

# Rushing into the kingdom of heaven: William “California” Taylor and New Zealand revivalism

Revivalism is a method of evangelism that has seemed like the norm in New Zealand Protestant churches for a century or more. Not that the churches using it have often experienced “revival” as such. Revivalism is the methodology, mostly coming from the mid-eighteenth century Evangelical Awakening and refined and developed in nineteenth century America, that seeks to bring about spiritual revival through conversions using specific techniques.

Preaching to gain conversions was a feature of the ministry of evangelists such as John Wesley in the Great Awakening in England and

America in the mid-1700s, but even then was controversial. Apart from widespread rejection of the emotional pressure it seemed to substitute for the work of the Holy Spirit, it was seen by many to place human work, decision-making, at the heart of the salvation process, instead of the work of God. Wesley split with his friend, the even greater evangelist George Whitefield, over this issue. Whitefield, a Calvinist, stressed the sovereignty of God and sinfulness of humanity, and never asked his hearers to decide to accept Christ. Instead, he typically prayed that the Holy Spirit would convict his hearers of their sinfulness and turn their hearts in repentance to God. Wesley, an Arminian in theology, was more comfortable with his hearers being able to make that decision for themselves, perhaps

moved by God’s prevenient grace working in their hearts ahead of time.

In the frontier areas of the United States – in the early nineteenth century, barely off the East Coast – rugged individualism flourished. This meshed well with an Arminian approach to theology and an unsophisticated collection of frontier preachers, many of whom were Methodists, unbothered by

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theological niceties and who simply wanted to see conversions. At frontier camp meetings methods were honed for maximising emotional and psychological pressure, including having penitent seekers come to the front where all could see and the preacher could focus, and calling for instant decisions.

Charles Grandison Finney, a lawyer by trade, became the best known and most influential of these frontier preachers. He was successful in evangelism and literate enough to write books setting down his ideas and techniques. He made no distinction between pulpit and courtroom; in both he was preaching for a verdict, for his hearers to be moved, compelled to make the “right” decision. In his mind the end, the salvation of souls, justified the

means, which included all manner of psychological techniques.

## Taylor arrives

Although some early Methodists and others may have been familiar with revivalism, it was not popular with the clergy of Victorian-era churches, generally striving for the respectability Peter Lineham has captured in the phrase “mahogany religion”. The first really

identifiable American revivalist to visit New Zealand, unashamedly employing the techniques of Charles Finney, was the Rev. William “California” Taylor who arrived in Auckland

unannounced on the boat from Sydney just before Christmas 1864.

A minister of the American Methodist Episcopal Church and itinerant evangelist, as was his custom he made straight for the local Wesleyan Methodist leadership, in Auckland the Rev. Thomas Buddle. He promptly gained an engagement to preach two days later, on Christmas morning, in Buddle’s own pulpit at High Street Chapel, the centre of Auckland Methodism.<sup>1</sup> Not only did he preach the premier sermon of the church year, but also held an afternoon service for the young, and preached in the evening service as well. Clearly, to have appropriated such a pulpit at that time of year, Taylor must have made a very swift and favourable impression.

Taylor was a Virginian who had been raised and converted in the

camp meeting tradition and in his mid-20s was appointed a missionary to California, arriving in time for the gold rush with the “forty-niners”. Over the next seven years, dealing with such a tough crowd in San Francisco, he developed his own distinctive style, seeking maximum impact. He sang in the main streets and piazza, he would deliberately set up his pork barrel platform outside saloons, and would visit brothels and bars, even setting up a “bethel”, a hostel for seamen.<sup>2</sup>

1856 brought disaster to his mission. An economic collapse, then a major fire, wrecked it financially, then physically. Although absolved from blame and responsibility by his denomination, Taylor refused to let the matter rest and set off around the world, with two aims: to raise money to repay the debt, and to preach to “seekers of salvation”. In 1862, he received what he thought was a divine call to Australia. To get there, he passed through the United Kingdom (participating in the dying stages of the great transatlantic revival), then journeyed through Asia Minor and the Middle East, especially Palestine, arriving unannounced in Melbourne in June 1863. This began an eighteen-month period working through southern and eastern Australia, until he moved on to New Zealand.

Taylor’s Auckland sojourn lasted until 18 January 1865, when he travelled to Nelson via Taranaki, a six-day trip by steamer. He then spent from 2 February to 13 February in Wellington. This was followed by nearly a month in Dunedin, then a fortnight in Christchurch, before he sailed back to Australia at the end of March.

He supported himself through his ministerial stipend and sales of the books he had written about his career and travels. These were augmented by public lectures he repeatedly gave on three topics: his exploits in California, his recent visit to Palestine, and the life of St Paul. The audience was typically reported as “very numerous and influential” and “profoundly

attentive”, even when he frequently spoke for 2-3 hours.

### Storming a sinner’s heart

It was, though, his evangelistic preaching which earned him greatest renown, the *Otago Daily Times* claiming he was “widely known as the ‘Revival Minister’”.<sup>3</sup> Eschewing the usual formality, his style was charitably described as “eminently practical and original, at times rising to an impressive eloquence”.<sup>4</sup> Some critics were prepared to countenance stylistic and theological roughness on the grounds of “getting results”:

*It would be puerile to insist upon the merits of elegance or correctness of style in these books or in this lecture.... They have merits equally, and we think for their purpose, far more valuable. Mr. Taylor is thoroughly what he seems, a man of indomitable strength, perseverance, earnest and enthusiastic. Who would ask the clearer of the forest to be a professor of calisthenics?.... This missionary “does well his part,” with him be the honour of the results he has achieved without cavilling at the sharpness or polish of the instrument.*<sup>5</sup>

But Taylor would have wished for no such assistance. He made no apology for, and indeed positively cultivated, an unorthodox, emotional style of which Finney would have been proud. He instructed a younger preacher that:

*It is your business to arrest them, knock their thoughts and reveries into pi [sic], and sweeping them away, insert your theme in their minds and hearts. To do this, you must wake them up, stir the sympathies of their souls, and thrill them, by all sorts of unanticipated means, with the joyful tidings of sovereign mercy, or the thundering peals of coming retribution.*<sup>6</sup>

His justification was the necessity of generating sufficient emotional pressure to impel hearers Godward.

*The intellect is the engine, the emotions the steam; both are alike necessary to locomotion. What we most need in this enlightened age is momentum, to stimulate people to action, proportionate to their*

*knowledge. Wake up the emotions, therefore, my brother, whether they manifest themselves at first in smiles or tears – wake them up by the grace of Jesus, and, so direct them as to propel the soul toward the cross.*<sup>7</sup>

Taylor’s preaching style and his deliberate attempts to rouse his hearers’ emotions were clearly shown in a published sermon on the apostle Paul’s Roman captivity. How many congregations today hear – or would accept – such a gruesome sermon illustration?

*As you accompany the apostle across the threshold, where hope bids adieu to many a criminal, the grating of the massive doors on their hinges causes you to shudder. Dark and damp, filled with poisonous vapors stifling you with stench, you feel that you have entered the vestibule of hell. Passing down the aisle, quaking with horror at every step, your ears are saluted from the cells on each side with the clanking of chains and hideous groans. Poor prisoners! they used to walk in the light of the sun; had kind mothers and sisters to caress them. Some of them have wives and children whom they have not seen for years, and may never see again. But when you reach the dungeon – O, such hideous sounds never fell on your ears before! What upon earth is the matter? Poor fellow, he must be strangling! Take a light and peep through the iron grating. O, horrible! What a sight! Why, there’s a man bound to a dead body – a decomposing human carcass, face to face, and limb to limb, securely lashed. See how he struggles! Each effort to free himself only brings him into more intimate contact with the putrefying mass. Hear the broken sobs of his choked emotions and his agonizing cries: “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this dead body?” There, sir, is the sinner’s moral condition, as drawn by the pen of inspiration.*<sup>8</sup>

In his actual method of inducing conversions Taylor was not backward in applying Finneyite procedures either, both in stressing the legal aspects of the guilty sinner before the righteous Judge and in

demanding a decision of the will.

*In storming a sinner's heart, my brother, heave away with the battering-ram of legal thunder till you force a breach. Don't stop then to talk of the number and comparative turpitude of his sins, nor to introduce questions of orthodoxy or rules of holy living, but rush for the citadel – the conscience and the will – and having taken that, the poor sinner will feel that the smallest sin he ever committed involves the death penalty, and what he called his good works are but "filthy rags". Then – to change the application of the figure – run with him, and show him how to flee the wrath to come, to escape the pursuing avenger, to rush into the kingdom of heaven....<sup>9</sup>*

He put a particular emphasis on the need for the immediacy of the decision. Stressing the words "accept" and "receive", he now preached the slogan, "Believe that He saves you now." His approach to dealing with the problem of evil and the need for spiritual and moral renewal was the classic evangelical insistence on individual conversions. Any institutional or social failure could be remedied if only enough individuals would answer the altar call.

*What is this rum-selling, and drunken debauchery, and gambling, and theft, and bloodshed, and corruption in office, and ballot-box stuffing, but the development of sin in the hearts, and its corresponding manifestation in the lives of those various characters?... The health of a people consists of the health of the individual members composing society. If, therefore, we sincerely desire to see a reformation in this city, and to see society elevated and established on a permanent moral basis, we must earnestly apply ourselves to the work of personal reformation.<sup>10</sup>*

Taylor elaborated the same view with regard to national, even political structures and systems – improve enough individuals and the systems and nation will improve:

*The purity and moral strength of a nation, or any organization,*

*depends solely on the purity of the individuals composing that organization; and ... great national sins, and organized forms of iniquity and oppression, could only be effectively undermined, cured, and removed by the individual piety of the people....<sup>11</sup>*

The simplistic nature of such assertions, let alone the question of whether purity and morality provide single right answers for political and organisational problems, has been widely debated for generations and need not detain us here.

### **California Taylor and New Zealand revivalism**

In a number of ways, therefore, "California" Taylor foreshadowed the main themes which subsequent New Zealand evangelists would pursue. He saw the problems of evil and sin as primarily individual in scope and believed that the issue of paramount importance was an individual's relationship with God. He therefore concluded that the crucial matter was whether or not any particular person had passed through an appropriate conversion experience in which they believed that they were now saved. From his Arminian Methodist theological viewpoint, he saw no problem in using appropriate preaching, directing and counselling techniques to induce his hearers to decide by their own will to believe, and to publicly indicate that belief by coming forward at an altar call. He did, though, add to his message the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification which has seldom been promoted by other mainline evangelists.<sup>12</sup>

Taylor also used methods of self-advertisement, the principles of which were refined by his successors. His books were advertised and sold. Music was important to his gospel presentation and, in addition to that normally provided in a church service, he sang solos himself.<sup>13</sup> He seems to have made an outdoor street-preaching attempt only once in New Zealand, at 4 p.m. on Sunday 1 January 1865, outside the Union

Bank in Queen Street, Auckland. His attraction was sufficient to draw "about four hundred persons" even at that hour on that day.<sup>14</sup> Usually, his addresses were described as "appropriate", "eloquent", "feeling" or "telling", but with no comment on their content or results.

Assessment of Taylor's evangelistic effectiveness is difficult, contemporary evaluations being muffled in Victorian verbosity and circumlocution. One modern historian has named him as "the most successful evangelist ever in the Australian colonies".<sup>15</sup> Decades after his campaign in the region, Taylor himself claimed to have increased Australasian Wesleyan membership by over 11,000 in his three-year tour, but gave no separate estimate for New Zealand.<sup>16</sup> When he recalled the time spent in New Zealand, he made no comment on Nelson, described Wellington as "an excellent series of meetings, at which several distinguished citizens were converted to God", and characterised his reception in Dunedin as one of "appreciative cordiality". In Christchurch he claimed to have met with "blessed success among a most lovely and loving people". Auckland, where he worked longest and received the best newspaper coverage, he failed to mention at all.<sup>17</sup>

At the time, reports indicated that he usually drew large crowds, the most numerous perhaps being in Christchurch where over 1,000 crammed into Durham Street Chapel one night.<sup>18</sup> One over-eager newspaper labelled him "this modern Gamaliel".<sup>19</sup> Taylor himself, though, may not have felt his efforts were all that fruitful. At his farewell soiree in Auckland, he observed that, "The manifest success of their series of meetings had fallen very far short of the ordinary standard throughout the Australian colonies."<sup>20</sup>

His holiness teachings were at least as prominent as his purely evangelistic work. William Morley, a Methodist leader present at the time and who wrote only a

generation later recalled:

*A few months after [Durham Street's] dedication, William Taylor, of California ... held a series of revival services therein, preaching first to the Church, and urging the members to seek holiness of heart. He then addressed the unconverted, and several scores of persons found "the Pearl of Great Price".<sup>21</sup>*

A more recent writer is more enthusiastic:

*At first there was little response: but when the preacher began to call the people to full consecration, his message began to make a profound impact. There was not room at the Communion rail for all those who sought to know their sins forgiven.<sup>22</sup>*

Such evangelistic success as he did have is also partly attributable to the expectant atmosphere pre-existing within some of the churches in which he worked. There appears to have been an ongoing evangelistic ferment amongst Auckland Wesleyans in this period. Morley again recalled:

*The writer well remembers in 1864-65 the earnest spirit of Christian fellowship, the crowded congregations and the lively prayer-meetings, and how the adjoining schoolroom was filled for special services, and scores were led to decision for God.<sup>23</sup>*

After Taylor's visit there were two more "revivals", in the following year and then during 1868 and 1869, under the leadership of local ministers.<sup>24</sup> Opinion appears divided amongst contemporaries over just how much value Taylor's activities were. While his own evaluations were not fully verified by the figures he claimed to have used, he did have a number of influential supporters. These writers, men of influence, especially within Methodism, were of the opinion both that most of his converts remained in the faith and that even some later denominational leaders were fruit

of his labour.<sup>25</sup>

### **Nineteenth-century revivalism after Taylor**

Apart from Methodism, other New Zealand denominations and groups, too, produced their own revivals and revivalists, flourishing ever more towards the end of the century. Mostly, such activity was on a small scale with few individual stars of the magnitude of Taylor. Groups such as the Seventh-day Adventists had itinerant preachers operating from tents, although they were more interested in enlightening the ignorant about their particular theological viewpoint than in altar calls to conversions.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes denominations might set apart a particular person for evangelistic work. The Baptists did this from 1890 to 1893 with the Rev. Thomas Spurgeon, son of the famous C.H. Spurgeon and inaugural pastor of

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the Auckland Baptist Tabernacle, as his father was of the London Tabernacle. Spurgeon gained the Baptists 800 converts in those years.<sup>27</sup>

Other groups had a strong revivalistic emphasis in their very ethos and had relatively large numbers of their members directly involved in evangelistic outreach activities. The Brethren, particularly, staffed a well-trodden "sawdust trail" throughout much of rural New Zealand, utilising from 1895 the horsedrawn "Bible/Gospel carriage" as a compromise between building fixed bases and supplying evangelistic outreach where needed in the backblocks.<sup>28</sup> The best known of their workers were W. Corrie Johnson and, particularly, Gordon Forlong, who acted as the nucleus for a group of like-minded men who also worked throughout most of central and southern New Zealand.<sup>29</sup>

The most controversial of revivalistic groups were the Salvation Army. The first Salvationists, who arrived at Port Chalmers in 1883, wasted no time in putting into practice all they had learned in Britain and within little over a month optimistically cabled General Booth back Home: "Dunedin, Auckland, blazing. Christchurch shortly. Reinforce Sharp."<sup>30</sup> Their deliberate attempts to attract public attention led to much adverse comment and some rough treatment from both breakers and enforcers of the law. For example, they frequently endured physical attacks from bystanders or even "skeleton armies" (mobs of youths and louts). They conflicted with the Milton Borough Council in Presbyterian South Otago when allegedly to preserve the peace it passed bylaws forbidding Salvation Army street marches and then used

the Police to enforce them.<sup>31</sup> But the Army's confrontational methods worked and within a short time they could boast nearly 2% of the population as adherents.<sup>32</sup> They

were bolstered by no less than four personal visits by Booth himself between 1891 and 1905.<sup>33</sup>

Opposition to Christianity was thriving at the time as Darwinism became more acceptable and as Freethinkers assumed a high profile, led by no less a figure than Sir Robert Stout (at various times a provincial councillor, Member of the House of Representatives, Chief Justice, Attorney-General and Premier). These "freethinking" groups also had their itinerant "evangelists", seemingly little different, at least in their methodology, from the Christian groups. "Although Secularism was in opposition to Christianity it at times seemed just another religious group, a little more extreme than the latest Bible-based sect, but nevertheless bearing strong resemblances to it."<sup>34</sup>

There was also a strong regional

variation in the use of and response to revivalism. Rural areas often seemed to respond more strongly, in the lower North Island especially. The work of the itinerant Brethren in their Bible carriages is an example, with Forlong based at Bulls though working in the provinces from Taranaki to Otago. The main trunk line allowed Booth to stop briefly for the country folk who flocked to places such as Studholme Junction, Herbert and Waikouaiti, or the thirteen railway stations between New Plymouth and Wellington.<sup>35</sup> The Scandinavians of the southern Hawkes Bay and the farmers of the Wanganui district were notable groups in the late nineteenth century, affected by ministers who adopted revivalistic methods. This became somewhat more popular amongst clergy as first the transatlantic awakening of the late 1850s and then the activities of Moody and Sankey made revivalism more acceptable than the raw and apparently uncouth camp meeting-based versions of the Finneyites. California Taylor, the loud and emotional street preacher who wrote books and gave public lectures, bridged the two styles. He introduced full-blown revivalism, yet did so in a way that was popular, without causing offence or disturbance.

How influential was Taylor? Peter Lineham has gained “a clear impression that by 1900 New Zealand had become more outwardly religious and moral than it had been in 1850”. In his opinion, “the most significant factor was the appearance of revivalism in the country.”<sup>36</sup> To the extent that this was so – amongst the other contributing factors such as the closely related temperance movement’s rallies – California Taylor, our first itinerant revivalist, introducing the methodology here and helping to make it acceptable, played a significant role in New Zealand’s spiritual development.

## Endnotes

1. In the nineteenth century, there were four Methodist denominations: the mainstream Wesleyans, but also the smaller Primitive Methodists, Bible Christians and the United Free Methodists. The United Frees and the Bible Christians amalgamated with the

Wesleyans in 1896, but the Primitives held out until 1913 when they too joined in to form the Methodist Church of New Zealand.

2. Biographical details are taken from O.M. Buck, “William Taylor” in Dumas Malone (ed), *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1935-36), vol 9, 345-46; “William Taylor” in Bede Nairn (ed), *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Carlton, 1976), vol 6, 250-51; William Taylor, *William Taylor of California. Bishop of Africa. An Autobiography* (London: Hodder, rev ed 1897). Taylor did significant work in South Africa also, before returning to the United States. Later in his career, his denomination titled him the missionary Bishop of Africa.

3. *Otago Daily Times*, (18 February 1865): 5.

4. *Canterbury Standard* (21 March 1865): 5. Or “startling eloquence” by the *Evening Post* (13 February 1865): 2, and “too demonstrative” by the *New Zealand Herald* (13 January 1865): 3.

5. *New Zealand Herald* (13 January 1865): 3.

6. William Taylor, *The Model Preacher: Comprised in a Series of Letters Illustrating the Best Mode of Preaching the Gospel* (Cincinnati: Phillips and Hunt, 1859), 15-16.

7. Taylor, *Preacher*, 186.

8. Taylor, *Preacher*, 237-238.

9. Taylor, *Preacher*, 245. Taylor even called this “the law of direct appeal to the heart”.

10. From a sermon given 13 July 1856 in San Francisco. Emphasis in original. Quoted in William Taylor, *Seven Years’ Street Preaching in San Francisco, California* (New York & London: The author, 1856), 293-294.

11. Taylor, *Model Preacher*, 392.

12. Becoming in the hands of Finney and others a teaching that Christians – such as themselves – could become “perfect” during their earthly life, entire sanctification is a doctrine that a Christian can become at least entirely sanctified. Most theologians would argue that sanctification is a process that remains unending during one’s earthly lifetime.

13. E.g. *New Zealand Herald* (4 January 1865): 3; *Lyttelton Times* (30 March 1865): 5.

14. *Daily Southern Cross* (2 January 1865): 4.

15. R.B. Walker, “The Growth and Typology of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in New South Wales, 1812-1901”, *Journal of Religious History*, 6 (1971): 335.

16. Taylor, *Autobiography*, 175. He claimed these assessments were derived from official denominational figures.

17. Taylor, *Autobiography*, 197-198.

18. *Canterbury Standard* (21 March 1865): 5.

19. *New Zealand Herald* (26 December 1864): 5.

20. *Weekly News* (21 January 1865): 6.

21. William Morley, *History of Methodism in*

*New Zealand* (Wellington: McKee, 1900), 413. Morley also observes that, “Probably his visit was quite as successful through his teaching of systematic beneficence, which many were led to adopt.” Morley, *History*, 470.

22. W.T. Blight, *A House Not Made with Hands* (Christchurch, 1964), 21.

23. Morley, *History*, 204.

24. Morley, *History*, 221.

25. See “William Taylor”, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 250-251; H.R. Jackson, *Churches and People in Australia and New Zealand, 1860-1930* (Wellington: Allen & Unwin/Port Nicholson Press, 1987), 51-53; Morley, *History*, 213, 470.

26. Peter J. Lineham, “Adventism and the Sawdust Trail in Late Nineteenth Century New Zealand”, in Peter H. Ballis (ed), *In and Out of the World: Seventh-day Adventists in New Zealand* (Palmerston North: GPH, 1985), 32-51.

27. See Craig Skinner, *Lamplighter and Son* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984), 95; J. Ayson Clifford, *A Handful of Grain, vol. 2 1882-1914* (Wellington: Baptist Union of NZ, 1982), 8-9.

28. Peter J. Lineham, *There We Found Brethren: A History of Assemblies of Brethren in New Zealand* (Palmerston North: GPH, 1977), especially ch. 3.

29. Lineham, *Brethren*, 60. See also Houlton G. Forlong (ed), *Gordon Forlong* ([Palmerston North]: GPH, 1977).

30. “Off to New Zealand”, *Social Gazette* (1899). Quoted in Cyril R. Bradwell, *Fight the Good Fight: The Story of the Salvation Army in New Zealand, 1883-1983* (Wellington: AH & AW Reed, 1982), 11.

31. Bradwell, *Fight*, 10, 43-48.

32. Peter J. Lineham, “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder Who’ll Be There? An Analysis of Nineteenth-Century Trans-Atlantic Revivalism in New Zealand and Canada”, in Douglas Pratt (ed), “*Rescue the Perishing*”: *Comparative Perspectives on Evangelism and Revivalism* (Auckland: Colcom Press, 1989), 1-22.

33. Bradwell, *Fight*, ch 7.

34. Peter J. Lineham, “Freethinkers in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand”, *New Zealand Journal of History* 19 (1985): 78.

35. Bradwell, *Fight*, 58-63.

36. Peter J. Lineham, “How Institutionalized was Protestant Piety in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand?” *Journal of Religious History* 13 (1985): 376.

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