

*Editor's Notes: This is a transcript of the debate on allowing Free Methodist evangelists the right to participate and serve in church government. The debate arose because women were allowed to serve as evangelists as well as men. Prior to the 1886 General Conference B.T. Roberts, the denomination's founder and general superintendent, and William Gould, from the New York conference, engaged in a series of heated debates about women's role in the church in the pages of the denominational magazine The Free Methodist. This transcript is taken from the General Conference Daily Magazine, edited by T.B. Arnold. All editorial comments by him are in italics with his name following the comment. My comments are also in italics but are not credited. The punctuation, spelling and capitalization are all original to the General Conference Daily manuscript.*  
– Christy Mesaros-Winckles

## **The Fifth Session of the 1886 General Conference in Coopersville Michigan October 19, 1886**

**Resolution (as reported by *Free Methodist* editor T.B. Arnold):** The committee on revision [to the Discipline] also reported in favor of making evangelists members of the quarterly conference. Because the chapter on evangelists was a provision for licensing women as well as men, this proposition brought on the woman question, which has been so strongly discussed of late in the church paper.

**William Gould (New York delegate):** I am not ready for a vote on this question; I think the conference is not ready for a vote. I wish to call your attention to two points:

1. This amendment flies in the face of the common belief of the church that there are more than one or two orders in the ministry, and that evangelists are without governmental power. This chapter has had a growth. It is not as it originally was. The evangelist was considered to be without governmental authority. Paragraph 160 of the Discipline reads: 'Evangelists are a class of preachers called of God to preach the gospel; to labor to promote revivals of religion; and to spread abroad the cause of Christ in the land, but not called to a pastoral charge or in all cases to government in the church.' If you adopt this amendment, you will make them have governmental authority. To be consistent you will have to strike out this chapter. But be careful that you do not become unscriptural. 'And God hath set in the church, first, apostles; secondarily, prophets; thirdly, teachers; after that, miracles; then gifts of teachings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? – I Cor. Xii, 28, 29. 'And he gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers.' Eph. ix., 11. Are you prepared to go against that? The Scriptures are plain on this point. I know of many who are good exhorters who are not capable of governing the church. There is many a person with a warm heart but a poor head. This adopted, and the sisters are in the quarterly conference, and if there, in every other conference. I must oppose it as a matter of conscience. Are you prepared to vote on it? I think not.

**W.M.B. Colt (Delegate from Indiana and Central Illinois):** I move to postpone the vote on the question until to-morrow morning.

*Cries of no! no! It was seconded. -Arnold*

**Gould:** I think it is wise to postpone. No evil will be done. But I think it should be put over until Wednesday.

*The motion to postpone was voted down.*

**J.B. Freeland (Delegate from Dakota):** I moved this amendment, but it was in reference to a man evangelist in my district. Brother Gould's position is that woman should not have any part in the government of the church. (*He here gave Webster's definition of government - Arnold*). His idea would revolutionize the government of our church. In receiving members our sisters have a right to vote, and in our church the sisters are in the majority. Who administers discipline to cases of the trial of members? Here woman has a right to vote in the election of the committee and in the trial of women to be members of the committee. Is not this government? Who elects the class leaders? The women here have a right to vote, and it is a very important part of our polity. And who makes our preachers? The sisters. It has been said it is greater to make the preachers than to preach. Who recommends for license to exhort? The sisters. Who grant the license to exhort. The official board. Who makes the official board? The women as class-leaders are members of the official board. Who recommends for license to preach? The quarterly conference, make up of class-leaders and stewards. Who elects the delegates to the annual conference? The society, and our sisters in to vote; and as has been decided by our Discipline, are eligible to election also. Brother Gould says: 'Don't drive in a wedge here.' It is a plan in our system, and has been from the beginning. This would also revolutionize the New Testament church. All the church took part in the election of Matthias. Who elected the seven deacons in the early days of the church? The whole multitude.

And who composed the first Christian conference? The whole multitude. These three texts I deem sufficient. They are proofs that woman did have the power to govern in the church. I am satisfied that woman has had a prominent part in the work of government. I shall not present the historical part of the evidence.

**J.T. Michael (Pittsburgh Delegate):** I am not in favor of Brother Gould's proposition at all; but I am not in favor of this change.

**Gould:** I supposed that there would be an army of those who would be prepared with a multitude of arguments in favor of woman's governing. I wish to answer Brother Freeland's argument. He says women govern because they elect to office. I can clearly see a great difference between choosing who shall govern and governing. This is illustrated by the marriage law. In that woman promises to obey her husband. Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the Declaration of Independence, made a clear distinction between choosing a governor and governing. I have in mind those who I would like to keep company with in glory. In taking members into the church I think of this. Is there no difference between voting for a president and being president? There is a clear difference between the duties of the classroom and the duties of the official board. As a rule, women feel out of place when it is forced upon them. In regard to the election of Matthias, there were only 120 there to elect. They were not all the disciples. Jesus met above 500 at once. Doctor Clark, who is a great authority, thinks it was a delegated body that elected Matthias. 'Elected by the whole church,' but you can't prove that it was done by order of God. You can't show the God

approved of the choice of Matthias. When God wanted a man for the place, he had one, in Paul. It ought to be understood that words are to be interpreted in the sense in which they were used by the writer. You know we had a brother once in the church who attempted to establish a new order of things, giving the holy kiss – he had Bible for it, but he interpreted to mean the kissing of the sisters as the men. This comes from not knowing the facts. The Jews did not allow the women to mingle in the congregation at all. (*This is a mistake, the brother mentioned was never a member for the Free Methodist church – Arnold*). So wedded was Peter to Jewish usages, that it took a revelation to him where he could go to Cornelius. We must not interpret the Bible by the modern, but by the ancient usage of the language. Brother Freeland says it has been the custom of women to vote in our church. I have been told that women have been accustomed to sit on official boards. We had one woman in the New York Conference who was a class-leader, but she did not claim a seat in the official board or in the quarterly conference. In other conferences I have heard that it has been the practice, but it is only of late, within the last six years. My custom has been to say to the sisters, who have been brought forward, that I did not think it scriptural; but according to the law they might take their seat, and I would resign. The brother has spoken of the wedge. That is my word. He says it is already in. I think not. Be careful. Wedges are made to split. I have tried to look at this carefully. I have read closely, I may be obliged to step outside. Do not take this as a threat. If you desire to make this change, you will be antagonistic to the church universal. It's not Methodism in England, nor in America. But you say, are we to be governed by their course? God bless them and prosper them. You may say, they are backslidden, but in the days of their prosperity they did not find it necessary for the sisters to take part in the government of the church. Do what you do in the love of God.

**Colt:** I confess I was astonished when this question first came up in the *Free Methodist*. I supposed it had been settled long ago. It seemed to me to be more fitting to have come up in the dark ages. It seemed to me that we had all the Discipline we needed on the subject. During the discussion in the paper I looked to see it properly handled. I think it was overdone. I am astonished too with this question, whether licensed evangelists shall have official relation to the body to which they are amenable. It seems to me that the position our brother takes would overturn the order of our church. In this day of reform, when woman is coming to the front, and taking up the work of redeeming society from the thralldom of intemperance and other vices, it is astonishing that there should arise in this church a voice against it. The brother makes a difference between choosing a government and governing. In cases of trial, as has been shown, women have a right to act on the committee. This is the highest act of government. I am prepared to go further than anything that has been said on this floor. I think that all distinctions were wiped out by Christianity. I have here an old book, a hundred and fifty years old, from which I will read to you on the subject. (*He then reads a long section from a Biblical commentary illustrating women's leadership and governing roles in the Bible*).

We have a sister of our conference (Central Illinois) that has undertaken the enterprise the past year that would have discouraged most men, and carried it through to completion. It was the building of a church. At the time of our conference all was complete but the seating, and she had the money for that. In the meantime she had filled the appointments on her circuit. She has gone back to her charge for the third year. Why are some so anxious to govern? The Bible says, 'The Gentiles exercise lordship \*\*\* but it shall not be so among you.'

That spirit is out of place in this day. Some are so tenacious of their authority. The church of God is not to be governed by the authority, but by love and the word of God.

**G. English (Illinois Delegate):** It is a mistake that there is nothing of this kind in English Wesleyanism. My first experience of church business was among them. It was the practice for women to sit on official board.

**H. Hornsby (Genesee Delegate):** Does English Methodism have official boards?

**C.B. Ebey (Illinois Delegate):** I am a young convert. Four years ago I voted with Brother Gould; but I have been converted. Like the Presbyterian convert. I knew, I can not tell just when, but I know I have been converted. I thought it right for women to lead class, and preach, but not to vote. I went to Canada last year with Brother Hart. I found a camp meeting mostly managed by women. I found this year over there that the largest circuit in that conference was raised up by –Reverend, shall I call it, Sister -? I went to the quarterly conference to see how they did business over there. There sat several sister evangelists, who had been the means under God of raising up the work, and who knew more about its wants than any one else; and while the chairman felt the need of them so much as to ask them to come to the sitting; yet because of this chapter that we are now trying to amend, they could not vote. These sisters seemed embarrassed by the lack of the rule we are trying to pass this morning.

**T.S. LaDue (Oregon Delegate):** I have been overwhelmingly converted to the idea that women should vote. The Scripture argument to which I have listened I think is unanswerable. Then the account of that sister's work in Central Illinois shows me that there is acceptability there that is not to be ignored. And there comes to my mind that there is an organization in this land managed entirely by women, whose influence is most potent, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.

**Hornsby:** I don't profess conversion. Brother Freeland refers us to the election of Matthias by the early church; but that election was a failure. The reference we have to English history is misleading. Only one of the queens of England ruled in reality, and that once was Elizabeth – Anne was ruled by her courtiers, one of whom was an able administrator. Victoria was ruled by the people. When they say she must change her prime minister she has to do it.

**A.F. Currey (Susquehanna Delegate):** While the discussion has been going on, I have been forcibly reminded of the story of an Irishman who found himself in a woman's rights convention. When asked what he thought, said he, 'Ye do not know the nature of the craytur.' There are two points to which I wish to call your attention. 1. The nature of government. 2. The nature of the creatures of government.

The fact is, all human governments are by the people, and of the people, and for the people. The fact is, we have got in our heads some kind of oligarchial notions. To be a Roman was greater than to be a king, and to be a member of the Free Methodist Church is greater than to be a member of the General Conference. We need to understand the nature of woman.

When God made the human family he made them all from the same lump. [*Cries of No! no! and Yes! Yes! - Arnold*] And I am prepared to say that when he took the material from the side of man to make the first woman it was to refine the grass in man and to give us manhood improved by the process. And it's time for you to take off your hats, ye bearded portion of the human family, and bow to the refined and better portion in the form of woman. Another point is this: Peter, in talking about the adornments of woman, said they were to take them from the outward and put them on 'the inner man.' Woman's physical

nature was taken from man's physical nature. If there is any difference it's in the refining of the melting over the grosser of the man in order to make a woman. Self government is absolutely necessary to free agency. Human nature cannot be compelled to do right or wrong. Freedom is essential to responsibility. It's the same in heaven as on earth. God has made men and women equal in this. I believe that in women inheres all 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 recognition of the right of women to preach, and this is a part of the same struggle; but that was gained.

**Gould:** I did not oppose that. I have never opposed woman's preaching.

**Curry:** I spoke of the general principle.

**Hornsby:** You said you were ready to give the proof, and I supposed you meant some one here.

**Curry:** No sir; I spoke of what I believe a general principle.

**Hornsby:** But you spoke of individuals.

**Curry:** Sit still and stand the fire.

**Hornsby:** It's not fire, nothing but thunder.

**Curry:** You never heard thunder unattended by lightening.

**Hornsby:** Oh, yes.

**Curry:** 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. The installation of a woman as pastor of a Congregational church in Iowa is a new departure in the denomination in that State, although some Universalist and Unitarian women preachers have been known there. The attention of the Congregational Association at Marion was called to the fact the other day, and they hope was expressed that many other women might be called to the same work. But here comes up this opposition to this advance movement. Tell it not in Gath; publish it not in the streets of Ascalon! 'O, shame where is thy blush.' The men who vote against this amendment will not dare to look a sensible woman in the face a few years from now.

## **Sixth Session of General Conference October 20, 1886**

*(The debate over evangelists being given the right to serve on governing boards continues...)*

**B.T. Roberts (General Superintendent):** I hope to convert Brother Gould, and therefore I renew my argument. Brother Gould said yesterday that the word multitude, when used by the Jews in reference to the early church, always meant men.

**Gould:** That is what I said; of course there are exceptions to all general rules.

**Roberts:** These passages, of which I am about to speak, are the exceptions then: 2 Samuel, vi., 15: 'So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord.' According to Brother Gould's argument there was none there but men; for the Jewish custom was to separate the women from them. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> verse we read: 'And he dealt among all the people, even among the multitude of Israel, as well to the WOMEN as the men, to every one a cake of bread and a good piece of flesh and a flagon of wine.' The word ochlos rendered

'number' in Act 1, 15, is used in the New Testament about 140 times. Here in this place, it is rendered in 'number.' In three or four places it is rendered in 'company,' and in all other places multitude, or people.' That it is not a delegated number here is seen from the fact that they are spoken of as 'the whole company,' 'the number, etc.' Peter, on the day of Pentecost, is addressing them, says, 'men and brethren,' but why say brethren? Because it is a generic term. The word 'men' used by Peter means the men of the company, but the word 'brethren' means the whole company, all the women and all the men. Brother Gould says this evidence is vitiated by our not having more of him [*meaning Matthias*]. But we hear just as much about him as we do Bartholomew and many others. In the second chapter we read, 'Others mocking said these men are full of new wine.' But Peter replied that it was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel, that in the last days the Spirit would be poured upon all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy. But why say daughters if none of them were there? There must have been women there, or the promise would not have been fulfilled.

**Travis:** I understand you to say that all the disciples went away but the one hundred and twenty.

**Roberts:** That does not affect the statement in the least.

*[The previous question was called for. On the vote being taken it was lost. The discussion then continued - Arnold]*

**Travis:** I had not thought to speak to this question, but I take issue with the proposition that our church government is on the same bases as that of our civil government of the United States. When a young man I read the constitution of the United States, and I told the lady I was engaged to my purpose was to become an American citizen, and if she did not wish to come with me I desired her to release me from the engagement. As soon as the law would permit, after my arrival, I became a naturalized citizen of the United States. But when a man tells me that the government of our church is on the same bases as that of the United States, I deny it. The government of the church is that of a kingdom, and Jesus Christ is the king. I may get into the outward church in this world, but I can't get into the kingdom of Jesus Christ without going out of the world. Men have no rights, naturally, in the kingdom of Jesus Christ. *[From this the speaker went on to discuss the passage in Paul's writings in regard to men being the head of the wife and Christ being the head of the man, and God being the head of Christ. In connection with this he argued that the duty of subordination to men on the part of women was on the same basis as the duty to be plain, etc. The reporter seeing a chance to shie a rock could not resist the opportunity, hence the meager report of an elaborate speech. He noticed the following points:*

*The comparison of the government of the kingdom of Jesus and the government of the earthly church is fallacious.*

- 1. Because the first has reference to piety, the other to church regulations.*
- 2. The idea that the government of the church is absolute, is not true in fact. The very gathering of this General Conference is proof of its being a government of the people.*
- 3. Questions of polity are left to the enlightened judgment of the church. The idea that men have no natural rights in the church of Jesus Christ is a fallacy. Every Christian is entitled to all the privileges of the church on earth – its ordinances, its means of grace, the communion of the saints and the watchful care of the church. This body, or no other ecclesiastical body, has a right to exclude one of them, except for a cause, and that a violation of the rules of piety and the abuse of their privileges.*

*He has resorted to arguments supposed to be drawn from the word of God. To arrive at the truth, we have to resort to the principles of interpretation. Men have to compare opinions and thus settle questions of truth. How did he get these passages of scripture? By the expressed opinions of a majority of a company of translators. Here is a company of men acting in a similar capacity. He is trying to influence their judgment. If he succeeds he will be willing to accept their decision. If not, will he? And why not? Will the question be settled by absolute governmental authority or by a government by the people? If the later, his argument falls to the ground. Ours is a government of the people, by the people, for the people. His argument for the subordination of women is a matter of interpretation. The truth in the case is to be found not from the understanding of one man, or a few men, but of that of the many who consider the question and have pronounced their judgment upon it. The practical judgment of the Christian world is changing the relationship of woman by bringing her to the front. The judgment of Christendom is, led by the clearest head and the warmest heart, must take the lead, be it man or woman. -Arnold]*

**Roberts:** Before the vote is taken I wish to notice one of brother Travis's arguments. He quotes the passage, 'But I would have you know that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of every woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God.' His argument, if it means anything, means that because man is the head of the woman she is subordinate. I am willing to let the matter stand on this passage. But it also says that God is the head of Christ. Now, it is to be understood in the same sense in both cases. Now put along with this passage in Philippians ii., 7, where speaking of Christ this same writer says, 'Who being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God.' So woman, by the same reasoning, equal with man. Again, the very apostles never claimed government over the church even as doctrine. The whole church came together to decide, thought the apostles were endowed with plenary inspiration.

*[Roberts goes on to quote Acts vi., 5]*

**Owen (Delegate from Susquehanna):** I am beginning to talk like the Democrats two year ago. I was about to say 'Quit you like a man,' but I'll quit you like a woman.

**Marshall (Delegate from East Michigan):** I would like to sit and listen to these able arguments, but I think no arguments can change the opinion of a single person... and we have been at it for the last two days.

*[The previous question was ordered. The amendment was read again. It was adopted by a vote of only four against it. - Arnold]*

*Later that day in the conference Gould stood up and addressed the delegation:*

**Gould:** I rise to privilege a question. The action of the conference this morning places me where I can't act any longer with it. I give you the credit for honesty. I know no other way than to do as I am now doing. The reserve delegate from my conference is here, and I move that he take the place on all the committees where my name has been placed.

**Arnold (FM Editor):** I think the brother is taking an inconsistent course.

**Freeland:** Brother Gould, the amendment does not give the women any more privileges than they had before.

**The Chair (Roberts on this day):** The matter has not been settled. Another vote is necessary before it becomes law.

**Gould:** I know; but this vote shows me the mind of the conference.

*[The motion, by Brother Gould, was passed, and after giving out the notices the conference adjourned. –Arnold]*

## **General Conference 1886 October 25 – A Card**

*The delegates at General Conference received a card from Gould entitled “Why I Withdraw from the Free Methodist Church” on Oct. 25, 1886, towards the end of the conference.*

*“To all Who Know and Love Me in the Lord – Dearly Beloved: The General Conference, held at Coopersville, Michigan, having by its action fully confirmed the policy of admitting sisters to membership in the governing courts of the Free Methodist Church, that was endorsed by the General Conference of 1882:*

*And, believing that this policy is not only unwarranted by the Word of God, but plainly contrary to its teachings:*

*And, having done what I could to prevent the adoption and confirmation of the said, policy, as also the practice arising therefrom, I am conscientiously bound to withdraw fellowship from the Free Methodist Church.*

*I have, therefore, withdrawn from, the said church, and am no longer a minister or member thereof.*

*It is not a little thing to sever connection with a church in which I have served God during twenty-three years, and whose doctrines and members are inexpressibly dear to me. This step is taken in great sorrow, but it is taken after at least four years of investigation, thought, and prayer and with a sense of divine approval.*

*I purpose to follow God fully in the future, as in the past: to preach his gospel, as the way may be open to me: to live and die in THE FAITH once delivered unto the saints.*

*Your Brother, in undying love;  
William Gould*

*Allowing women evangelists to serve in church governance paved the way for the first two women delegates to be elected to the 1890 General Conference – Clara Wetherald of East Michigan Conference and Anna Grant of the North Indiana Conference. These two women and the male delegates would engage in the next round of debate on women’s role in the denomination – their ordination as Free Methodist elders.*