"WHEREFORE THEN THIS THUSNESS?" THE SOCIAL COMPOSITION OF BAPTIST CONGREGATIONS IN NEW ZEALAND

At the present time it is a common observation that with minor exceptions Baptist congregations in New Zealand look very "middle class". Whether a fuzzy term like "middle class" is an appropriate description or not, the intended meaning is clear. On a Sunday morning those worshipping in a Baptist church are more likely to be school teachers, accountants and managers, than they are to be truck drivers, factory workers, shop assistants, cleaners or labourers. In other words there is a perception that (to use another fuzzy term) the "working class" is under-represented in our churches, and indeed in some cases is almost entirely absent.

But has this always been the case? Is this "working class" absence historical, or is it of more recent origin? This essay is an endeavour to assess, over the 140 years of Baptist presence in this land, the relationship between Baptist congregations and the lower socio-economic strata of our society. To do that it will examine such evidence as is available in the reports and comments of contemporary observers.

The beginnings

In attempting to make some assessment of the social status of Baptist immigrants in the early decades to 1880 we may begin with their occupations. A perusal of the first

volume of the centenary history of the Baptist Union of New Zealand yields the following:

Name	Place	Occupation
Henry C. Daniell	Nelson	clerk, accountant
William Bayly	Taranaki	farmer
Josiah Flight	Taranaki	farmer, horticulturist
Joshua Robinson	Auckland	timber manager
George Vaile	Auckland	farmer, architect
Theo. Mannering	Rangiora	sheep farmer
Thomas Pannett	Christchurch	farmer
William Purdie	Dunedin	doctor
Thomas Dick	Dunedin	auctioneer
William Ings	Dunedin	market gardener
Edwin S. Brook	Port Albert	surveyor
Thomas Adams	Greendale	farmer
William Hall	Invercargill	ironmonger
Samuel Costall	Wellington	printing compositor
Richard Shalders	Auckland	draper, ironmonger, timber merchant
Joseph Webley and Thomas Blick	Nelson	opened a woollen mill
G.A. White	Oxford	managed a brick kiln
Giles Chamberlain	Masterton	opened a roller flour mill
William Sansom	Rangiora	baker, storekeeper
Arthur Wright	Oxford	managed a brick kiln
William Cutler	Port Albert	bootmaker
John Coombs	Dunedin	ran a tannery
William Morgan	Auckland	printer, teacher
Jonathan Garlick	Auckland	draper, journalist, property and mining interests
Gilbert Carson	Auckland	journalist, newspaper manager
James Renshaw	Thames	cutler, dealer in leather goods
Richard Pole	Malvern County	school teacher
Thomas Pole	Malvern County	school teacher
Nathaniel Grindrod	South Malvern	storekeeper, blacksmith

In a list such as this we are looking at skilled artisans, small entrepreneurs, farmers, and a few professional people. But how typical of Baptist congregations in general were these leading lights?

Transient populations

As far as country districts are concerned, the best indication as to the social composition of congregations may come from churches that failed, rather than from those that survived. One such congregation was at Sheffield in Canterbury. In 1877 under the stimulus of preaching by Richard Pole and Rev George Johnston, a chapel was built and a Baptist church established. Within a couple of years, however, the scarcity of employment for farm workers forced many of the Sheffield church members to leave the district. Baptist services struggled on, but were discontinued in 1880.[1]

At exactly the same time an unnamed Baptist minister who had studied at Spurgeon's College came to Masterton, and commenced Baptist work at Upper Plain, then a saw-milling centre. A chapel was opened in 1878, the first such Baptist building in the Wellington province. In time, however, the milling of available timber was completed and, with the resultant shift of population, the Baptist congregation faded from view. Baptist work in Masterton was not restarted until 1937.[2] At both Sheffield and Masterton we may be looking at churches with a substantial number of working class members who were farmhands and sawmill labourers. When work failed the workers moved, and the congregations also failed.

A further glimpse of this kind comes in an address in 1888 by Thomas Spurgeon as president of the Union. Entitling his message "Head Winds", Spurgeon noted that one of the winds into which the Union was heading was economic depression.

> *The churches have suffered severely. Many of our members have been out of work for weeks and months and others have*

been seriously retrenched...Our sheep have scampered away from us. Literally by the shipload they have departed. Some of our best workers and pray-ers are not. To New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, San Francisco and South America they have wandered...I know of one little country church from which no less than six leading families migrated in a month.[3]

In a migrant society such as New Zealand, this kind of movement was not untypical. People were not yet rooted in the land, and it was easy for there to be a good deal of coming and going. Since by far the majority of immigrants to this country were from the lower rungs of England's socio-economic ladder we may assume that working class people were a not inconsiderable part of this flux.

Country and town

In these disappearing congregations we are looking at the phenomenon of transience. Until 1914 this was a marked feature of life among the unskilled. For Baptists, with their congregational polity, the forming of a church among people of this kind depended largely on the presence of a particular lay person who could offer leadership. The existence of such churches was always precarious. Methodists with their connexional system were better able to maintain continuity.

If the relatively few rural Baptist churches had a significant proportion of members that might be called working class, a very different picture of Baptist life in the towns was given by J. Upton Davis in 1881. Davis, who was minister at Hanover Street in Dunedin, had recently travelled through the country, and in an address in Auckland gave a detailed survey of all the Baptist congregations. In conclusion be observed that Baptists held comparatively high positions in society, and stated that in his opinion, it required "some firmness of principle to face the disadvantage of being a Baptist whether a minister or a private member."[4]

A cause for concern

From the 1880s onwards with the arrival of the *New Zealand Baptist* more detailed information about Baptist life becomes available. An early indication of the attitude of some Baptists to the working class comes in an editorial of July 1883 concerning the Salvation Army. The Army had only recently begun work in New Zealand and its focus and style had evidently called forth ridicule from more sophisticated church-goers. The editor of the *Baptist* thought that some at least of his readers were in need of stern rebuke.

> *It was our privilege the other evening to sit in the "Salvation Theatre" amongst the hard-working men and roughs of Christchurch... To see uncouth, hard-visaged, vice-marked faces smiling and singing with vigour of the "mighty, mighty power of a Saviour's love" struck us with peculiar force, and we inwardly prayed to God to richly bless this noble work... Have a care then, Christian friends, how you denounce this great work, for it is undoubtedly of God.*[5]

No doubt the Salvation Army was touching the working class. But what of the Baptists? Were they adequately represented in the lower strata of society? In an 1893 *Baptist* editorial Rev Arthur Dewdney thought they were. His estimate of the situation was sparked by a statement of the Labour leader Keir Hardie in far off Britain. Speaking at a meeting of the Congregational Union at Bradford, Hardie had advanced the view that the working classes were alienated from the churches. "But is this the fact?" asked Dewdney. "We think decidedly not; and we very much question the wisdom of paying so much deference to the utterance of men of the Keir Hardie stamp." It was Dewdney's opinion that in New Zealand

> *The masses are no more alienated from the Church than the classes are, if, indeed as much. Our churches here are very largely manned by the "sons of toil", and if their consecrated effort were withdrawn from them it would go very hardly indeed with not a few. And we are persuaded that this is so of the Churches generally.*[6]

But not everyone agreed. Among liberal clergy the inability of the Protestant churches to hold the loyalty of the working class was a constant refrain from 1890 onwards.[7] By 1903 this fear had surfaced in the *Baptist.* Rev W.R. Woolley in a guest editorial noted the observation of John A Steuart who in an address in Glasgow had asserted that "the working man lives entirely or almost entirely outside the pale of the church." While hoping that this statement might be proved to be a mistake, or at least an exaggeration of the facts, Woolley acknowledged that even "to the most optimistic among us, the condition of things is serious enough."[8]

The challenge of the working class

Aware of the absence of the working class Rev R. S. Gray of the Oxford Terrace church in Christchurch attempted to do something about it. In 1905 he sent out a circular to a considerable number of working men who were not in the habit of attending church. In the circular he pointed out that there seemed to be no valid reason for any estrangement between the church and men. Christ, after all, had appealed with singular success to men, and had commissioned his Church to make its appeal to all that is noblest and manliest in men. "Wherefore then," asked Gray, "this thusness?" Following up his own question, Gray asked working men to meet with him and, in the words of *Baptist* editor, F. W. Boreham, "to discuss simultaneously a cup of coffee and a batch of obstacles to church attendance."[9] The obstacles elicited by Gray were three – (1) the anti-labour stance of the churches, (2) the inconsistencies of professing Christians, clerical and lay, (3) the difficulty of accepting Christian doctrines such as the Virgin Conception, the Atonement, the Resurrection, original sin and the fall of man.

Following his preliminary enquiry Gray held a number of Sunday evening meetings after the ordinary service, where working men could gather to discuss these

issues. At the second of these meetings about 250 were present, nearly all of them "toilers". According to the Christchurch *Press* the debate became decidedly breezy at times, and conflicting interjections enlivened things considerably.[10] While commending Gray's initiative, Boreham voiced his opinion that it was a case of the boot being on the wrong foot. The accused were not guilty. It was not the duty of working men to come to church. It was the duty of the Church to go to the men.[11]

The boot might have been on the wrong foot, but in the interests of making it fit the next editor of the *Baptist*, H. H. Driver, was quite prepared to give it another tug. In 1909 he invited John Kendrick Archer, the new minister at Napier, to write a discussion article under the title "Why don't men come to church?" Archer responded in a manner similar to Gray. He distributed to the men of his congregation and his recently formed Men's Brotherhood two slips of paper on which were the questions "Why don't men come to church?" and "How could the churches attract men?" The answers, reported Archer, were interesting, suggestive and varied. Most of them came from bona fide working men. The main answers to the first question were:

- Unattractive services, especially sermon topics that do not interest. (Alternative topics suggested were socialism, economics, and what today would be called social justice.)
- The hypocrisy and cant of Christians.
- Class distinctions, evidenced in formality, dress, and rented pews.[12]

It is noticeable that both Gray and Archer attempted to deal with working class men. What about the working class women? Were they involved in the churches? Given the well-known tendency for congregations of the period to contain a disproportionate number of women, working class women may well have been present even if not in representative numbers. But the absence of the working class from the churches was perceived to be a male

phenomenon, and the problem was formulated in those terms.

An urban denomination

For the period up till World War I one final piece of impressionistic evidence must be cited. At the 1890 Conference in Auckland pioneer minister Decimus Dolamore read a paper entitled "A sketch of the New Zealand Baptist churches". Towards the end of his survey Dolamore analysed the latest census figures and lamented the tiny proportion of Baptists. He went on:

> *Nor can we be satisfied with the reach and extent of our operations, while those operations fail to touch the greater part of our people. Our mining population is almost altogether outside us. Through the whole west coast of the South Island, and all the interior of Otago, we are almost unrepresented and almost unknown. The same remarks would apply to our agricultural districts, with few exceptions, chiefly in Canterbury. In the North Island the state of things is the same.*[13]

Here Dolamore was pointing to a feature that is still true a century later. Baptists in New Zealand are largely an urban phenomenon. But in delineating rural areas as a Baptist vacuum, Dolamore was also pointing to a working class population consisting of miners, farm workers, saw millers, construction labourers and all their kin. These gaps in the Baptist map led to special mission efforts. Three in particular may be mentioned – the West Coast mission, the Ohakune project, and the Gumfields Mission in the north.

Missions to the working class

Following the annual Conference at Christchurch in 1884 George Johnston, minister of the Sydenham church was appointed evangelist to the miners and diggers of the West Coast. For two years Johnston travelled on horseback up and down his 500 kilometre parish. But the response among the scattered settlements of those who remained after the

gold rush of the 1860s was disappointingly small. No church could be established. When funding failed Johnston, despite his great love for the Coast, was forced to give up. "We cannot say," said the report in the *Baptist* for January 1887, "that the mission has been a failure in any respect except in the matter of permanency." The truth was, however, that Baptists had failed to find a foothold among the mining community of the Coast.[14]

In the first decade of the new century the main trunk railway line was being thrust through the central North Island. A major centre for the project was Ohakune, a rough and raw town where a large part of the population was "working men". When railway construction was finished many of the navvies found employment in saw milling and bush clearing. Here in 1909 came Rev Guy Thornton on behalf of the Baptist Union, to evangelise and gather a church. Thornton, who could not feel satisfied to "preach religion handsome and out of the wet",[15] was an ideal pioneer. Known as "the Wowser"[16] he lived in Ohakune and visited camps, shanties, and sawmills over a wide area. In the December of 1909 a group of Bible Class volunteers visited Ohakune and erected a church building in ten days. Before his wife's health failed in 1912 and the family left the district Thornton had established an infant congregation, but the infant did not survive. By 1917 the Ohakune church had disappeared from the list of churches in the Union. Part of the reason for this was the phenomenon of transience mentioned earlier. A further reason may have been that those who responded to Thornton's charismatic personality were no longer attracted to the quieter ministry that followed. When numbers dwindled Baptists, with their congregational polity, were not well placed to put national money into sustaining a cause such as Ohakune. In this regard more centrally funded churches were better able to maintain work among the rural working class.

In its September 1893 issue the *Baptist* noted that the Auckland Association had started mission work amongst the kauri gumdiggers in the province. The missionary was a Mr Harry Long whose field was a scattered population spread over 3,500 square kilometres. Long gave 15 years to this work and was succeeded by Eric Evans in 1908. While the Gumfields Mission brought the gospel and the services of the Church to an isolated and shifting population, the work by its very nature was scarcely conducive to the forming of stable and permanent churches.[17] From about 1890 onwards the gumfields were flooded with thousands of Croat immigrants. Traditionally Roman Catholic and still strongly linked to their homeland, these new gumdiggers were scarcely fertile ground for Baptist preachers.[18]

Awareness and its decline

In 1920 Rev Joseph W Kemp arrived at the Auckland Baptist Tabernacle to begin a remarkable evangelistic ministry. For more than a decade Kemp blazed like a comet in the preaching firmament of the Queen City. His services drew hundreds to the Tabernacle and many were added to the church. But who were these people?

> *They did not appear to be "working class" or what Kemp called the "get-your-breakfast-in-bed-on Sunday-morning" type of man." Even Kemp found it difficult to attract these people of whom (sic) he said had little or no connection with the organised churches. Nor were they recruited from the ranks of "high society"...The Tabernacle in the 1920s appears to have appealed to large numbers of families who belonged to a "middle class of small entrepeneurs."*[19]

Kemp might not have been touching the working classes, but at least he was aware of this. Such however, was not the case with the *New Zealand Baptist.* From this time on the subject of the working class as an evangelistic challenge disappears almost entirely from its pages. While there is a considerable mention of the poor and the unemployed, it is their economic condition that is of

concern, not their absence from the church. Again, there is considerable discussion of "home mission" and "church extension", but this is seen in geographical terms rather than groups or classes in the population. Two reasons may be suggested for this shift from an earlier awareness. First, New Zealand society was becoming more socially homogeneous. The problem of the unchurched was thus seen as a problem relating to the population as a whole, and not specifically to class. Or it may be that under the editorship of J J North (1916-48) and his successors the *Baptist* reflected how Baptists were increasingly seeing themselves - educated, reflective, middle class.

Two lone voices

From the 1920s on only two lone voices break the Baptist silence on the working class. In 1953 Ian Kemp, grandson of Joseph, and minister at Papakura, recognised that the church as a whole was making little impact on the working class. With the agreement of his deacons he spent six weeks working in a wool store. He was well received by the men, Kemp reported, but found it difficult to promote conversation on Christian topics. Christianity was seen as negative and out of date. It failed to speak language that working men could understand, and its representatives whom they had met were regarded as cads and hypocrites. Kemp was of the opinion that they had not come in contact with vital evangelical Christianity. He concluded that the answer was for Baptist ministers to be released into industrial chaplaincy for a period of 6 months to a year.[20]

A second voice was heard in 1978. In an article entitled "Are we off target?" Rev Brian K Meadows pointed to the fact that in the western suburbs of Melbourne Baptists had declined over 30 years from 5.2 to 2.7 per cent of the population. On the other hand in Melbourne's middle class eastern suburbs 25 Baptist churches had an average membership of nearly 200, greater than the membership of

any other single Baptist church in Victoria. Meadows went on to point out that New Zealand Baptists, like their Australian cousins, conduct their church life in a middle class way that clashes with what the average shop assistant or labourer is comfortable with.[21]

Meadows' view was echoed a few years later by Dr S L Edgar, General Superintendent of the Baptist Union. As author of the fourth volume of the centenary history of the Baptist Union of New Zealand published in 1982 Dr Edgar commented:

> *At present Baptist churches direct much of their activity towards middle class people who have a fairly well developed sense of responsibility and reasonably enquiring minds...While other sections of the community are being reached this occurs as yet in only a few places.*[22]

Conclusion

So much for the observations that are still available to us regarding the social composition of Baptist congregations. A more quantitative analysis of the situation can be carried out using census data. For a number censuses from 1921 onwards we have available a correlation between religious affiliation and occupation. Again, since the 1981 census we also have a correlation of religious affiliation and income. An examination of these statistics confirms what we have already discovered. Historically New Zealand Baptists have been "middle class"; the working class has been under-represented in our churches.[23] To say this is, of course, to beg an obvious question: Why is the gospel which Jesus said was "good news to the poor" not in fact so?

Brian Smith

NOTES:

1. Paul Tonson, *A handful of grain: The centenary history of the Baptist Union of New Zealand,* vol.1. Wellington: New Zealand Baptist Historical Society, 1982, pp.85-86.
2. Newspaper cutting, New Zealand Baptist Historical Society
3. *New Zealand Baptist,* December 1888, p.179
4. Ibid., February 1881, p 4
5. Ibid., July 1883, p.297
6. Ibid., March 1893, p.33
7. Erik Olssen, "The 'working class' in New Zealand." in *New Zealand Journal of History,* April 1974, p.44
8. *N.Z. Baptist,* July 1903, pp 105-106
9. Ibid., August 1905, p.121
10. *The Press,* 10 July, 1905
11. *N.Z. Baptist,* August 1905, p 122
12. Ibid., August 1909, pp.391-393. Archer's article prompted a flurry of correspondence in the next two months. No new reasons for the failure of men to attend church were advanced, but there was some feeling that the fault was not all on the church's side.
13. Ibid., January 1891, pp.4-6
14. J L North, "George Johnston", N.Z.Baptist Historical Society pamphlet in the series *Shapers of Baptist Life.* Following the demise of the West Coast mission Johnston left New Zealand for Western Australia and pioneered Baptist work there.
15. E. Thornton, *Guy D Thornton,* Auckland: Scott and Scott, 1937, p.99.
16. "The Wowser" was later the title of Thorton's popular autobiography written in fictional form. In an introductory note he defines a "wowser" in the common parlance as follows:

(i) "A man who tries to rob a bloke of his beer and his pleasure" - therefore especially applicable to a temperance reformer.

(ii) "A bloke who wears out the knees of his pants on Sundays praying, and another part of his pants all week backsliding" - that is a hypocrite.

(iii) "Any sky pilot or local preacher who makes a bloke uncomfortable, and pretends to be religious."

17. A brief account of Harry Long's work in the Gumdiggers Mission is given by his son, W H Long, in the *N.Z. Baptist,* October 1958, p.534
18. A H Reed, *The Gumdiggers,* Wellington: Reed, 1972, p.72
19. G R Pound, "Rev Joseph William Kemp and the Auckland Baptist Tabernacle, 1920-1933." Unpublished M.A. research essay, University of Auckland 1978, p.27
20. *N.Z. Baptist,* June 1953, pp.127-128
21. Ibid., December 1978, p.5
22. S L Edgar, *A handful of grain: The centenary history of the Baptist Union of New Zealand,* vol.4. Wellington: New Zealand Baptist Historical Society, 1982, p 106.
23. Brian K Smith, "Baptists and the working class in New Zealand". Unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Birmingham, 1990, pp.28-40. A copy of this dissertation is in the library of Carey Baptist College.