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“Adam’s Helper”

Women’s Roles in Evangelical Churches in New Zealand  
from Colonial Times to the End of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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## Preface

To paraphrase Jane Austen, it is a truth universally acknowledged that traditional historiography recorded the achievements of men but was in want of the story of women. Recent decades have seen a correction to this gender imbalance with a proliferation of writings about women, spurred on by the successes of social history. Church historians have followed this trend with a growing number of publications studying either the most notable women of the Christian faith or whole categories of women within certain periods or movements. This thesis continues that trend by considering the roles of women in the Baptist, Open Brethren and major Pentecostal denominations in New Zealand.

This thesis ventures not only into the under-reported world of women but also onto the relatively untrammelled soil of the history of evangelical<sup>1</sup> women in New Zealand. Rosemary Neave, Elaine Bolitho, Ruth Fry, Enid Bennett, Susan Adams, Margaret Tennant, Alan Davidson, Vivienne Adair and others have written extensively on women in the Church and particularly on women in the institutional, Protestant churches. Barbara Sampson contributed to this body of historiography by telling the stories of Salvation Army women<sup>2</sup>. Within the Catholic paradigm Judith Graham and

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<sup>1</sup> The term "evangelical" refers to a significant stream of Christianity prominent in Western societies but evident around the world. Evangelicalism is notoriously difficult to define. Many have attempted – David Hubbard, *What We Evangelicals Believe*, Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1979; Donald Bloesch, *The Future of Evangelical Christianity: A Call for Unity and Diversity*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1983; David Wells, 'No Offense, I Am an Evangelical: A Search for Self-Definition' in *A Time to Speak: The Evangelical-Jewish Encounter*, A J Rudin and M R Wilson (Eds.), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987; Leonard Sweet, 'Nineteenth Century Evangelicalism' in *Encyclopaedia of the American Religious Experience*, Charles Lippy and Peter Williams (Eds.), New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988 – to name a few.

Noll, Bebbington and Rawlyk have mapped out the historical dimensions of evangelicalism and so include in their definition some socio-cultural elements – "a fairly discrete network of Protestant Christian movements arising during the eighteenth century in Great Britain and its colonies". Mark Noll, David Bebbington, George Rawlyk (Eds.), *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p.6. Apart from the historical linkages, commonality can be discerned in the area of core Christian theology, though even here some have conceded that "the evangelical movement defies a precise theological definition". C Norman Kraus, 'Evangelicalism: A Mennonite Critique', in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, Donald Dayton and Robert Johnston (Eds.), Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991, p.196.

Another writer, in the same publication, takes up the challenge to define as succinctly as possible the core of evangelical theology – Timothy Weber, 'Premillennialism and the Branches of Evangelicalism', pp.12-14. Firstly, he acknowledges the difficulties: "At best, 'evangelicalism' is a diverse movement which at times seems to have more dividing it than uniting it. In fact, some observers find it nearly impossible to speak of evangelicalism as a single entity and prefer to see it in terms of its constituent parts." p.12. Then he offers a four-fold taxonomy of evangelicalism and attempts to identify what these four branches of evangelicalism have in common. He sees an evangelical nexus in the following doctrines: the divine inspiration and ultimate authority of Scripture; the acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God; salvation from sin through faith in Christ; and commitment to a life of holiness and service in fulfilment of Christ's mission on earth. "Naturally, it would be easy to show that evangelical theology has included more than this; but I do not believe it ever included less." p.14. Weber adds that this theological orthodoxy "does not become 'evangelical' until it is joined to a spirit of renewal and conversion – of individuals, churches, and, at least to some extent, the world". p.14. In light of Weber's comments, and my own experience of the evangelical spectrum, the critical parameters for evangelicals are: 1) that the authority and veracity of the Bible is upheld; 2) that the person and work of Christ remain the central focus; 3) that the mission to communicate the gospel is actively pursued and not marginalised; 4) that God's principles for living are adhered to and not compromised by "worldly" standards.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Sampson, *Women of Spirit: Life-stories of New Zealand Salvation Army Women From the Last 100 Years*, Wellington: The Salvation Army, 1993.

Dianne Stevens have researched the stories of religious women.<sup>3</sup> Other writers on women in the New Zealand Catholic Church include Noeline De Courcy<sup>4</sup> and Pauline Grogan<sup>5</sup>. But for the Baptist, Brethren and Pentecostal movements historiography is scarce. Elaine Bolitho<sup>6</sup> and James Worsfold<sup>7</sup> are virtually the only exponents, apart the general Church historian, Alan Davidson whose landmark work remains a key reference point<sup>8</sup> supplemented by his other writings.<sup>9</sup>

One possible reason for the neglect of the history of evangelical women is that it fails to keep pace with a secular meta-narrative of relentless progress toward genderless equality. Within evangelicalism, the advance in women's rights is slow, fluctuating and sometimes halted altogether. Another reason, closely related to the first, is that the story falls well short of propaganda material for feminism. This is because it is neither a story of victims nor a story of heroines – at least, not heroines for the feminist cause. This combination of “shortcomings” dissuades most historians from attempting a task that promises no reward. Politically correct secular society has little or no interest, and the hierarchies of evangelical denominations are less than enthusiastic about revisiting such contentious subject matter. And so, the history of evangelical women languishes, largely untold.

I hope the following chapters illustrate that their story (or series of stories) is worth telling. Not only are they narratives of remarkable accomplishments, they are narratives of change without revolution. In each instance – especially among the Baptists and the Brethren – it was a change process that included considerable analysis and debate over a lengthy period. This meant that the opposing arguments were aired and quite well understood so that when change occurred its reasons and its critiques were already known. One intriguing phenomenon is that change occurred within an inerrantist paradigm<sup>10</sup> where the ultimate authority – the Bible – remained unchanged.

Chapter one sets the scene with a brief survey of women's roles in the Church during the modern era, focusing on developments in America. The second chapter outlines the developments in New Zealand from colonial times to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with particular attention to the position of

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Graham, *Breaking the Habit: Life in a New Zealand Dominican Convent, 1955-67*, Dunedin: McIndoe, 1992; Diane Stevens, *In Step With Time: A History of the Sisters of St Joseph of Nazareth, Wanganui*, Auckland: David Ling, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Noeline De Courcy, *A History of the Catholic Women's League of New Zealand, 1931-1990*, Dunedin: Tablet Printing, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Pauline Grogan, *Beyond the Veil: A Triumph of Love and Faith*, Auckland: Penguin Books, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Elaine Bolitho, *Meet The Baptists: Post-war Personalities and Perspectives*, Auckland: Christian Research Association of NZ, 1993; 'Women in New Zealand Churches: Part 1, 1814-1939, and Part 2, 1940-1993', *Stimulus*, Vol.1 No. 3, Aug 1993, pp.25-32 and Vol.1 No. 4, Nov 1993, pp.28-37.

<sup>7</sup> James Worsfold, *Women in Pentecostal Ministry: A New Zealand Perspective*, Auckland: Impetus Communications, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Davidson, *Christianity in Aotearoa: A History of Church and Society in New Zealand*, second edition, Wellington: The New Zealand Education for Ministry Board, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Alan Davidson, 'The Women's Vote – Then What?', *Stimulus*, Vol.1, No.4, Nov 1993, pp.22-27.

<sup>10</sup> Inerrantists insist that the text as contained in the Biblical canon is accurate, reliable and authoritative as the foundation for all Christian doctrine. For more on the inerrantist paradigm, and its views on women's roles, refer to the Appendix.

women in the major institutional churches. Chapters three, four and five are occupied with the Baptist, Open Brethren and Pentecostal denominations, the activities, debates and changes within those movements in regard to women's roles. The Appendix provides the reader with background material on the Biblical texts and the arguments raised by evangelicals.

I am especially grateful for the assistance of all those who contributed their time, their thoughts and their life stories to this research. Their names are listed in the bibliography. I am also indebted to those who supplied literature, those who recommended alternative lines of enquiry, and who assisted through electronic mail. They are in no way to blame for the flaws and shortcomings of this thesis, which are solely the responsibility of the author. I hope this thesis honours their contributions as well as the lives of the many people it mentions throughout its ninety-three pages.