were also a small few who—even at this early stage—were willing to look at the bigger picture and critique the prevailing systems of the day. Tucker notes that as early as 1929, North argued that only palliative measures would not solve the problem. Rather, a far more comprehensive course of action needed to be undertaken.[48] For North, there were bigger social issues that the church needed to address like unemployment and hunger.[49] He vehemently argued that the falling economic conditions were a direct result of human made systems and not the fault of any other factors like overpopulation.[50] North deplored that in a land brimming with plenty so many could remain hungry.[51] Similarly, during 1925-1931 when doubling as a Baptist minister and mayor of Christchurch, Archer spoke on behalf of the poor and unemployed.[52] He argued that the economic system needed to be drastically changed and resources should be distributed fairly and equally so that no one should lack any essentials. [53] Nothing short of a 'revolution' was needed. [54] However, the efforts and beliefs of these two men were clearly a minority.[55] Most Baptists were not ready to respond politically. Instead, the most common response was either one of pietism, blaming the current situation on things

[46] This story can be found at *NZB*, October 1931, 299.
[47] Smith notes that, overall, Baptists responded well to the needs of the poor in this way. See Smith, 'N.Z. Baptists,' 39.
[48] Tucker, *A Braided River*, 123.
[49] *NZB*, September 1929, 257.
[50] *NZB*, September 1931, 261.
[51] *NZB*, January 1931, 6.
[52] Tucker, *A Braided River*, 124.
[53] *NZB*, August 1931, 231.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Tucker, *A Braided River*, 125.

like alcohol or declaring that more evangelism would solve the situation, or they attempted to apply bandages where they felt they were needed. Few Baptist leaders—unlike Archer and North—were prepared to think deeper about the situation and challenge the systems at a political and economic level. It seems, however, that the work of these men created a foundation for a significant shift in the public discourse of the Baptists.

1931-33

Near the end of 1931, a strange current within Baptist life began to flow. More and more Baptists were coming to see that the existing political and economic systems added considerably to the plight of the nation.[56] Thus, the final public meeting of the Baptist Conference held in October 1931was themed around the economic crisis. So many came to hear the addresses of J.J. North and J.K. Archer that more seats were needed.[57] These addresses called for the need for Christians to be active on this issue. They told their hearers that to think Christianly about economics is to begin with the Christian gospel and the principles it espouses. This public discussion was the beginning of a greater public involvement in critiquing the undergirding economic systems that framed the national economy.

This discourse began by asking what the problem was that had caused the crisis and how best to address it. As one would expect, there were those who concluded that what is most important is spiritual regeneration.[58] That is that human beings need to come under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and be saved. Of course virtually all Baptists would rightly have agreed with this, but no longer could merely spiritual responses suffice. Instead, Baptists were recognizing that a deeper and wider response was required—one that required political engagement. Thus, as editor of the

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[56] This of course needs to be balanced. There were still those who clung to an individualistic and moralistic outlook. See Tucker, *A Braided River*, 128.
[57] *NZB*, November 1931, 340.
[58] *NZB*, March 1933, 69-70.

Baptist, North tried his hand at some economics in those pages.[59] A correspondent, A.D. Mead, was worried about North's 'unsound' economics.[60] North humbly admitted that he had no expert economic knowledge, and so he gave Mead or any other Baptist who had an understanding in economics the chance to write a series of articles in the ensuing editions of the *Baptist*.[61] Mead took up this challenge and wrote a series of articles entitled 'The Economic Teaching of Jesus'.[62] The dominant tone of this discourse focused on biblical principles, and how the love of Jesus can be a basis for an economic system. It was not a complete discussion on economics, nor did it espouse an alternative economic system. Rather, Mead attempted to create a biblical and theological basis for thinking about economics.

This kind of discourse particularly accelerated after the outbreak of riots in New Zealand. After the Auckland riots, North wrote against the timidity of the Christian church, and pushed some of the blame of the riots onto the church's lack of action.[63] Further, North publicly questioned the competency of the government concluding that the current Prime Minister Gordon Coates 'and his officials are not competent to make determinations that affect the wellbeing of thousands and the home life of tens of thousands.'[64] As such, two things were sparked in this growing discourse. First, there was an emerging recognition that churches needed to be more vocal. In a letter to the *Baptist*, Mead praised the churches for their attempts to alleviate the overwhelming pain, but he also challenged to church to be more active in addressing the underlying wound that gave rise to it. [65] Secondly, there was a growing disillusionment with the government's ability to handle the crisis.

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[59] *NZB*, January 1933, 3.
[60] *NZB*, February 1933, 42.
[61] Ibid.
[62] These articles are found in *NZB*, March 1933, 81; *NZB*, April 1933, 106; *NZB*, May 1933, 152; *NZB*, June 1933, 169.
[63] *NZB*, May 1932, 131.
[64] Ibid.
[65] See *NZB*, June 1932, 168. There were others like F.C. Brookbanks and J. Brown who argued along similar lines, but nuanced their conversations differently. See *NZB*, March 1933, 75.

Some even aligning themselves with the Labour Party because they felt that Labour policies reflected closely the values of the gospel.[66]

At a national level, it took the denomination some time to exercise its voice. It was not until the 1933 Assembly that the denomination officially addressed the issue of unemployment and slumping economic conditions. At this Assembly, the denomination made two important resolutions.[67] The first was a general statement acknowledging the plight of the nation. The second resolution dealt with the horrendous unemployment rates. Here, Assembly deplored Government's handling of the unemployment crisis, and 'respectfully' urged Government to 'explore various proposals' from public figures and bodies and in the meantime, to provide the necessities for families in deep distress.[68] As a statement of action, Assembly established a National Reconstruction Committee to assist in the process of thinking intelligently about a new economic order.[69]

During this period, the tide was clearly turning toward challenging economic structures. Andrew Picard has argued that whilst the churches worldview was perhaps too narrow and pietistic to be of any constructive value for the government, this changing tide sowed a 'discourse of discontent' with the status quo which later allowed churches to 'exert considerable pressure for social change.'[70] As the economic situation continued to decline, Baptists could not stand by and simply allow the situation to continue deteriorating. While it would be a mistake to conclude that the denomination was wracked with discontent, it would be fair to say that the seeds had been planted during this period—discontentment with churches simply standing by and discontentment with the government's management of the depression.

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[66] See *NZB*, June 1932, 169 and *NZB*, June 1933, 174.
[67] *NZB*, November 1933, 335.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Tucker, *A Braided River*, 130.
[70] Andrew Picard, 'Church Responses to Social Issues in Depression New Zealand, 1933,' *The New Zealand Journal of Baptist Research* 9, October 2004: 46-47.

1934-35

By the tail end of the Depression, the foundations of discontent had been set and there was no lack of Baptist voices urging for a renewed economic system—[71]including some radical political rhetoric.[72] In an official report released by the National Reconstruction Committee, W.S. Rollings commented that the church can and should contribute to political change. He proposed that the denomination gather its 'best brains together' to 'frame definite proposals that would look towards a final goal that would represent Christian ideals.'[73] Rollings argued that the church should bring a biblical and theological basis to the ensuing discussions around economic reconstruction. Such voices as these, however, tended to be too naïve to contribute a plausible alternative economic system.[74] They were often blanket statements that lacked the technical expertise and specificity to be of use to lawmakers.[75] In that sense, Baptists offered very little in the way of concrete solutions.

However, these voices were not wholly ineffective.[76] Instead, church leaders—including Baptists—were better positioned than most to help spread a change in values of society and justice because ministers 'tended to be articulate, they had ready-made audiences, they were often close to the unemployed and they enjoyed a relatively independent position.'[77] In the *Baptist*, North asserted that it was a sin to be content with the existing political structure, and urged that Christians agitate for political and economic change.[78] This kind of exhortation further affected the discourse of discontent within the grassroots of society. Thus, even though churches lacked the technical economic nous to articulate a

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[71] There was a flurry of correspondence on this issue in the *Baptist*. See for example, *NZB*, April, 1935, 108; *NZB*, September 1935, 271-272; *NZB*, October 1935, 332.
[72] Tucker, *A Braided River*, 133.
[73] *NZB*, October 1934, 299.
[74] Picard, 'Church Response,' 46.
[75] Tucker, *A Braided River*, 132.
[76] Ibid, 132-133.
[77] Ibid, 133.
[78] *NZB*, April 1935, 98.

sustainable system, they were effective insofar as they agitated for the government to do better.

This discontent ultimately helped pave the way for Labour's first electoral victory in 1935 and the subsequent welfare system that was instituted by that government. This occurred for two reasons. First, Baptist leaders unsubtly hinted that it had no confidence in the current government. North affirmed that it had passed no one's attention that the government's response to the Depression had been completely inadequate.[79] Accordingly, the 1935 Assembly passed a motion declaring that 'this Assembly is unable to believe that the problem has been adequately handled.'[80] Furthermore, in light of the upcoming elections, no 'candidate should be voted who does not give adequate undertakings in respect of this urgent national issue.'[81] Secondly, the values articulated by Baptists were most closely aligned with that of the Labour Party. Both churches and the Labour Party were concerned with the poor and their wellbeing. As a result, the Labour Party received religious endorsement from the churches.[82] As such, Baptists—along with other churches—had a privileged status within society accorded to them. They were able to be the voice of change on behalf of the unemployed, the poor and the desperate.

Once again, we can be under no false illusions that political agitation was the response of the majority of the denomination. Rather, it was only a minority that engaged politically and allowed the gospel to shape how they viewed all aspects of society, including economic reconstruction.[83] However, the Baptists leaders who did participate 'engaged more deeply with the questions thrown up by the Great Depression than many other church leaders.'[84] They showed a deep willingness to engage in political and economic matters. This was a move that was almost unprecedented within New Zealand Baptists. Therefore, the Great

[79] *NZB*, November 1935, 342.
[80] Ibid, 354.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Tucker, *A Braided River*, 135.
[83] Ibid, 136-137.
[84] Ibid, 138.

Depression was—in an important sense—a watershed moment within the history of New Zealand Baptists; one that was imperative for both church and society.

Conclusion

Baptists' responses toward issues of social justice and political agitation shifted markedly as the 1929-35 depression endured. Initially, they had a rather pietistic response and those who engaged in social justice—save for a few key leaders—were only concerned with palliative measures. However, as the depression endured, these responses more and more were concerned with engaging politically and seeking to address the underlying causes of the depression.

New Zealand Baptists do not have a reputation for political activism. However, during the years of the depression, when faced with the reality of desperate and hungry people, the Baptists found their voice. The values they articulated were important for society and needed to be publicly espoused. Of course the Baptists were only a small denomination in a context where religious influence was ever-decreasing in the public arena, but their response was nonetheless an important one and crucial for both church and society.

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