

# HEAR OUR PLEA: VOICES OF EARLY FREE METHODIST WOMEN IN DENOMINATIONAL PRINT CULTURE

Christy Mesaros-Winckles

**In the late nineteenth century a gender battle was brewing in the Free Methodist Church.** Since the denomination's founding in 1860, women had pursued ordination. With the support of the denomination's founder, Benjamin Titus Roberts, women began to wage a fierce editorial campaign in the pages of the denominational weekly magazine, *The Free Methodist* and the quadrennial special publication *General Conference Dailies*. The articles written by women and in defense of women's roles in the denomination illustrate that the 'woman issue' was fiercely debated in nineteenth century American culture in numerous contexts. The Free Methodist debate occurred at a crucial time in American evangelical history when other similar denominations were also debating women's roles in the church. It was a time when the evangelical movement could move forward and remain progressive or begin to deteriorate into the dogmatism of early twentieth century fundamentalism.

**KEYWORDS:** Free Methodist, gender roles, nineteenth century, ordination, religious periodical, United States

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In 1888 Clara Wetherald, a licensed evangelist and circuit-riding preacher in Michigan, wrote a ministerial update for the 10 October 1888, edition of *The Free Methodist*, the denominational periodical of the Free Methodist Church. Wetherald had been sent to dedicate a new church in Royalton, Michigan, only to find that the congregation still needed to raise \$369, and the building for the church was not completed. 'It was a great cross to me to go to dedicate a church, as I consider myself a poor hand to raise money', Wetherald wrote (1888, 5). Despite her qualms she led the congregation in a time of prayer on Saturday, 29 September 1888, since she was opposed to raising money on the Sabbath. As Wetherald and the congregation prayed for donations people began screaming out amounts of money they could give. Wetherald recollects:

The Spirit of God fell with power upon the people. The sister who had subscribed five dollars was so blest that she stood up shouting glory; holding up both hands she said, 'I'll sign five more for my husband; he's not here.' (1888, 5)

The fundraising was a success and \$400 was raised for the church building. Wetherald's ministry updates in *The Free Methodist*, and her original articles and speeches provide a glimpse of a forgotten part of American evangelical history. From 1887 to 1890, when the Free Methodist denomination's founder Benjamin Titus Roberts served as editor of *The Free Methodist*, women's writings and contributions to Free Methodist print culture were prolific, vibrant illustrations of the powerful religious expressions and contributions of many early Free Methodist women whose work within the denomination, like Wetherald's, has all but been forgotten.

Dynamic women leaders such as Wetherald have become just names in the General Conference minutes and no comprehensive history of women's involvement in the denomination exists. Even though women clearly dominated the early missions movement in Free Methodism, women's writings in denominational periodicals have been almost completely ignored and extensive archival research is required before the significant role they played in the Free Methodist Church can be fully understood. In addition, the early histories of Free Methodism were written by men such as William Hogue or E.P. Hart, both early Free Methodist General Superintendents, who overlooked the role of women in the early years of the denomination completely, thus wiping out their contribution to the denomination's growth. By the 1960s Free Methodist historians like Leslie Marston in *From Age to Age a Living Witness: A Historical Interpretation of Free Methodism's First Century* (1974) briefly allude to women's role in ministry, but the historical significance of their contributions and their legacy in denominational publications is still under-studied. It was not until 2006, with Free Methodist historian Howard Snyder's book *Populist Saints*, that women were named and given credit for their contributions to the denomination.

From a larger perspective, the writings of women and their impact on American religious publications and ministry are still vastly under-researched, partly due to the difficulty in locating archival records of their contributions. Kolmer (1978) notes in her research on Catholic women's religious history that as churches close and records are lost so are the lives and social impact of the women's ministries. The writings of nineteenth-century religious women must be resurrected before the traces of their lives are lost forever and an important part of American history and print culture disappears into dust. Looking at the print culture of early Free Methodism, particularly the period between 1886 and 1890, thus allows us to analyze the developing tension over gender roles as a means to resurrecting the contributions of early Free Methodist women evangelists.

### **Women's Contribution to Nineteenth-century Religious Periodicals**

Within nineteenth-century religious periodicals women writers were often restricted to the mission society pages (Cayton, 2010) or the Sunday school section. Yet in the North American Free Methodist Church the contributions of women to print culture increased to include women who wrote about their ministry, offered spiritual guidance and wrote original articles for denominational publications. In addition to his time as editor for denominational publications, Roberts also served as editor and publisher for his own independent religious periodical *The Earnest Christian*, which he founded in 1859 (Snyder, 2006). *The Earnest Christian* consistently featured regular women contributors who wrote on religious life, spiritual growth and conversion experiences. Prior to Roberts taking over as editor of *The Free Methodist* in 1887 the magazine featured few women writers outside the pages of the Sunday school curriculum or mission society news. Yet, as editor of both magazines Roberts began to regularly feature more women and encourage readers to subscribe to both *The Free Methodist* and *The Earnest Christian*. Thus, Roberts' tenure as editor of *The Free Methodist* provided women with a chance to voice issues that concerned them and served as a platform for Roberts to continue his push for denominational reform, which he hoped would ultimately allow women to be ordained.

Roberts was a cunning editor who included more contributions by women without drawing overt attention or animosity from more conservative denominational members. In addition, by encouraging Free Methodists to subscribe to *The Earnest Christian* Roberts was able to promote a series of periodicals that allowed women greater opportunities for publication. By examining the content of early Free Methodist print culture a narrative of women's involvement in both publication and ministry can be found that illustrates women were not sitting on the sidelines but actively writing, preaching and pushing for social reform in their communities.

## History of the Free Methodist Church and Periodicals

Among the American evangelical movements of the nineteenth century the Free Methodist Church was heavily involved in religious social reform. Roberts began his ministry in the Methodist Episcopal Church, but his views on abolishing church pew rentals, support of the abolitionist cause and preaching the gospel to the poor began to draw fire from the denomination in 1856. He published a series of articles on 'New School Methodism' in the *Northern Advocate*, an independent newspaper published by noted American abolitionist William Hosmer, which criticized the denomination for not taking action on important social issues. Roberts' articles infuriated the denominational leadership and at the 1857 Genesee New York Annual Conference he was placed on probation as a result of the articles. The case against Roberts remained unresolved from 1857 until 1860, when the Methodist Episcopal General Conference ignored Roberts' appeals to be re-instated as a Methodist minister. The denomination's decision infuriated many Methodist lay leaders who supported Roberts. Thus, a backlash by the Methodist Episcopal lay leadership in New York and Illinois resulted in the formation of a new denomination, the Free Methodists, with Roberts appointed as general superintendent in 1860 (Snyder, 2006).

From its inception the Free Methodist Church supported gender equality in ministry and in marriage. As Wesleyan historian Donald Dayton notes, Roberts' book *Ordaining Women* was one of 'The most radical of Evangelical defenses of feminism' in the nineteenth century (1976, 92). In a period of American history where women had little political or social power, the Free Methodist Church pushed against cultural boundaries and encouraged both men and women to view gender roles in a fundamentally different way. However, while the denomination's founder was forward thinking in his views on race and gender, other leaders of the denomination were not. Throughout his life, and specifically during his tenure as editor of *The Free Methodist*, Roberts continually encountered resistance against women in ministry from prominent men within the denomination. Although, men opposed ordaining women within the Free Methodist Church, they were more than willing to allow them to be traveling evangelists, missionaries, conference delegates and leaders of small groups (Snyder, 2006). Thus, while women could not be ordained elders, without their efforts the denomination would not have grown as quickly as it did during its early years. By the first General Conference in 1862 there were 2,533 members; by 1866 there were 4,974. By the 1886 General Conference, when the debate about women's roles was beginning to heat up, there were 17,677 and by 1890 21,161. The most rapid growth occurred between 1874 and 1890 – about a 178 percent growth rate over 16 years (Snyder, 2006).

## History of Nineteenth-century Women's Print Culture and Religious Contributions

Throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century the Methodist Church (or Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States) was largely a women's movement with its membership, until the 1830s, composed of at least 57 percent women (Hempton, 2005). Thus, it was no surprise that as an offshoot of the Methodism, Free Methodism, would also be heavily influenced by women's involvement. However, over time, socially constructed practices of 'male headship' (the belief that the husband is the 'head' of the wife and thus in charge of the home and church), began to take hold in conservative Christian culture and progressive Christians began to realize the fight for gender equality would be a long, uphill battle.

Because the religious periodicals of the nineteenth century served as a way to inform and unite members of the denomination, Roberts' tenure as editor was crucial in giving women a voice and allowing their denominational service to become visible. The weekly publication, *The Free Methodist*, had approximately 3,000 subscribers in 1886, prior to Roberts' taking over as editor (Snyder, 2006). Yet, while there were only 3,000 individual subscribers it was not uncommon for the readership to be much higher due to single issues being passed among various families within communities (Altick, 1957). In addition to *The Free Methodist*, the denomination began a special periodical *General Conference Dailies* in 1886. This periodical was published once every four years and sent to subscribers of *The Free Methodist* to inform church members about the daily sessions and debates during the Free Methodist General Conference. The 1886 and 1890 *General Conference Dailies* (Arnold, 1886; Terrill, 1890) provide an exceptional glimpse into the denominational debate on gender roles, and the 1890 edition featured the first two elected women delegates to General Conference, Clara Wetherald of the East Michigan Conference and Anna Grant of the North Indiana Conference (Terrill, 1890). Wetherald was a regular contributor to *The Free Methodist* during the 1886–90 period, writing ministry reports and original articles supporting women in ministry. Her speeches published in the 1890 *General Conference Dailies* further illustrate the strong connection between women's involvement in denominational ministry and Roberts' desire to draw awareness of their contributions through publications.

### Free Methodist Print Culture as Social Activism

The denomination's connection to social reform efforts was clearly evident in the way its publications embraced the moral and social issues of the nineteenth century. The Free Methodist Church strongly supported the temperance cause, publishing a weekly temperance section in *The Free Methodist* for decades. While men wrote many of the original temperance articles in the 1886–90 issues, Roberts regularly published calls to support the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) (Taylor, 1887) and the

work of WCTU President Frances Willard (Hawley, 1888). Temperance publications and activism served as one of the early avenues for women to pursue publication (Kelly, 2010). The fight against alcohol was an issue close to many Free Methodist women's hearts and was also regularly addressed in the mission section of *The Free Methodist*, where women talked about religious and moral reform on the mission field. As Ruggles and Robbins note in their study of early twentieth-century women's mission magazines, these publications provided opportunities not available elsewhere: 'Women reading and writing for the publications of foreign mission movement acquired a gendered agency through their use in print – one that clearly influenced the larger enterprise in which they were participating' (1996: 653–4). For Free Methodist women writing provided them with a sense of spiritual agency, giving them the power to voice their opinions and demand denominational support for more senior leadership roles.

The writings of Free Methodist women in the late 1880s illustrate the social tension in American culture between ministry and family. The women wanted to share their faith and engage in active ministry but, at the same time, their writings are full of the tension between their duties at home and their duties in ministry. Fighting against the 'cult of domesticity' late nineteenth-century Free Methodist women had to illustrate that not only were they called to share their faith, but also that they were capable of balancing both family and work. In an era where women's roles were still largely confined to the domestic sphere this was no easy task (Epstein, 1981). As the nineteenth century progressed, and women became socially active in temperance and other religious reforms, they began to push for recognition of their ability to balance work both within and outside the home (Cruea, 2005). In American culture, one way to gain credibility for women's work was through religious periodicals. By publishing personal testimonies, writing articles about moral reform and sending in ministry reports, Free Methodist women began to illustrate that there was more to them than just a cook, mother or housekeeper.

Despite the prevalence and importance of religious periodicals in nineteenth-century America, little scholarly attention has been paid to women's contributions to this nascent print culture, thus excluding a vibrant but buried history of women's role as evangelists and moral reformers. Some attention has been given to the writings of WCTU President Frances Willard or noted Methodist revivalist Phoebe Palmer and her periodical *A Guide to Holiness* (Bizzell, 2006). However, the writings of numerous other evangelical women have not been closely examined. By returning to the forgotten contributions of Free Methodist women we can begin to see how early Free Methodists engaged in larger social issues of the day and how the struggle to define biblically acceptable gender roles that still is occurring in today's evangelical society has been a struggle extending over a century.

## Women's Role Debate Begins in *The Free Methodist*

As the nineteenth century progressed, American women began to slowly enter professions like law and medicine and be admitted into universities. Yet, ordained ministry was still largely closed to them. By mid century the issue of women's role in church ministry was being debated in numerous American denominations as women began to assert their influence in other areas of the public sphere (Hassey, 1986). Therefore, the Free Methodist Church's debate on women's ordination and social roles parallels a larger societal discussion about women's roles both inside and outside of the home.

In 1886, prior to Roberts becoming editor of *The Free Methodist*, there was already a fierce debate raging on the pages of the magazine about women's roles in the church. The debate featured no women speaking on their own behalf, but Roberts wrote in often, supporting their right to ordination, while the conservative W. Gould wrote opposing it. In the fourth article of Gould's series 'Ought women to govern in the Church? Women's subjection became a penalty through her sin', Gould (1886) interprets the creation account as proof that Eve was created as a helpmate for Adam. Thus, she was subject to his will before the fall. The story of Eve taking the forbidden fruit illustrates not that woman is more fallible than man but, as Gould notes, that 'The woman had specifically sinned, not for the sake of earthly enjoyment merely (*delitzsch*), but in high flown aspiring, as though she would emancipate herself from man, get before him and take him under her guardianship' (1886, 2). Because of Eve's willful desire to subject man to her will, Gould stresses that women have always been put under man's authority for their own well-being. Therefore, how can women fulfill leadership positions in the denomination if women were never created to be equal or rule over men?

In the rebuttal to Gould's article, Roberts (1886) draws heavily on the writings of English philosopher John Stuart Mills and his 1869 book *Subjection of Women*. As Roberts notes, anything but an egalitarian position allows the enslavement of one gender to the other. The rights of women were greatly diminished because of the law and religion's reliance on men to lead them. He stresses:

Let men be persuaded that women were created to live in 'subjection' to them, and be their servants, and it naturally follows that they will enact laws to secure this service for themselves on terms as favorable as possible. It took men a long time to find out that the Bible did not favor the enslavement of the colored race. But when they discovered that Paul laid down principles that would loose the bonds from every slave, then they saw that in his treatment of Onesimus he merely respected for the time the prejudices of the age. So in speaking of the 'subjection' of women in those passages on which Brother Gould delights to dwell, the apostle simply paid a temporary deference to the prejudices of those but recently

converted from heathenism; while at the same time he laid down principles which, if carried out, will emancipate from bondage every woman in Christendom, and allow her to take her place where she belongs side by side with man. (1886, 5)

Referring to his abolitionist roots, in his article Roberts urges other Free Methodists to consider how gender equality fits with the denomination's strong stance on racial equality. The Free Methodist Church's social justice focus could not be selective. According to Roberts, social justice and equality required fighting for the rights of all oppressed groups, regardless of gender or race. Looking at the Bible in historical and cultural context becomes one of the central tenets of Roberts' position on gender equality. The print debate continued throughout 1886 and led up to the 1886 Free Methodist General Conference where the 'Woman Question' was recorded in the *General Conference Dailies* (Arnold, 1886).

The 1886 General Conference granted licensed Free Methodist evangelists the right to be delegates to their annual conferences. This was a relatively small point of *The Discipline* (denominational book of rules and guidelines). However, since some licensed evangelists were women a debate ensued, because this resolution would allow women to serve as delegates to conferences. Gould, who was a General Conference delegate, vehemently opposed this motion, arguing that women could have no role in the governance of the church. Countering Gould, A.F. Curry from the Susquehanna, New York, delegation argued that the evangelist question really was about debating the equality of women and men. As Curry said:

Freedom is essential to responsibility. It's the same in heaven and earth. God has made men and women equal in this. I believe that in woman inheres [sic] the elements of supreme government. We ask her consent to be governed when she unites with the church in the same manner that we ask the consent of the man to be governed, and this recognizes her self-government. I well remember the struggle we had to get the recognition of the right of woman to preach, and this is a part of the same struggle; but that was gained.... We live in a time when the advance of thought is along this line. Women are being admitted to various occupations of men to the learned professions, etc. This amendment is being made at a time when they are filling chairs as professors in the seminaries of our land. (in Arnold, 1886, no. 6)

Curry goes on to note that the Congregationalist Church had recently ordained women as senior elders and that for the Free Methodist Church to put off the debate on women's role in the denomination would be foolish. As Curry emphasized:



Hope was expressed that many other women might be called to the same work. But here comes up this opposition to this advance movement.... The men who vote against this amendment will not dare to look a sensible woman in the face a few years from now. (in Arnold, 1886, no. 6)

Gould still vehemently opposed Curry's argument; however, the delegates voted in favor of giving evangelists the right to serve as conference delegates. Only four delegates voted against it. Gould promptly resigned from his position as delegate and Free Methodist elder in protest after the vote (Arnold, 1886, 25 October).

At the 1886 General Conference Roberts was also appointed editor of *The Free Methodist*, a move that surprised him but set the stage for women to have a more visible presence in the denominational publications. Roberts' appointment as editor of *The Free Methodist* magazine signaled denominational support for his continued push towards social and biblical gender equality. Most of the 1886 conference delegates had supported Roberts' position, and now as editor he was granted the power to promote this position to the rest of the denomination. Thus, the debate continued, but Roberts took the period between 1887 and 1890 to give women more attention in the denominational publications in hopes of increasing support for their ministry at the 1890 General Conference.

### **Women's Involvement in *The Free Methodist* 1887–90**

While Free Methodist evangelists could not serve officially as annual conference delegates until 1886, they had been serving in governmental roles since the 1870s. In the North Michigan Conference Clara Wetherald served with her husband John on the Hadley circuit as early as 1875 and was regularly included in the circuit-wide leadership meetings (*Hadley Circuit Meeting Minutes*, 1875–1890). John was an ordained elder and Clara a licensed evangelist; they switched their membership from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1875 to the Free Methodist Church (Woods, 1984). Under Roberts' leadership, *The Free Methodist* began to publish ministry updates from Wetherald, and women began to contribute more articles to the original article section of the paper. Between 1887 and 1889, the issue of women's role in the church and society is subtly inserted into periodic issues of *The Free Methodist*. Wetherald's role in the denominational publication is understated. She did not have articles published in every issue, but her ministry updates and original articles illustrate her involvement in the denomination. In addition, Wetherald's narrative sets the scene for the continuing struggle Free Methodist women faced in balancing their family life and ministry.

Clara and her husband John had two daughters, Henrietta and Mary. Both were jointly appointed to circuits in Michigan during the 1880s, in addition to raising their two daughters. In the April 1888 *The Free Methodist*, Clara's daughter Mary

writes her testimony. Through Mary's voice her parents' ministry and Clara's gift as a revivalist are illustrated:

My folks were on the Hudson and Addison circuit, and I was permitted to be with them through a protracted meeting at Hudson. One evening mother had entreated sinners to turn to Christ. I arose and with the Lord's help asked them too, and the Lord Almighty blessed me. Of course after sunshine the storm had to come, and the devil planned just right how to overthrow me, for it worked so. After church my father stepped up to me and said he was very sorry I had done as I had; I was too forward for one so young, and the Devil said: 'Well, there' if a Christian thinks so what does the sinner think?' I went with it to mother, and she told me it was the enemy trying to overthrow me; that she knew and felt that I had the Spirit with me, but Satan suggested a great many things and I gave up in despair and served the devil faithfully for three years the most of the time. (M. Wetherald, 1888, 6)

Wetherald never gave up on Mary and continually gently reminded her not to give in to Satan until she turned back to her faith in 1888 and sent in her testimony to *The Free Methodist*. Furthermore, Mary's testimony clearly illustrates that Clara served as a full partner with John in his preaching ministry, and provides rare glimpse at how one woman balanced the roles of mother and minister.

Wetherald herself provides testimony about her role as a traveling evangelist in the 10 October 1888, *Free Methodist*. She sent in a report to Roberts about a dedication she conducted at a new church in Royalton, Michigan. Wetherald summarizes the dedication by noting that:

I never saw such a scene before at a dedication. All seemed to feel the power of God and I had to go down into the congregation to get the names of the givers as I could not hear their names. It reminded me of the olden days when the glory of God filled the temple so that the priests could not minister at the altar. (1888, 5)

This experience occurred while Wetherald and her husband were appointed to the South Lyon and Milford Circuit in Michigan. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s Clara's joint appointments to ministry are more implicitly recorded in conference records than explicitly noted – with John's name often standing for both in the conference appointments record. However, when John and Clara were appointed to South Lyon, Michigan, they are both listed as appointed ministers – something that was not very common at the time.

This joint appointment is further confirmed when Clara does not mention her husband in the Royalton article, implying that it was she who traveled alone to perform the church dedication. In many of the ministry updates Wetherald sends

to *The Free Methodist* it seems she and her husband traveled separately around the circuit to minister to the various churches. If they had traveled together they would have been unable to cover so much territory. Much of Wetherald's writing appears in the correspondences or testimony section of *The Free Methodist*. However, through her updates and the mission pages which featured numerous female contributors, Roberts began to insert more original articles written by women that reinforced the larger social themes of equality he was fighting for within the denomination and that women in America were beginning to push for in a very public way.

### **Women Writing on Gender**

*The Free Methodist* articles written by women served numerous purposes. Wetherald's articles illustrated the capability of women to serve in senior pastoral roles. Whereas other women's writing drew attention to the larger question of gender roles that always loomed in the background during this time period. In the 1 June 1887, issue of *The Free Methodist* a Mrs Southworth from New York wrote an original article regarding women's submission entitled 'Women' (1887). Southworth ponders why only certain portions of Scripture are stressed by men and not others, particularly when that biblical passage seems to favor them over women:

There seems to be a particular charm in the word *obey*, to some minds, when it refers to a wife. I heard a Christian young man say that he believed it was the duty of the wife to obey her husband, and if he ever got married, his wife would have to *obey* him. Great importance is attached to some portions of Scripture while others just as important seem to be overlooked. Reference is often made to the wife being 'the weaker vessel;' but why not give just as much importance to the other part of the verse 'giving honor unto the wife.' Please study the definition of honor, and see where the wife will stand. (1887, 2)

Southworth noted in her article that she was not speaking on the issue of women governing in the church, but on the general welfare and status of women in society. Through the ministry reports of women like Wetherald and Southworth's article, Roberts is able to tie in the large social issue of women's place in American society to women's place in the church.

In the 7 August 1889 *Free Methodist*, Roberts published the graduation oration from Chili Seminary. The speech was given by Harriet D.W. and focused on the role of women in the church and society (D.W., 1889). As founder of Chili Seminary in 1866 (Snyder, 2006), this was a sly move by Roberts to draw attention to his school and promote gender equality. D.W. states in her graduation address that Christianity allowed women to gain more and more rights in both the church and society at large. Towards the end of the speech she notes that women

have already been given the right to vote in England, but not in the United States or in the church:

All that is due woman has not yet been awarded her; but the tide of progress is still rising, and friends of the cause believe that as Christ's teachings are being better understood, the day, not far distant, approaches when the avenues of learning will be thronged by women of great intellect, every employment and position of usefulness open to her and her rightful position granted without controversy. Her indispensable help in moral reforms is acknowledged and the Christian sentiment of giving honor to whom honor is due is prevailing (1889, 498).

D.W.'s speech was only the beginning of a wave of articles published in 1890 about the 'woman issue', and as the 1890 General Conference began to approach more women writers filled the pages of *The Free Methodist*, urging conference delegates to vote in favor of women's ordination.

### **Fighting for Equality in the Denomination**

Southworth and D.W.'s articles illustrate that the issue of women's ordination was not only an issue of spiritual calling but also an issue of social equality. As Curry also noted at the 1886 General Conference, women were being admitted into roles as professors and other professional occupations. The question of equality in evangelical culture, and particularly in the Free Methodist Church, was fast becoming a question of whether Christians would follow the larger social movements of the time or remain entrenched in the past. Roberts and Free Methodist women realized they had an uphill battle even to achieve ordination, let alone complete social equality, and prior to the 1890 General Conference, where the issue was to be discussed, Roberts began publishing a series of articles favoring women's ordination.

In the May 1890 issue, Wetherald wrote a two-page defense of her ministry and a woman's right to be part of the denomination's governing body entitled 'Shall women be ordained?' (Wetherald, 1890). Wetherald points out:

I think the great difficulty is that man is not satisfied to be the head as God has designed him, but he seems to aspire to be being neck and arms, and in fact the whole body, and monopolize the whole seat of authority. (1890, 2)

She goes on to compare the plight of women and their pursuit of gender equality with the plight of the slave who was oppressed because of the color his or her skin. Wetherald concludes her article with a quote from African-American suffragist Sojourner Truth, whom Wetherald refers to as 'a colored lady and a preacher' (1890, 2). She notes:

In speaking on women's rights she [Truth] said, 'Men need not make such a fuss about women having anything to do in the church, for it was God and a woman that produced for the world a Savior and man had nothing to do with it.' (1890, 2)

Drawing on the rhetorical eloquence of Sojourner Truth, Wetherald draws correlations in her article between racial and gender equality, just as Roberts did in his 1886 rebuttals to Gould.

The 1, 8 and 22 October 1890 editions of *The Free Methodist* also included pleas from women evangelists for a vote in favor of their ordination. Free Methodist elder, W.B.M. Colt, who had supported the resolution to allow evangelists to serve as delegates at the 1886 General Conference, published a historical defense of women in Christian leadership positions from the first century church in the 1 and 8 October editions entitled 'Why not?' (Colt, 1890). Roberts' daughter-in-law Emma Sellew Roberts, who was serving as co-principal at Chili Seminary along with Roberts' son Benson, followed up Colt's article in the 22 October edition with an article entitled 'Help it on' (Sellew Roberts, 1890). Her article draws attention to the fact that the Methodists, Congregationalists and other denominations, like the Nazarenes, had already voted to ordain women by this time. However, she notes that within the Free Methodist denomination prejudices still ran high:

Many women among us are filling the pulpits with acceptability, but many more living in less favorable quarters have a message on their soul, to proclaim which no opportunity is given. They still cling to the church whose principles they espouse. Every Sunday they are found at church listening, perhaps to an attempt at preaching, made by one not especially gifted or blessed. They attend camp meetings, speak words of power in exhortation and testimony, but their call to ministry and preaching ability are entirely ignored. (1890, 2)

The push by prominent Free Methodist leaders prior and during the 1890 conference (held during October, when Sellew Roberts' and Colt's articles were published) illustrates the desire of many of its founding members, including Roberts, for complete gender equality. In spite of this desire, the denomination was a democracy not an autocracy. Thus, the decision to ordain women had to be made by the denomination as a whole and not its founders. Since the 1890 conference only had two voting women delegates (Wetherald, from the Eastern Michigan Conference, and Anna Grant, from the North Indiana Conference), the likelihood of the decision passing in favor of the women was low and, with three superintendents now presiding over the conference (Roberts, Coleman and Hart), who all held differing opinions on women in ministry, the debate in the 1890 *General Conference Dailies* (Arnold, 1890) was to be long, intense and at times vicious.

### **The Height of the ‘Woman Question Debate’**

The 1890 General Conference was a major turning point for the denomination. Roberts was ill and would only live until 1893. Denominational leadership was being passed on to more legalistic and conservative men such as Hogue from the Genesee Conference in New York (Arnold, 1890), who were adamantly opposed to women in ministry. Thus, the 1890 General Conference was Roberts’ last chance to see women ordained during his lifetime, and the women at the conference made a valiant attempt to gain ordination. The contention began in the first sessions when Hogue proposed that the ordination of women required a change to *The Discipline* and would have to be voted on by each annual conference for approval. Hogue knew this would postpone and possibly eliminate any chance of women being approved for ministry. As Wetherald, an elected delegate for the East Michigan conference stressed:

I am opposed to the resolution. In some conferences there will be a large majority for the resolution. Other conferences which have no opportunity to prove the efficiency of women as preachers will vote against it [sic]. Only those conferences where women have labored will not hesitate to pass it. For twenty-four years I have preached the gospel and have never been laid aside from the ministry but six months. I have had people come many miles to have me marry them, and I would not do it. I have labored many years for \$100 a year. The railways refuse to grant permits to women who are not ordained, no matter if they are licensed. I do not stand here because I want to be honored. That is all taken out of my heart. There are those who have been saved under my labors who have desired to receive the Lord’s Supper from my hands; but I could not administer it. God has given us this right, but the conference refuses it. (in Terrill, 1890, 61)<sup>1</sup>

Wetherald’s address gets to the heart of the issue. The denomination was granting some rights to women, but in limiting those rights was restricting their ministry. In conferences, such as Wetherald’s, where women had held senior pastor positions for at least a decade in all but name, there was little opposition to women in ministry. In fact the Michigan conference, prior to sending Wetherald as a delegate to General Conference, listed both her and one Abby Porterfield as ministers on trial (Woods, 1984). It can be inferred from this classification that Porterfield and Wetherald were senior ministerial candidates in training and the Michigan Conference was taking a stand for women in ministry, hoping to ordain Porterfield and Wetherald pending the decision of the 1890 Conference.

The decision whether to ordain women at the 1890 General Conference or to send the matter back to the annual conferences and re-address it at the 1894 Conference was postponed until later in the conference, after the ‘woman issue’ was again discussed. Hogue, who opposed women’s ordination, noted:

It is not a question of woman's rights: this is not a woman's rights convention. I remember old Father Mead used to say, 'The man may be the head, but the woman must be the neck, for she is next to the man – and you all know that the neck always turns the head.' I once heard a lady speaking on woman's rights who met the teachings of the apostle Paul as to women's keeping silence, etc. in this way: 'Had the apostle Paul lived in our day and possessed the light we do he never would have written that.'... The women of America may in their sphere wield an influence for good that can be equaled under no other conditions. It is the soft hand of woman that rocks the cradle of the nation (in Terrill, 122)

Foundational to Roberts' argument for the ordination of women was his belief in complete gender equality and conviction that the Bible had been misinterpreted to favor socially accepted practices of gender discrimination. As Roberts noted at the 1890 General Conference:

It is a very hard thing to speak to men's prejudices. They are stronger than the sense of justice. They are stronger than the love of truth, even in many good men. We can hardly estimate the power of prejudice, and yet I think as Christian men we ought to conquer our prejudices and adhere to truth however it may be in conflict with our training. Prejudices on this subject are the growth of centuries. Truth may be in conflict with our training and prejudice on this subject. We have been brought up to regard women as inferior to man, and are not willing the same rights be given her. (in Coates, 2003, 109)

Roberts also noted in his address to the conference that the interpretation of Genesis 2:18, which calls woman a 'helpmeet' to man, did not infer that woman was inferior to men, but a partner equal in every way (Coates, 2003, 110–11). In doing so, Roberts cleverly redefines 'helpmeet' in order to re-appropriate the patriarchal term into a tool for the Christian feminist cause.

Roberts' points were reinforced by the powerful speeches of women delegates at the conference. Wetherald noted:

I know we have responsibilities that others do not have; and I think of all the others we should have the support of the church. I do not see why the heavens should fall and everything be turned bottom side up if five elders should lay their hands on my head and say, 'Take thou authority to preach the Word of God and to administer the holy sacraments in the congregation.' (in Terrill, 171)

Wetherald's address relies on the emotional appeal of ordination to attempt to elicit guilt from the other delegates. While she does not directly say it, Wetherald implies that denying women the right to serve as pastors the denomination is equivalent to denying the will of God. This constituted a powerful accusation in an evangelical denomination that was founded as a response to what was perceived as the Methodist Episcopal Church's own denial of God's will to respond to social injustice. Yet the ordination of women still met resistance, even with support of women delegates such as Wetherald and the influential Roberts' powerful arguments.

### **Conclusions**

Ultimately, women were denied the right to ordination by a very narrow margin in 1890 (Terrill, 1890). As Roberts' health diminished he published one final book in 1891 on the question of women's ordination, *Ordaining Women*, which both historically and theologically defended women's right to equal status in society and in ministry. Yet, after Roberts' death, the 1894 General Conference voted by a large margin to not allow women's ordination. As men such as Hogue, who was appointed general superintendent to fulfill Roberts' term after his death (Marston, 1974), began to take over key denominational leadership positions, the question of women's role in the denomination was pushed to the background. It was debated and defeated again at the 1894 General Conference, and was not endorsed until 1974 when the Free Methodist Church of North America officially passed a measure allowing women to be ordained senior pastors.

Too often nineteenth-century religious women are pushed to the background of history as they are seen as being too submissive to a patriarchal system and undervalued by their denominations (Welter, 1978). However, while these women's fight for ordination was unsuccessful in their lifetime, they still felt a sense of fulfillment and purpose in their ministry. The narrative of first wave American feminism is much broader than a political agenda. As Magarey notes in *Passions of First Wave Feminists*:

The women who engaged in the Woman Movement – what today is most often called First Wave Feminism – were as various as we are, their politics complex and wide-ranging, usually far more adventurous than current representations of them could even begin to suggest. (2001, 2)

Therefore, the passionate women of early Free Methodism and their denomination's founder not only contributed to a legacy that illustrates women's work in ministry but sets the framework for larger social movements that were to evolve over the next century.



Preserving the writings of early Free Methodist women provides evidence that the denomination, and the larger evangelical culture at the time, were heavily engaged in the social movements. As Hardesty stresses in her book *Women Called to Witness*:

The nineteenth-century American woman's rights movement was deeply rooted in evangelical revivalism. Its theology and practice motivated and equipped women and men to adopt a feminist ideology, to reject stereotyped sex roles, and to work for positive changes in marriage, church, society, and politics. (1999, x)

Because the role of women has gone unnoticed within evangelical history, there is a vacuum that allows today's evangelical culture to forget the past, undervalue the contributions of women to the American evangelical movement's success and allow the debate on biblical definitions of gender roles to continue.

Finally, by drawing attention to the public acts of speaking and writing that these women participated in we are able to further interrogate the 'feminization of piety' thesis which argues that the reason disproportionate numbers of nineteenth-century women were drawn to evangelical religion was because its forms and practices privileged a private, domestic piety (Brown, 2009). No doubt the Victorian 'angel in the house', was the ideal that motivated the fierce opposition to ordination by Free Methodist men; however, as the testimony of Clara Wetherald and Emma Sellew Roberts on the pages of *The Free Methodist* reveals, these women entered, sometimes forcefully, a privileged public space in order to make their voices heard. Far from practicing piety in the confines of the home, these women continued to speak and act through persecution, systemic discrimination, multiple pregnancies, and the wear and tear of thousands of miles on the road. Their fortitude is a testimony to the true force of evangelical religion in the nineteenth century and their voices should never be forgotten.

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**1.**

While the 1886 *General Conference Dailies*, edited by T.B. Arnold, did have some spelling and typographical errors, the 1890 *General Conference Daily*, which was edited by J.G. Terrill, contains even more. Terrill notes in his editorial comments that he was "obliged to leave out a good many things that were said – some whole speeches." Additionally other speeches had to be condensed. Furthermore, the lack of experience of some of the reporters contributed to more errors in the 1890 *General Conference Dailies* than was common in *The Free Methodist*. (in Terrill, 127).

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